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Merely Players

HALT!! THIS IS THE SECOND BOOK IN A SERIES. Well not really. It's part 2 of the only book. Did you know Wattpad only allows 200 chapters? Stifling my creativity. IF YOU READ THIS YOU WON'T HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT'S HAPPENING. IF YOU FOUND THIS ALL OF A SUDDEN PLEASE GO TO MY PROFILE AND READ PART 1. Thank you for your attention. Everyone else- hiiiiii. Welcome baaaaack. Make sure you read chapter 200 Reaching Out first.

China's heart thundered in his chest as he saw who exactly America had brought as his star witness.

She lingered in the doorway, her eyes wide as they flicked around the cavernous room, before settling on him. China kept his mask on, staring at her without recognition, even as her face fell, like up until the last moment, she had been hoping he wouldn't really be here.

And as the American aide prodded her forward, Song Kum-jeong, O-geun's mother, stepped into the Great Hall.

Relief flooded through him with the force of the Chang Jiang River at the same time as sorrow welled, mingling in his body to create a sickening feeling.

His Liaoxi was safe, safer than if she had been taken by America, anyway.

And Song Kum-jeong was not.

He didn't let his eyes linger on her for too long, nothing more than an observation, wondering what new stone America was about to toss at him that he would have to deflect.

The Korean woman stood at the back of the room, her eyes on the blood-red carpeting as America gave the audience time to

appraise the new character.

She was dressed in Western-style clothes- a long, dark blue skirt and blouse. To make her more 'civilized' for the audience? Or because her other clothes had been dirty? Had she come from a POW camp? Her thinness said she could have. How had she ended up there? Why hadn't they been able to find her when they looked?

China's teeth almost clenched, despising his lack of information. But he kept his jaw loose.

"Is she Korean?" he asked America idly.

"You know she is," he replied, that triumphant white grin still marring his striped face.

"En," China said easily. "Unlike most of you, I can tell the citizens of fellow Asian nations apart. I just find it interesting that you brought a Korean witness without having a Korean representative at this discussion."

Not even a southern one. Rhee's government had become slightly unpalatable to the rest of the 'free world.'

"This assembly is only for members of the United Nations," the UN said, his wings ruffling uneasily as he recovered from his surprise at the new obstacle to him going home.

"Of course," China said. "Like always."

Song Kum-jeong was trying desperately to make eye contact with him. China refused.

Her expression was distraught, filled with guilt and a desperate plea. She wasn't doing this out of hatred or for money, even if that would have helped him. China knew why she was doing it.

That would make this easier.

And so much harder.

Song Kum-jeong's guards led her forward. They had almost

reached the pews.

He couldn't let her tell her story. Even if she had no physical evidence, she was still looking at him in that way, with that desperate recognition. At least some of the representatives had to have seen it.

Now.

"Just like you didn't invite the DPRK to his own trial," China said, loud enough for the rest of the room to hear. Not fast, not like he was trying to buy time. Just casually. "Only the representative of the government that you support."

"The rightful government of Korea," America interjected.

"Is it you that decides that?" China asked curiously. "Or the United Nations, perhaps? I thought it was the people of the country, but I suppose that can't be true. Otherwise you wouldn't have the loser of a civil war who doesn't even have a proper Countryhuman sitting in Mr. Wu's seat."

He spoke over Tingfu. "If that were the case, I also would have been invited to the vote to label me as an aggressor, and my representative wouldn't have had such a difficult time getting in."

Song Kum-jeong had been stopped below the lip of the balcony as her guards shifted uncertainly. Her escort was under stage directions, as predicted.

"And the Palestinian Statehumans would be allowed to attend any conversations about how their people were forced out of their homes by a certain newly-formed 'country.'"

He didn't glance at the Israeli representative. He didn't want the audience looking at the man. They had to look at *him*.

"It's interesting," China said, lounging in his chair. "Your little resolution about 'uniting for peace' was supposed to be about securing peace in the world through collective measures. But it seems the only countries allowed to unite are the ones that want war."

"Hey pal, *you're* the one that joined a war that had nothing to do with him," America said with impatience, irritated that his dramatic timing had been interrupted.

"And what does Korea have to do with you?" China asked, still smiling. "The trusteeship is over. The south no longer belongs to you."

"And if I didn't step in to save them, it *would* belong to CCCP. Or *you."*

There was something dark under America's tone. The eyes of the audience were on them, watching their duet.

The United Nations attendant stood, walking to the balcony doors, glass of water in hand.

"If I recall correctly, it's been CCCP and I that have been calling for a withdrawal of foreign troops from Korea for months," he said, still sitting, heart beating purposefully slow. "Including mine. You might remember my Mr. Wu campaigning for that the first time you tried to label me an aggressor."

"Yeah, you'd *love* that, wouldn't you?" America snorted. "I'm sure we all know what would've happened if the United Nations hadn't stepped in."

He looked back at the crowd, making sure he had their attention. China tensed internally, but the foreigner didn't spare a glance for the man in the black suit as he slid from the room.

"North Korea and his drones would have swept straight to Busan," he announced as he turned back to China, voice echoing around the hall. "He and his Communists would have conquered South Korea and turned it into another Soviet puppet state."

'Move faster,' China projected, even has his heart grew heavier with every unseen step the attendant took towards Song Kum-jeong.

"I think I forgot the part of the United Nations Charter that says you're allowed to interfere in the outcome of a civil war when you don't like it," he said out loud, smiling up at the American as he

came closer. "I'm fact, I think I remember something that says the direct opposite."

"And how would we have been able to sleep at night if we didn't step in?" America demanded. "How would any of the good folks here have rested easily knowing that we just stood back and let Communism ravage Korea, that we let men and women lose their rights, their *liberties,* just so we could say we 'followed the law?'"

If China wanted to counter him, he could have asked how he could do the same thing. How he could sit back and watch as his neighbour was invaded by foreign powers once more, as they bombed his cities, razed his villages, as the river that joined them filled with the blood of a hundred thousand innocents.

He didn't. He stayed quiet, letting the country monologue as the attendant crept quietly in one of the side doors, heading along the wall for the back of the room. Winning the battle didn't matter.

All that mattered was winning the war.

"We came to Korea because we knew it was the right thing to do," America's voice was rising in tempo, more fervent, and still passionless. "Because we *knew* that *someone* has to stand up for the little guy in this world, for peace and democracy-"

Hidden from the cameras and translators above and the audience in front, only seen by the eyes of the Chinese delegation, the attendant reached Song Kum-jeong. Behind the safety of her escorts' backs, he held something out to her, not the glass of water. She looked down and her face paled as she understood what it meant, the colour draining from it as she jerked her head up, her eyes wide as moons, looking to China, begging him to tell her it was a lie.

For the first time, he met her gaze.

And he let his smile fall.

Her beautiful face went blank, the light leaving her eyes.

"-and *justice!"* America was spitting, unaware of what was happening behind his back. "That's why each and *every* person is

here today. Because they know as well as I do that the only way the world will ever have peace is if countries like *you-"*

Song Kum-jeong started to scream, a loud piercing cry that came from her heart as it bled out.

The entire room had flinched. China did, too, letting his mask slip on purpose. Representatives jumped up, the guards spun, looking for some threat. But there was only the Korean woman, her head tipped back as the howl of grief poured from her throat.

The attendant had already put distance between them.

"What's wrong with her?!" the UN cried, wings flaring.

One of the men reached for her, and she turned, fleeing for the exit, her footsteps staggered. She fell to her knees with a sob, but threw herself forward again, slamming through the double doors and out of the room.

There was a moment of stunned silence. It was good that no one immediately followed her, China told himself. It gave her time.

America recovered first. "What are you waiting for?!" he barked at the escorts. "After her!"

They burst into action, pursuing the woman like hunting hounds.

China watched, eyes wide. They widened further as America turned to him and furiously demanded, *"What did you do?"*

"Me?" China asked, shocked enough to let his voice become a bit louder. "I was sitting right here!"

"I *saw* you look at her," America accused, his aviators flashing.

"Because I noticed she looked pale," China retorted. "Do you think I have some sort of psychic powers?"

"She *did* look rather sickly," Su Xianghua fretted from behind him. "I was watching her the whole time. She was swaying on her feet. Is she going to be okay?"

"I'm sure she will be, Miss Su," he said, 'not able to disguise' the fretting note in his own words.

"You-"

"Mr. America." The UN marched up to them, noticeably not actually placing himself between them as the American advanced. "The eyes of every person in this room were on you and Mr. PRC. I will admit that your witness' sudden breakdown is suspicious, but it's evident that he wasn't directly responsible for it."

"Perhaps she was ill," Yakov Malik spoke up. "I have heard the conditions in the United Nations camps are poor. Is that where you got her from?"

"None of your business, 'comrade,'" America said cheerily. But there was frost under it. China could see his fingers twitching, wanting to curl into fists.

"Once she is retrieved and calmed, we can ask," the UN cut in. "In the meantime, I'm sure America has already heard her account, if he would like to repeat it."

"I'd hate to put words in her mouth," America said, casual again as he leaned on the podium. "I can wait for her to mosey on back."

"Didn't you say you wanted to get this done with today?" the Swedish representative asked. "Tell us now, and she can corroborate you when she returns."

America quirked a brow. "And what are *you* in a rush for, friend? You don't even have to be here."

"Matters pertaining to world peace should be dealt with expediently," the Swede replied, crossing his arms.

America looked like he might argue, then shrugged. "Fine, sure, if you like the sound of my voice that much."

The Countryhuman casually recounted what Song Kum-jeong had told him, but China could tell he had scored a blow. The words weren't as convincing as they would have been coming from a

nervous woman filled with fear for her son and shame at her betrayal.

And who had looked at him with so much hope.

Luckily she hadn't passed on any exact quotes that China had said, only the bare bones of their encounters (though he noticed America left out the parts about him giving her rations).

He wondered if she had done it on purpose, trying not to betray him entirely, only enough to gain her freedom.

Just after America finished, one of the men that had went after Song Kum-jeong slunk back in, whispering something into the UN's 'ear.'

But China heard. He had expected it.

His heart still ached.

"Well, where is she?" America asked in a more chipper voice.

The UN cleared his throat anxiously. "Mrs. Song Kum-jeong will not be rejoining us."

America's jaw tensed slightly. "Why not?"

The UN hustled him around the side of the choir loft, and they engaged in a fierce, whispered discussion that only China was privy to. He kept his mask firmly in place.

America came back out, grinning broadly as he clapped his hands together. "Bad news, folks!" he called, with no sign of dismay for the general audience to see. "The flight didn't agree with Mrs. Song. She's feeling a bit peaked, so I'm letting her back out. You'll have to stick with my reporting skills."

China was sure he was irked that he hadn't held his tongue for news of the woman. With her not around, he could have made up all sorts of nasty lies, knowing she could never confirm or deny.

If China were him, he would have said he'd violated her in

exchange for military rations or protection, and that her sudden outburst had been from the trauma of being in the same room as her assaulter again. The impact a woman's tears had was always effective against upstanding people. Or at least those that *pretended* to be upstanding.

That was why China had a list of women (and some men) who knew that the answer to 'Did this man assault you?' was always 'Yes.' Though thanks to he and Wu Xinquan's work with the traitors, he hadn't had to resort to that today.

"I think your reporting skills are quite good," China politely praised America, shoving all feelings about what he had just done behind his mask. The war wasn't over yet. "Though I have to wonder- even without a monetary incentive, isn't it all still just hearsay?"

"Then what do you call these?" America pulled something out of his suitcase, holding them up like fish.

China raised a brow. "...'Lián zhǐ shǒutào?' I believe you call them *'mittens.'"*

He won a cough from the Indian representative.

America was undeterred. "Mittens from *your* army. Mittens that *you* gave to her son."

*'Don't you **dare** mention him.'*

Fortifying his mask for the possibility that he might have to hear O-geun's name from the mouth of the country that had killed him, China said, "I'm certain I wouldn't wear anything like... *that.* No offense," he tossed over his shoulder to Wu Xinquan.

"Those are standard issue mittens for the People's Volunteer Army," his comrade said. "Our soldiers were underequipped when we first entered Korea, but by January and February- which is when you claim Mrs. Song met my Countryhuman- quite literally any soldier could have given them to her."

China could hear the Colombian representative lean towards the

Ecuadorian one and whisper, "Underequipped when they first got there? They *routed* the Yanquis."

That must make him nervous. His own troops had only just deployed to the battlefront.

"Unless they have my name embroidered on them," China pointed out. "Do they?"

"No," America admitted. "But explain how else a random Korean woman would have got her hands on Chinese army mitts."

China let Wu Xinquan say, "Our army lives under the principle of serving the people. And if we're fighting for Korea, that includes Koreans. It's common for our soldiers to trade non-essential items with civilians in exchange for food or clothing repairs. That might be hard for you to comprehend."

"No one just gives away their mittens in January," America retorted. "Especially not in the winter we just had in Korea. Not unless he's high-ranking enough to get a new pair without having to dig latrines for giving away the old."

"*You* might not," China agreed.

"But *you* would."

China quirked a brow at him. "Unfortunately, you have no proof of that. Unless you want to bring Mrs. Song back in. Maybe she can provide some evidence you forgot."

America's jaw feathered slightly. "I won't drag some poor woman in to testify when she's half-dead on her feet. I'm not a monster."

China's jaw *didn't* feather. "In that case, I'm afraid your story lacks proof. Unlike ours."

He smiled, smug, reaching down for the ground. Then he froze.

"Comrade China?" Wu Xinquan murmured.

"I, ah." China chuckled nervously. "I forgot the bag."

Wu Xinquan closed his eyes. Su Xianghua put a hand over her mouth. Li Yanmiao gaped. The rest of his entourage all held varying expressions of dismay, his translator even momentarily forgetting to translate.

"I appear to have misspoke," China said to America with an air of embarrassment. "So I suppose neither of us have-"

"Mr. China!"

The room turned to see his cameraman hustling in from the side door, having come down from the balcony.

"Is this your bag?" he panted, holding out the black leather bag. "I went to put on a new lens, but this isn't mine. I think I took yours by accident on the plane."

China lit up. "That's it! Aiya, thank you so much, Mr. Wang. You've saved us!"

The man blushed and stuttered, handing over the bag to Wu Xinquan.

"Did you supply the film projector we asked ahead for?" his comrade asked the UN.

"I was unfortunately unable to procure one," the organization said, not looking at America a little too determinedly.

"No matter," China said breezily, opening the bag. "I brought my own, just in case."

The audience watched in bemusement as China's entourage set the projector up on the podium, while Wu held up an envelope.

"What I have here are official photos taken by both photographers employed by the state and private citizens," he announced.

He tried to hand them to the UN, but America intercepted, dumping the photos into his hand and flipping quickly through them before tossing them to the podium.

"And we're supposed to trust these?" he demanded. "Just because you write a couple dates on them, doesn't mean they aren't staged."

"If you look closely, you can see several were taken on national holidays or celebrations," Wu Xinquan said as the UN edged by to examine them. "Commemorating the liberation of Pyongyang, the parade for the liberation of Seoul, the New Year, the Spring Festival, and the Founding of our Communist Party just this July."

There were a dozen black-and-white photos of China greeting soldiers returned from Korea, looking elegant compared to them; with his Premier at meetings; standing on the steps above Tiananmen Square; posing with his Chairman.

"They don't show much," America combatted. "You could've easily staged these to look like they were taken then, or edited them. Photo-editing exists."

"I'm sure you would know about that," China said lightly.

"And what's *that* supposed to mean, Red?"

"Because you're such a wealthy and developed nation, of course." China smiled. "What do you think it meant?"

"These are fake," America announced, straightening up.

"They could very well be," the UN admitted, somewhat reluctantly. "I'm afraid-"

"Projector's working," China's secretary cut in, sliding a reel into it.

On the wall of the pit, a video flickered to life. Black and white and grainy, with no sound. It showed Tiananmen Square filled with people- women in short cheongsam, men in zhongshan, children in shirts that glowed white on film with ascots around their necks. All waving red flags and holding banners patterned with slogans in Mandarin- *'WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE,' 'LONG LIVE THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA,' 'CELEBRATE MAY DAY,'* which China bade the UN's translator to recite for the room.

And there was China, standing on the steps with his Chairman and Premier, a little girl in the uniform of the Young Pioneers holding a bouquet of flowers out to him, which he accepted with a smile and soundless comment that made her beam.

"If you still believe we could stage something of this magnitude, then do," Wu Xinquan said as the audience watched the reel play on. "But there were multiple foreign photographers and journalists there that can attest this footage is real."

America stared at it, his face blank before his smile returned as he faced the Chinese man. "And what's this supposed to prove? Okay, he was safe and sound at home on May 1st. Mrs. Song said she saw him in late *January* and early *February."*

Wu Xinquan frowned, and China sighed. "I suppose he's right. Do we have anything specific for those dates?"

"Only the Spring Festival photographs," Wu muttered grimly. "And they won't accept those."

China's blood beat in his veins as he looked to the UN. "Well, then I suppose we're out of evidence for our side. Does Mr. America have anything else to bring up?"

"Nope," he said with real cheer this time. "I think I've said everything I need to."

Even though he had as much evidence as China, *less* evidence than China, he radiated a smug surety, his earlier irritation swept away.

The war, not the battle.

"Alright then." The UN nervously shuffled his wings. "Any closing remarks?"

Wu Xinquan stepped forward, his handsome face intense as he looked out at the crowd of representatives.

"Fellow men of peace, I ask you- why would the country that has been a vocal proponent of pulling all foreign troops from Korea

from the start, including our own, choose to involve himself in the war? What would we gain from it? We know the risks that come with being an enemy of global imperialism, and while we would brave those fires every day for the sake of our nation, why would my Countryhuman jeopardize our people when he doesn't have to?"

'There's that question again.'

"We know there will be lies and slander about us every step of the way," Wu said fiercely. "Why would he do anything that would only add to that?"

He placed a hand over his heart. "My country wants peace, in Korea, in China, in the *world."*

He did. And the only way to win that peace was through struggle.

"Don't give in to the voices of the warmongers," Wu plead. "Don't send your soldiers to die for the sake of their conquests. I ask you all today to make the right decision."

"Touching," America drawled, not giving the words time to land. "And I'm sure the folks here will."

The projector reached the end of the film, stopping with a *'clunk.'*

Wu left the podium, returning to his place behind China, not sitting, his face tense, no longer a mask.

"You can go," the Countryhuman said, waving a hand at America. "My representative said everything that's needed."

His expression was easy on the surface, but his eyebrows were almost imperceptibly furrowed, anxious for the verdict. He didn't look like a man that was waiting for something.

"If you say so." America strode to the podium, facing the audience. "Fellow men of the free world! And Mr. Malik. I think from everything we've seen here today, one thing has become clear- Communist China is just as crafty as we knew he was. Just as sly as CCCP, as vicious as North Korea."

China would like to see his friend show the man 'vicious.'

"Mr. Wu asked why his country would jeopardize his people when he doesn't have to." America slammed a fist on the podium. "Because he doesn't give a damn about them! Because their lives are *meaningless* to him, something that the witnesses that weren't allowed to speak today know. They *know* that they were sent to Korea to satisfy their country's lust for conquest, and they know he was there to satisfy his thirst for blood!

"Slaughtering his own people in a civil war wasn't enough." America's voice rang around the hall, demanding to be heard, demanding to be believed. "He needed to kill Koreans, too. Did you know Mrs. Song has a son? All she wanted was to see him again. Do you know what she told me when I promised we'd find him? She said 'if Red China hasn't gotten to him first.'"

China had detached himself as soon as he heard the word 'son.' A good actor didn't allow their own feelings to interfere with the role. He forced himself to raise one eyebrow for the audience to see.

"Her son could be dead, killed by this country." America flung a hand at China. "Or killed by men that are just as savage and brutish as him. Just like so many Korean and Chinese children. Like *your* children one day could be."

China's comrades weren't as skilled at feeling nothing as he was. He could hear Li Yanmiao's teeth grating.

"So I tell you today, men of the United Nations." America leaned over the podium, gripping it with his hands so hard his tendons bulged.

"Make the right choice."

China's heartbeat sped up as he allowed himself to feel again.

He was the only one that could hear the absence of passion in the other country's voice. To the audience, his monologue had been powerful, commanding.

He could see it in their eyes. Even the ones that had been irritated

with America, the ones that had been bored, the ones that clearly had believed China's evidence, had been swayed.

Almost everyone in this room had been born to wealth, or broken other's backs to obtain it. It didn't matter how much America annoyed them or how little they cared about China personally.

They would do *anything* to destroy what they saw as a threat to their power.

The only point of China speaking now would be to buy himself more time. He stayed silent.

"If that's all-" The UN's voice was weak and shrill compared to the war cannon of America's. "Then we can start the-"

The door opened. China's heart leapt.

"Do you mind?" America asked impatiently. "We're kind of in the middle of something here."

"Apologies for interrupting." The man that had frisked Li Yanmiao hustled down the steps to speak quietly with the UN.

"There's a man outside insisting we let him in," he murmured. "Says he's a reporter with *The Manchester Guardian."*

"Tell him this is a private assembly," the UN dismissed.

"He says he has evidence."

"I think we have enough evidence," America cut in.

"Really?" China asked innocently. "I think when it comes to international justice, you can never have enough."

"Admit him!" Yakov Malik called, along with a few others, some of which clearly only wanted to witness more drama.

China would give it to them.

"Alright." The UN cringed under America's aviators. "Let him in."

As they waited, the American strolled over to China, smiling.

"What are you scheming?" he asked quietly.

"You seem to think I'm much more clever than I really am." China smiled up at him. "It flatters me."

"You get that you aren't going to get out of this, don't you?" the foreigner asked with mock sympathy. "These people-" He waved at the audience. "Aren't dumb. They *know* what you are."

China's smiled widened. "So do I."

America flashed his teeth at him, then walked away. China toyed with his pankou knot, waiting for his third act twist.

It came in the form of a short, squat man with a thick brown moustache and balding pate sprinting into the room, exploding the doors open. His chest heaved as he glanced wildly around the hall, ignoring the calls of the guards behind him.

"Mr. China!" he cried, flying down the aisle like a chestnut being flicked away.

A guard intercepted him, and he cried, "They searched me! They searched me!"

He wasn't released until the doormen had caught up to confirm, upon which he rushed the final steps for the stage.

"Have you voted yet?" he demanded of the UN, blue eyes wide behind his wire-rimmed spectacles.

"We were just about-"

"Oh thank heavens!" The man reached into a massive brown duffel bag, rummaging aggressively. "I came as soon as I heard the news, but those blighters at the gate wouldn't let me in, understandable, of course, lot o' important folk here, but quite irritating. I told them I had evidence for the trial, but even then-"

He cut himself off, beaming as he pulled two things from his bag-

a notebook and a reel of film.

"Got it!" he cried. "Pray tell, do you have a projector I could borrow?"

"It just so happens that we do." Wu Xinquan's tone was wry. China smiled, feeling his eyes on him.

"Excellent!" The man hustled for it, but the UN stuck out a wing, feathers askew.

"Before you take any further actions, please state your name and occupation, and *what* is going on."

"Ah, right, of course." The man held his items close, straightening his glasses. "William Gardiner, senior reporter with *The Manchester Guardian.* And upon this reel I have an interview conducted with the Countryhuman of the People's Republic of China."

"Really?" America said, skepticism dripping from his voice. "Let me see that."

"Apologies, sir, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime interview that no one will be laying hands on but me." Gardiner held it protectively to his chest. "Countryhumans don't just go handing out interviews to foreign reporters, as I'm sure you're well aware."

"Then why'd he give one to you?" America asked, thinking he'd caught him.

"I'm a bit of an exception," China explained. "I've given a few foreign interviews. When the person asking is interesting, that's all that matters."

The United Nations nodded. "That is true. That he's done interviews before, that is. I've seen them published in a few journals, mostly left-wing." His wings rustled as America turned his head to him. "But I cannot confirm whether Mr. Gardiner conducted one."

"I can," Gardiner said proudly, switching out the reel in the projector, and shoving his in. "No audio, that's on my audio

recorder. One second."

He lugged the heavy box from his bag, fiddling about with it until he had both ready. He did a countdown, then, with an awkward stretch of arms, flipped the switches for both machines at once.

China was sitting in a plush seat in an ornately furnished office, sipping something from a crystal glass, while Gardiner sat across from him, notebook perched on his lap and rear perched on the edge of his chair.

"Alright, a few light questions before we get into the serious matters," Gardiner said. *"My wife has been dying to know what sort of dramas they have in China."*

"Have you ever seen jingju?" the China on the recorder asked, voice just slightly out of sync with the lips of the one projected in black and white on the wall. *"I believe you call it Peking opera."*

"I'll confess my knowledge of Chinese culture is limited," Gardiner's voice said. *"Though I've always been fascinated with your country."*

The interview went on, while America turned back to the reporter. "Sorry, pal, you're a bit late. We already have a bunch of useless evidence."

"It's useless?" China asked, frowning. "How so?"

America's brow twitched above his aviators. "We went over this- whatever day it was, it doesn't matter. That Korean woman said she saw you in late January and early February."

"Late January and early February?" Gardiner perked back up. "That's when this interview was conducted! February 8th, to be precise!"

The day Song Kum-jeong had said she had left O-geun with China to watch the celebration of the founding of the Korean People's Army.

America froze for the briefest of seconds. "Prove it."

"It is rather convenient," the UN murmured. "And if this interview was conducted on that day, why hasn't it been published?"

Gardiner drew himself up like an indignant chipmunk. "It should have been! But when I brought my notes back to press, they said they wouldn't! We speak a little about the war in Korea further in, and they said interviewing an enemy Countryhuman might be too hot-button to put out! Look."

He started to pull papers from the bottom of his bag, thrusting them out. "Plane tickets for my flight there and back, bills from my lodgings, my report, and the cursed rejection letter. All dated."

The United Nations scanned over them in silence for several minutes.

"Well?" the Indian representative eventually called.

"They appear to be legitimate," the UN said, looking up.

"Of *course* they're legitimate!" Gardiner blustered. "Do you think I'd try to bluff you?"

"No, no," the UN said hastily. "It's only... Why didn't you say anything about this before?" he directed at China.

The Countryhuman tipped his head. "Would you have believed me? You barely believe Mr. Gardiner with all the proof in your hands."

The UN cleared his throat.

"And more than that..." China looked away, embarrassed. "I forgot."

"You forgot?" America demanded.

"The Spring Festival began on the 6th this year, and lasts for around a week, if you're feeling enthusiastic," China said. "It's a very lively holiday. And I am... something of a lightweight, as Mr. Wu can attest."

Wu Xinquan nodded, not acting. He didn't think he was, anyway.

"That entire week is a blur," the Countryhuman admitted shamefully. "I hope I didn't say anything I shouldn't have," he said to the reporter.

"No, but you took me drinking," the man said cheerily. "I've never seen a man get put under by half a glass."

China laughed nervously. "Yes, well, I'll give you another interview next time you're in my country if you promise not to tell anyone else that."

"Do you swear that what you just told this assembly is true?" the UN cut in.

Gardiner nodded. "I'm not much of a religious bloke, but I'll swear on a Bible if need be."

The UN turned him down, which was good. If god had been real, China doubted it would have been merciful enough to spare a man for only *thinking* he was telling the truth.

"I believe you." The organization closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "Thank you for your statement, Mr. Gardiner."

"Can I stay for the rest of the trial?" he asked excitedly.

"I think you've *more* than overstayed your welcome, pal," America said, grinning as he slapped him on the shoulder. "You should get out of here before you trip over your own feet."

"I've never done that even once," the man protested. "But very well."

He set about fetching his things as the interview wound down.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. China," the Gardiner on the wall said. *"I truly believe your country will go on to do great things."*

"So do I," the black-and-white 'China' said. *"I tell you what- the next time I see you, why don't I show you a proper Chinese performance? I'm*

sure you'll love it."

"I'd like that very much, sir."

China smiled, and the projection went blank.

When Gardiner was gone, he finally stood, walking to the podium with measured steps.

"I suppose I will say something after all," he said to his audience, revelling as they held their breaths. "You voted for 'Uniting For Peace' in order to bring peace to the world. If you vote to find me guilty today, you are uniting for war."

He didn't have the power that America did. He couldn't afford to narrow his eyes or put ice in his tone.

So he smiled.

The United Nations was sober as he sent China back to his seat. "Does anyone need time to discuss everything we've been presented with?"

For one of the very few times in the UN's six years of history, the answer from the assembly was unanimous- no.

"I see." The organization let out a breath. "Then barring any further interruptions, it is time to cast your votes. A reminder that only the eleven Security Council members are allowed to vote, and that seven votes are needed for the decision to pass. This is not a Security Council resolution, so in this case, a permanent member voting against it will not be considered a veto."

Yakov Malik gritted his teeth. China had expected this. That was *why* this wasn't a proper resolution- because CCCP would just veto it. And the General Assembly would take too long, and give too many 'lesser' countries a vote.

"Why don't we let the guys that think Red China's innocent go first?" America suggested.

He was sure in the outcome, even with proof that his only

witness' story was false. He wanted the drama of China having to see that only one person found him innocent, already knowing how the vote would end before it was even over.

"That isn't-" The United Nations sighed, giving up. "Very well. Those who believe the People's Republic of China is innocent of the crime of participating personally in his aggression against Korea, please cast your votes."

Yakov Malik raised his hand for the domed ceiling, his face determined.

There was a pause. No one else moved.

'Ah.' Humbling to be reminded that no matter how good an actor you were, the one with more money and power would get the role.

The UN closed his eyes, lines drawn at the edges of his lips. "And-"

"Wait," the Indian representative called, thrusting his hand up.

"Yes?"

"I'm not asking a question." Sir Benegal Narsing Rau firmed his chin. "I'm voting."

That was a bit surprising. Their relations were friendly- or rather, they had the potential for friendliness. And India *had* just supported the recent acceptance of China's sovereignty by the Tibetan delegation, and voted against labelling him an aggressor.

But he knew the country had far preferred Chang Kai-shek, and saw China and his Socialism (and desire to Liberate their historical buffer zone) as a threat.

Ah. He supposed that wasn't so surprising then. As someone that shared a border with him, India had likely realized he would be expected to play a large part in blockading him, which was bad for his economy. And as someone recently out from under the thumb of British imperialism, he would understand that his soldiers would be viewed as cannon fodder by the rest of the United Nations.

"Anyone else?" the UN asked, scanning the crowd hopelessly.

China sat still. Unless the entire assembly had a sudden change of heart, his fate was sealed.

'Never bow before it's over.'

He looked into the audience, finding the eyes of Aleš Bebler. The man stared back.

Then, slowly, he raised his hand.

China blinked thankfully at him.

The UN waited a few more seconds, and when no one else moved, exhaled, deep and slow.

Three votes. That was all China had received. There were eight more aligned against him. Would two people abstain? Would there be a recount? Or would they all vote to move against him, pulled by America's strings?

His heart beat fast, his blood pounded in his veins, excitement filling his body as they reached the climax.

"Alright." The UN's voice was weary, knowing he was about to be forced into another war. "And for the crime of participating personally in his aggression against Korea, who finds the People's Republic of China guilty?"

Warren R. Austin's hand shot up, only beaten by Jiang Tingfu, who rose to his feet, his eyes narrowed in hate. His clique hadn't been able to win against the will of the Chinese people alone. He had seen how well having foreign masters had worked out for the reactionaries in Korea. Now he wanted some of that for himself.

'But not you, personally, right?' China asked him with his eyes. ***'You** won't fight. You'll send others to do it for you.'*

Tingfu stared back, defiant and boring.

China locked his gaze on the audience, awaiting his verdict.

Behind him, his entourage readied themselves.

The two hands remained in the air. Alone.

His heart beat faster.

America leaned on the podium, his smile bright. "It's voting time," he reminded them all. "That means you're supposed to *vote."*

There was a heavy hush over the hall as the representatives stayed silent, no one wanting to be the one to explain themselves to the American country.

Finally, the Dutch representative stood, a hand on the folding table before him.

"The Netherlands is abstaining."

"Oh?" America said after a moment. "Care to explain why that is, Balluseck?"

The portly man adjusted his glasses. "I reserve the right to not explain the decision of my nation."

"Colombia is abstaining, too." The Colombian representative joined him in standing. "And reserving the right not to explain our vote."

One by one, the other representatives stood, adding their country's voices to abstainment. Ecuador, Brazil, Turkey, and after a moment, France.

All eyes turned to Sir Gladwyn Jebb, still seated in the front row. America lowered his head, staring into his soul, if the British had those.

One more vote and they would need a recount. Would the other representatives still hold firm? Or would they crumble under the weight of America's influence?

China fought the urge to lean forward, slowing his breathing. America didn't, canting towards the Brit, his chest rising and falling

shallowly.

Jebb reached for his glass of water, taking a long sip before he placed it back with a decisive *'thunk.'*

"The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is abstaining," he announced.

Relief, joy, excitement, and an overwhelming sense of *victory* flooded China, exploding through his nerves. He wanted to leap up and dance, but he remained seated, only allowing himself a small smile, making sure he looked more relieved than smug.

His Premier had lost the bet.

"I have been asked to explain this decision." Jebb levered a look at America. "Britain does not wish for war."

Maybe he didn't see the dark, vicious look that twisted the American's face, the subtle, almost unnoticeable, twitch and contortion of muscles.

But China did.

He would confess, he felt something similar, considering that British troops had been massacring his friend's people and his own soldiers in Korea.

'Britain only wishes for a war he thinks he can win, right?'

But he knew that wasn't the source of America's rage.

The foreigner looked like he might lose his mask. China tipped his head, eager to see it.

But instead, he just looked out at the audience, and announced, darkly and authoritatively, "You're all making a big mistake."

The men shifted under his gaze. Yakov Malik smirked.

"Well those are the votes," the UN said brightly, likely trying to deliver a verdict before America could change anyone's minds. "On

the charge of violating Resolution 6 of the United Nations Security Council by dwelling in Korea during a time of war, and personally participating in his country's aggression against it, the People's Republic of China is found *not* guilty."

China could have jumped to his feet and taken a sweeping bow, but instead, he dipped his head.

"Thank you," he said humbly. "China is honoured by the assembly's commitment to truth and justice."

He likely wasn't the only one that could see the sheen of relief that flashed across the UN's eyes at the verdict. America certainly did.

The assembly started to pack up, tucking their papers away, draining the last of their water, hoisting their briefcases. Some lingered to ply their diplomacy, Yakov Malik exchanging a few words with Benegal Narsing Rau, while others left immediately, the Swedish representative gone before the dust had even settled.

China didn't bother circulating. The curtain call had never interested him as much. Even if it was satisfying to receive a standing ovation for a perfect act, it didn't carry the same level of excitement, of not knowing how things would turn out.

He was innocent. And it would be a mistake to think any of these people or their countries had decided that for his country's sake, or justice, or even because he had been an exceedingly good actor.

He had put on a good show. He had won the war that was actually just other battle. This small victory could be taken and expanded on another day.

Though he did make sure to thank Rau and Bebler personally.

"I am glad comrades can stick up for each other," China said to the Yugoslav in rough Slovene. *"I am sure China will return the favour someday."*

The man dipped his head. "My Countryhuman is very much looking forward to meeting you."

Yakov Malik strode over, placing himself directly between them with an unobtrusiveness that was frankly impressive. "Father will be pleased to hear that we prevailed here today."

China smiled, nodding. *"Tell Comrade CCCP that I am grateful for the support. It is good for the Socialist countries of the world to stick together, do you not think?"*

He smiled over the man's shoulder at Bebler, switching from Russian to Slovene. *"Comrade Korea is looking forward to meeting Comrade Yugoslavia as well."*

Actually, he didn't think his friend cared for the country much, due to him not voting against the United Nations interfering in his country, only abstaining. China didn't care much for that, either. But he understood playing the game.

He bid his farewells to the men, who exchanged curt well wishes with each other before leaving.

China smiled, looking down at his photographs as he gathered them from the chair they had been placed on.

He admired the picture of him and his Chairman on the steps of Tiananmen Square, both of them smiling. Full-frontal, his face to the camera. Now *that* would be the picture to use for his wanted poster, if he didn't look so happy and innocent. He looked good.

Or rather, Hebei looked good.

His skin, as scarlet as China's, looked dark in the black-and-white photo, but flawless, the little moles under his eye and mouth covered by red oil paint, along with the white circle and characters centered on his face. More make-up made his masculine jaw look as refined as his Countryhuman's. His eyes were held in a more narrow position than usual, his lips curved up in a manner that was similar enough to China's smile that only he, his Chairman, or a handful of very specific people could notice the difference. The few inches he was missing were made up for by secret soles in his shoes, just as sitting in the chair had disguised him in William Gardiner's interview.

Internally, China nodded in satisfaction as he slid the evidence back into the envelope. His province had played his part well, as usual, attending meetings, holidays, interviews, following the scripts China had crafted for him excellently. He'd especially enjoyed the adlib about taking Gardiner to a performance. He'd have to take him to another one once his friend's war was over.

With their film projector and evidence packed, China's entourage headed for the door. And while no one was looking, he slipped behind the choir loft, out of sight.

"I wish Comrade China would actually wait for us for once," one secretary sighed as they passed the UN.

"He wants to get home as soon as possible," the other replied. "You know he hates leaving the country."

China crouched, waiting, listening to the remaining representatives and their crews exit the room, until the hall was silent. He closed his eyes, exhaling silently, holding his breath as he listened, forming a picture in his mind's eye.

A rustle of feathers, an exhale as the UN leaned over the podium.

"I bet *you're* happy."

"I wouldn't say 'happy,'" the UN said to America, no longer disguising the weariness in his voice. "But I am pleased I don't have to authorize another invasion."

"Did you tell them to pull that little abstaining trick?"

"Do you think they would listen to me if I did?" The UN sighed again. "They chose to abstain because they don't wish to go to war against Red China. It wouldn't end well for anyone."

A slam against the wood of the podium as America slapped it. "Neither can letting him get away with fucking around in Korea."

No need to mask in front of the UN. A poor sign for all of them.

"You know damn well he's there," America growled. "You *know* it."

"And how do you explain the photos, the film, the interview?"

"They're tricks," the American dismissed. "Big Red put something together, helped him pull a fast one."

Rude. China and his crew had worked hard to pull off their tricks without outside help.

Well, aside from utilizing the attendant, who was the Soviet's man. But the idea had still been China's.

The UN exhaled. "America, you need to let this obsession with CCCP go. You see his hand in everything. It's making you paranoid and I-"

"Paranoid?" America's voice was low.

Silence stretched tight like a string.

"You think it's paranoid that I'm the only one that knows how dangerous he is? You think it's *paranoid* that I see his hand here when it clearly *is?"* A swish, a hand through the air. "What do you think happened with that Korean broad? My best lead and she fucking offs herself? You think she just got all the way here and decided she'd had enough? She had a fucking *kid* to get back to!"

'And why did she have to 'get back to' him? Where did you take her?'

The UN didn't voice the accusation, though he had to be thinking it as well.

"The Chinese delegation didn't move," he argued. "Neither did the Soviets. Someone would have noticed them."

"They're *sneaky!"* America hissed. "Why do you think we had no idea the Norks were going to cross the 38th?!"

Another silence.

America's voice cooled. "Why do you think the North Korean army was able to ambush us last year?"

"Because they're sneaky," the UN murmured.

"Exactly." Another slam. "Just like CCCP, just like Red China. You *know* he's in Korea. And you're letting him trample all over your fucking Charter, all over *my* army and everyone else's. Over *me.*

"Well, I'm not going to let it happen."

"America, *please."* There was a plea in the UN's thin voice. "The verdict was decided upon, we're going to have peace in Korea, and hopefully this entire Korean Question will be settled soon. Just *let this go."*

"Let it go?" The darkness in his voice seeped out, no longer restrained by his mask. "You want me to *let it go?* You want me to 'let go' of truth and justice? Why don't we let go of democracy while we're at it!?"

"This *was* democracy," the UN stressed, wings rustling. "Please, abide by the-"

"This was a *farce!"* America snarled. "This was a damn commie *mock-up* and if you aren't careful, I'm going to start thinking *you* had hand in it. Or a wing."

UN gasped, and China could hear his wings flare. He focused, clearing his mind of everything but sound, and heard the soft rasp of fingers on feathers.

"Well, *you* might all be content to let go of righteousness. *You* might all be *cowards."* The words were low and slow.

"But America *isn't."*

"America." His name was the only thing the UN said, desperate.

The country's tone was casual, conversational, as he said, "You know, I've been thinking getting a new quill. The old one's starting to run out of ink. What do you think?"

Another long silence. China could hear follicles straining and the shake of feathers as they trembled.

When the United Nations spoke again, his voice was bleak.

"If you find inarguable proof of Red China's presence in Korea, I will move the matter directly to the Court."

A chill ran through China's skin. His one chance was up, it seemed.

"That's real nice of ya," America drawled, tone back to normal as he released the man's wing. "You can go ahead and start drawing things up now then. Because I'm *going* to find it."

Heels clicked away on the stage, and thumped across the hall.

"Good chat, like always!" America shouted, and the doors slammed shut.

There was a thump as the UN slammed his head into the podium. China stood, stretching languidly, then crept around the side of the terraces.

The organization was slumped over the wooden stand, face down and wings drooping.

China padded up behind him, not making a sound. He cocked his head, looking at the exposed back of his neck, slowly reaching out a finger, stopping just short of his sky blue skin.

'No survival instinct at all.' Unlike his friend.

He wasn't going to kill the UN, obviously. Even though he easily could. He'd already dodged one true accusation today. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of another.

He slid around to the UN's front, waiting patiently. He knew America wouldn't leave yet.

Eventually the winged man heaved a despairing sigh, and propped his head up on his hand. His eyes flicked up to China's.

"Ah!" He leaped back, wings flaring defensively as he almost fell over.

"Hello," China said politely.

"M-Mr. PRC." The UN placed a hand on his chest. "I'm sorry, I didn't you there. When did you, ah, when did you return?"

His eyes gleamed nervously. China smiled.

"I figured I should thank you for your fair arbitration today."

"Yes, well, you're- It's my job as the United Nations to be fair and impartial." His wings twitched. An easy tell.

"I'll admit," China said pleasantly. "After how you accepted the violation of your own Charter to try and destroy Korea, and your refusal to acknowledge the winners of my civil war, I was slightly skeptical of you."

"I see." His white eyes dipped to the floor.

"En. But now I know you'll do what's best for you in the end." China narrowed his eyes just slightly, leaning over the podium.

"I'm sure I'll see you at the Security Council soon."

The thin man shrank back slightly. It could have been just an innocuous parting comment.

But the United Nations heard it as the promise it was.

In the end, roles like this were fun, too. There was always something satisfying about the moment the mask would come off, as the audience would realize they had been tricked.

It wasn't time for that yet. But when it came, China knew it would set his blood aflame.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I need to be getting back to my own country." China bowed exaggeratedly low. "Good day."

He swished away, head up, not a care in the world. As he left the hall, he heard the UN's face make contact with the podium once more.

He smiled. Time for the encore.

He found America on the landing between the third and second floor, staring crossly down into the entryway, thinking he'd missed him. He didn't see China as he approached from behind.

"So, we finally get to meet." China was satisfied to see the American's broad shoulders tense imperceptibly before he turned around. "Well, I suppose we met in the assembly. But that was a little too formal for my tastes."

He eyed the America up and down. "I have to say, I thought you'd be taller in person."

America stared at him, clearly taking in the fact that they stood at almost the exact same height, before laughing loudly. "And I thought you wouldn't have a sense of humour. We never properly introduced ourselves, did we?" He thrust out a hand imperially. "The United States of America. Sorry if things got a bit heated in there, you know how it is. Good to meet ya."

China stared at his outstretched limb, smiling neutrally until the other country retracted it, looking somewhat annoyed.

"Oh, right," he said, falsely jovial. "You chinks don't know how to shake hands."

"Only those whose hands are clean. But I will take that apology for the misunderstanding, if it's still available."

Though China hadn't deigned to acknowledge the slur, America's brows rose as if he had. "Oh shit, right. I'm not supposed to use that word. It's not 'politically correct,' anymore, is it."

"I don't take offense," China said smoothly. "I don't expect much from someone for whom the majority of his politics are incorrect."

America's lips flattened minutely. "Did you need something from me, ching-chong?"

The other country had swapped masks, changing his voice from white stone and rolling lawns to parlours and cigar smoke. China

allowed himself a slight slackening of his own in response.

"I just wanted to see the country my comrades are winning against. And now I have." China breezed by him, pleased when the other man had to jump a few stairs to catch up to him.

"You don't really think you and your other little commie pal are going to win this, do you?" America asked, arrogant once more.

But China had heard the way his teeth had grit when his racial epithet had once more gone unchallenged. Clearly, a man used to getting a rise from his audience. Which meant the best way to get on his nerves was to ignore what he thought the script should be.

"I certainly don't think *you* are going to." China cast a smile over his shoulder as he said it. He had always enjoyed prodding little men who thought of themselves as dragons. Truly one of life's greatest treasures.

America stepped in front of him, blocking his path down to the empty entry hall. "Alright, so you're a smooth-talker *and* pretty smart, for a commie," he said in the tone of a fruit vendor who had just been called out on selling windfalls. "How 'bout you and I cut a deal?"

He paused dramatically, most likely waiting for China to inquire as to what it would be. The Asian country, however, did not play along with his theatricality, smiling at him politely until he continued.

"'What deal?' Well, I'm glad you asked." America looked around the empty hallway exaggeratedly before stage-whispering, "I don't offer this kind of thing to every Third World schmuck, but I'm willing to invest a dollar or two in your industries, to, y'know, help you get up and running. And I could-" He looked around again, once more confirming that they were alone, before managing to whisper even louder, "Talk to my guys and maybe nudge 'em in the right direction when it comes to getting you recognized as the real China.

"And all *you'd* have to do is-"

"Sign an armistice agreeing to abandon Korea," China finished languidly. It didn't take any masterful power of observation to realize that was what the other country had been leading up to. Now that his attempt to go to war with China had been deflected, for now, the next step would be to try and salvage his gains in Korea.

If China had to say, the ideal plan now was- conquer Korea, use his capture of Korean politicians and records to falsify information proving China had in fact been there (well, some actually *could* provide true information), then use that as an excuse to invade him, able to come at him from two fronts. And if China really was as aloof and bourgeois as he had been acting, perhaps America wouldn't even *have* to invade him. Perhaps he could get him to sell out, as he was trying now.

It wasn't really about destroying China, you see. It was about dominating it, and him. As always.

America looked satisfyingly irked by his spotlight being stolen.

'Get used to it,' the Chinese country gloated silently.

"We have a winner!" America admitted, sounding briefly like a hawker before returning to his normal voice. "Which is what you *won't* be if you don't take my deal. So whaddya say? Get a jumpstart to your businesses and maybe even get recognized as China- no promises, but I'd try to steer 'em in the right direction- or keep fighting a thankless war that has nothing to do with you? Seems like an easy choice to me."

"And to me," China replied congenially.

"Great!" America rubbed his hands together. "Let me talk to my guys-"

"I choose the war." China slipped by him, basking in the stunned silence from behind him before the other Countryhuman had to catch up again, jogging this time as they reached the unforgiving marble of the ground floor.

It was empty, the security likely being interrogated on what they had witnessed.

"Okay, I feel like we were on the same page, but now I've lost you." America tried to cut him off again, but was stymied by China lengthening his strides. He could only keep pace as he continued, "You heard me, right? Millions of dollars plus UN recognition- which means you can veto any more attempts from these guys to try and screw you over- and all you have to do is sign a paper."

"I heard you."

"Then what's not clicking?" America sounded like he was trying to not let his irritation seep into his voice. "I thought you Asians were supposed to be smart."

Smart enough to realize that the latter half of his promise wasn't true. Even now, the American was collaborating with the Kuomintang against China. The American military and the Chinese 'Nationalists' were bosom-buddies in the fight against Communism, and signing an armistice wouldn't change that. And as for his industries...

"For the first time in Chinese history, the business of China belongs to the Chinese people alone," China said, feeling a thrill as he always did at the words. "I'm sure your people don't know the feeling, but it's one mine are willing to fight for. For both us, *and* our comrades."

"And you'd take that over economic development?" America asked, disgusted. "Do you realize how much cash you're turning down? It would make a hundred thousand look like chump change."

"And how many lives would I have to trade for each of those dollars?"

"See, that's the neat thing about capitalism- you wouldn't be trading any lives." America grinned, a shark with perfectly straight, white teeth.

"I'm sure the Koreans in the south would have something to say

about that."

And so would Song Kum-jeong.

"And I think there are many who would have something to say about you talking so easily about bribing the UN."

China stopped abruptly, turning in a way that placed America between him and the wall.

"There is no ivory in a dog's mouth." He kept up his small smile as he widened his eyes slightly. "I don't need your money, your 'investments,' or your bribes. I know you have no intention of recognizing me anytime soon. But one day, you and the rest of the world will have no choice before my merits. CCCP isn't your only competition, anymore, *Yankee."*

Unlike him, America had dropped of his façade completely, and none of his previous insincerity remained as he growled, "I tried to give you a way out, but you just *had* to make yourself my enemy. Now you can say goodbye to everything you've thought you've accomplished. Your factories, your resources, your cities." He stared at China from behind his aviators, cold and unfeeling. "When this war ends and Korea belongs to me, then it's your turn."

"I'm well-aware that I became your enemy the day I decided to walk a path that didn't involve selling myself to foreign powers," China returned. "But I don't actually seem to care. I'm not the frightened one here."

"Frightened?" America scoffed, clearly finding the thought ridiculous. "I'm the USA. I don't get 'frightened.' Certainly not from some backwater country that doesn't even have plumbing.'"

"No?" China tipped his head, smiling once more. "Then why do you want me to sign an armistice?"

He bowed slightly, then glided away, hands clasped together.

"You may have fooled UN and the rest of those idiots, but I *know* you're in Korea. And if I catch you on the battlefield, it's fucking over for you." America was fully dispensed of any pretend

amicability as his words swirled like dark smog. "You're going to regret getting in my way, *chink."*

"I don't think I will." China would never regret helping a friend, or getting the chance to slip a verbal arrow past the American's armour.

"Oh, and America." He smiled over his shoulder. "Have a safe drive to the airport. I hear the roads can get... dangerous."

He sailed away after that, claiming the last line as his.

He didn't look back at the bottom of the stairs as he left. The blood had already been mopped away, like she had never even been there.

North would find out about this. He would read the transcripts and pester CCCP and China for every detail. But after she was buried by America and the United Nations, no one else would find out what had happened to Song Kum-jeong. Maybe he didn't have to either. At least not from China.

Every victory required a sacrifice. You always had to lose something.

As he emerged into the late afternoon sunlight, pausing as he blinked it from his eyes, the attendant from the main hall hustled over, his face blank. He escorted China past the cameras and crowd, to the black car where his comrades were waiting.

As the Countryhuman climbed in, the man pressed something into his hand. The same object Li Yanmiao had snuck into his pocket. The same that China had passed to the Soviet agent, and that he had shown Song Kum-jeong.

A long, leaf-shaped throwing knife with a scratch running vertically down the blade.

'Some women can't bear to outlive their children.' Wise words.

China tucked the grief away with all the rest, saving it for if it was ever needed.

"There you are," Wu Xinquan said as he took his seat.

"Toilet," China explained breezily.

"You should tell me before you go off and do something like that." His comrade quirked his brow, really meaning 'You should have told us about Gardiner.'

"It must have slipped my mind," China replied innocently, letting a trace of his real voice bleed through Hebei's, knowing the driver wouldn't be able to tell the difference. "I'm sure I'll remember next time."

Wu Xinquan shook his head.

China smiled.

As his car pulled out of the building's lot, he was amused to see one of the last vehicles on the street unmoving, while a team of mechanics swarmed towards it, several of them dressed like members of a bomb squad.

They wouldn't find anything, of course, but it would keep the American stuck here for an hour, at least.

Their first-meet and he had already outperformed him, and scored a victory. He looked forwards to the next act, where he would make sure to score another.

But he couldn't get overconfident. It couldn't be forgotten that the only reason he had won here today was because the other nations had been cowed by their losses in Korea. If it weren't for that, America would likely be dragging him to a holding cell right now.

China drummed his long fingers on the side of the door, watching as the oppressive buildings blurred by on their way to his plane.

But all in all, he had accomplished what he came here to do. The winged fool had at least pretended to buy that he wasn't involved in the war personally and would be unable to authorize force against his country, and- of near-equal importance- America knew he was no longer alone on the stage.

China's country and people were safe, for now. Mission accomplished, soon he would be back with Korea, fighting for his friend's freedom once more.

He smiled, though there was still one little loose thread dangling from the tapestry.

'Where are you, Little Sister?'

Court chapters: 3 (and counting?)

So. Book outline says 90 chapters in this part. But it did say 89 a day before I wrote this chapter. So we will see.

I HAVE BEEN WAITING TO WRITE THESE CHAPTERS FOREVER. Also the United Nations has the most evil web design ever. I think they actively attempt to make it difficult to access specific past records to hide their crimes. I know this sounds paranoid, but please don't say that until you try and use their filter and you have to manually tap the screen to go one month at a time all the way back to 1951 TWICE.

[image]

Stranded

North Pyongan had always believed that being in Heaven would feel like being rocked gently by refreshingly cool water.

But he had also believed it would be the end of all pain. And as the comforting blackness he had been rocking within became flooded with an agony that only grew stronger, he wondered if he had been sent to Hell instead.

He lashed out blindly, his body twitching and thrashing, and suddenly he was breathing water again, the liquid pouring into his lungs as his panicked mind whirled.

This was the punishment for breaking the Ten Commandments, for taking lives and lying for his sister and trying to turn his back on God. He had been wrong that He would understand, that He would know he had always tried to do what was right and that that was enough. And now North Pyongan had been sent to suffer forever, to be drowned over and over by one of the things he loved most while he-

There was a hand on the back of his collar, *'Thank God He realizes I don't deserve this,'* and he was being hauled up, that same hand slapping his back hard, forcing the water from his lungs.

He coughed and sputtered, nails clawing at something that felt like wood, his eyes squeezed tight against the salt in them.

"Hey, comrade, easy," a raspy voice soothed, and North Pyongan had a moment to be pleased he had been right about God being a Communist before realizing that the voice was actually Pak Ga-ram's.

North Pyongan tried to speak, but when he opened his mouth, he started to vomit water, his already sore throat spasming painfully as he forced out all the brine his stomach had filled with before his lungs had given up.

When he was done, he tried to collapse. But his face only landed in more water. Someone quickly hauled his head up before he could drown again.

"It's okay," a familiar voice said, soft, but raspy as Pak Ga-ram's. A more gentle hand rubbed the back of his. "It's okay, I say."

North Pyongan tried to make sense of what was happening. He was still being rocked, and his legs wouldn't meet solid ground, kicking in the water. His arms were splayed across… a board? He tried to open his eyes to see, but everything was blurred by saltwater and pain.

His thoughts swirled about like a ship's wreckage, occasionally crashing up each other and sparking a memory. The mission, the sampan fleet, the destroyer, flying through the air and…

He tried to focus on the one thing he was certain about.

"Com... rade Liao… xi?" he croaked to the familiar voice. His own was unfamiliar, throaty and garbled, like he was still drowning.

"That's me," she confirmed, and he forced his eyes open to see a blur of yellow and green across from him.

"Where…?" His mind couldn't remember the words, or how to move his tongue.

"We're out on the ocean," the Chinese woman explained. "Just rest and listen, don't cause a commotion."

"The entire task force went down," Pak Ga-ram said grimly from beside him. North Pyongan tried to turn his head, but his muscles wouldn't move. "I think Captain Ko and Comrade Jon might've made it away, but I don't know for sure. You went down, too."

Liaoxi chimed in, "Comrade Pak saved you."

Sounding sheepish, the man said, "I just fished you out and gave you chest compressions. It wasn't a big deal."

"You did almost drown," the woman cut in.

“I was fine,” Pak Ga-ram said quickly.

Drowned… North Pyongan could vaguely remember flailing in the water, reaching out for salvation that wasn’t coming. Did he remember a hand grabbing his, or was that a false memory?

“Your… efforts I crown,” he slurred, since his comrade hadn’t finished Liaoxi’s rhyme. “Thank you for saving me.”

“I… didn’t really save you,” Pak Ga-ram uncomfortably denied. “You… Uh, never mind.”

“I don’t intend worries to cast,” Liaoxi said softly. “But I’m afraid you passed.”

North Pyongan blinked, her olive and pastel citrine smearing together. “Passed?”

“You, uh, died,” Pak Ga-ram said awkwardly. “Once I got the water out of your lungs, it was a good half hour before your heart started beating again.”

North Pyongan tried to wrap his mind around that.

Your heart could stop when you drowned, as it ran out of oxygen to pump. And it could be restarted with chest compressions. North Pyongan had seen it before, and even saved a boy who had almost drowned in the Amnok the same way.

The person wasn't truly dead when that happened. Their brain was still working, their body was just shutting down around it. Their soul was still intact, hovering above its vessel, ready for life to be breathed back into it, or for God to reach down and draw it close.

But the heart could only pause for a few minutes before it could no longer be restarted. A half hour…

North Pyongan had died. He had died, and all he had seen was… nothing. No light of Heaven, no embrace of the Lord. Just…. Nothing. Not even blackness. A complete absence of anything.

He tried to shake his head, the world swaying.

Of course he hadn't seen Heaven. He hadn't truly died. He hadn't thrown himself into the waters on purpose, or been held under by a Countryhuman. His own soul would have been firmly intact, not even drifting away, only waiting for his body to heal so it could rekindle.

"Comrade?" Liaoxi said, her brows furrowed.

"I don't… feel well," North Pyongan slurred.

"Well you did… y'know," Pak Ga-ram coughed. "Sorry."

"I don't think you're done healing," Liaoxi said, almost sounding guilty. "The thought of waking you wasn't appealing, but…"

"We need your help." Pak Ga-ram's voice was grim. "Take a look around us."

North Pyongan forced his head up, rubbing the blur from his eyes with great effort. When he could finally see, he looked. What he saw made his heart sink.

The sea. And *only* the sea.

Behind Liaoxi, who was clinging to the opposite side of what had been a board from a sampan, with a large bag in front of her, beyond Pak Ga-ram, holding on with one hand while the other was poised to catch North Pyongan if he slid under again, on his other side. The only thing around them was a slate grey expanse of open water stretching to the dark line of the distant horizon.

It was only when North Pyongan twisted to look behind that he could see a smudge of shoreline, made indistinct not by his eyes, but by distance.

"We're stranded."

Liaoxi bit her lip, and Pak Ga-ram nodded soberly.

"After the destroyer finished taking the sampan out, they started

to send out boats to take prisoners. We'd already put some distance between us so I could resuscitate you, so we just held tight. We thought we'd wait for them to go away, then swim back to shore. But they were taking forever, and using that spotlight to search the sea."

"So we just let the current take us," Liaoxi continued. "Like thus."

North Pyongan could feel it pushing at them, sending them… eastward? The sun was covered by heavy clouds, but if that faraway shore was Korea, then he was right.

"But once I came off the adrenaline, I realized my leg is screwed," Pak Ga-ram said with shame. "Some shrapnel must've got me when we went down. I wanted to push though, but…" He winced. "It's too much. I can only go for short bursts, and Comrade Liaoxi can't fight the current by herself."

"How… long have we been out here?" North Pyongan managed.

"Four days," the sailor rasped. "It should be the 12th."

Four days. South Pyongan would be chasing her tail with worry, and Korea would be…

"Comrade Pak wanted to delay waking you." Liaoxi's guilt was clearer now. "But we can't wait any longer, and we can't make it with just us two."

"It's'okay." North Pyongan's tongue still couldn't separate the words. It was all he could do to remain focused on what was happening around him, and not spiral thinking about how his sister and Countryhuman must be feeling right now.

He knew why he was so muddled now. His brain had shut down from lack of oxygen, and was still working on repairing itself.

He shuddered. Hwang's worst nightmare. At least the damage shouldn't be too severe, if his lungs and heart had already fixed themselves up enough to function.

"I suggested waiting until we drift into Soviet territory," Pak Ga-

ram said. “A few people fled up north on fishing boats, so I figure they’re not just blowing everything they pick up on radar out of the water. But Comrade Liaoxi’s not keen on that.”

Liao…

North Pyongan’s eyes widened as the address registered, swivelling towards the Chinese woman. Her mask was on, but her scarf didn't cover her yellow skin or white eyes.

She nodded soberly. “He had to know my identity true. My mask was soaked through.”

“She was practically waterboarding herself,” the sailor agreed. “I couldn’t stand watching her anymore, so when she almost passed out, I took it off her.” He winced. “I didn’t expect her to be a foreign Provincehuman. I thought she just had really bad jaundice.”

Liaoxi looked a bit offended at that, though it didn’t show in her voice.

“Of the Soviets we have to stay free,” she told him. “They can’t know about me.”

For the first time, North Pyongan wondered if CCCP even knew China was here, let alone his provinces.

“We wouldn’t… get taken to Shoviet waterssh anywaysh,” he slurred, trying to picture a nautical map of the East Sea in his mind.

If they were farther north, the Northern Korean Cold Current would send them into shore, likely even into Wonsan Harbour. The East Korean Warm Current farther south that could sometimes bring debris from Japan onto their coasts could do the same thing.

But they were in the southern branch of the Northern Cold Current, after it had already left the Wonsan area. If they continued to float in it, it would carry them directly to the Tsushima Warm Current.

And Japan.

He managed to communicate this to his comrades, stumbling through the words.

The skin around Liaoxi's eyes had paled. "If the options are CCCP or Japan, then I choose the first man."

For good reason. North Pyongan hadn't been able to get her to share any more about what had happened to Manchukuo, but she had shared information that the Soviets had passed onto China after interrogating the Japanese scientists responsible for Unit 731 and its counterparts. The more details that came out, the more North Pyongan regretted asking. Which he was sure was her intention.

Pak Ga-ram nodded vigorously. "I also vote no to Japan."

"Alright." North Pyongan drew in a deep breath, tightening his grip on the sampan board.

"Then let's get back to Korea."

—

Resisting the current hurt more than anything he had ever felt physically.

The Northern Korean Cold Current wasn't particularly strong or fast this close to the surface. Only around half a knot. But North Pyongan's muscles were stiff, his legs cramped from thigh to calf, and his skin stung awfully from being submerged in salt for so long.

Four days of Liaoxi and Pak Ga-ram having to force themselves to struggle against the current, preventing themselves from being carried too far, dragging North Pyongan's dead weight with them. To his horror, he found that they'd even made him drink two canteens full of water, and the flask of Liaoxi's ginger tea in an effort to speed his healing. Only one canteen was left now, and they were rationing it.

Even though they both assured him they'd discussed it and done it willingly, it still weighed heavily on him, bearing him down in the sea. South Pyongan wouldn't have left them to sleep in shifts and waste their strength paddling on no food and little water,

exhausted and injured, for four days. Neither would Korea.

North Pyongan was a sailor, and he couldn't even stop himself from drowning.

The hours blurred together like words on seawater-soaked paper. His skin wouldn't stop burning, and his lungs ached, the inside scoured by saltwater.

His mind and body begged him to stop, to close his eyes and sink down into the deep again, to rest.

But he couldn't when the other two were refusing to give up.

Liaoxi had swam around to join them on their side, turning the sampan board around. He couldn't see the fingers that clutched at their little raft, but he knew they would be just as pruned as he and Pak Ga-ram's, the pastel skin waterlogged by the prolonged soak. She was breathing heavily, trying to get enough oxygen through her facemask, and the eyes visible above it were bone-weary.

Pak Ga-ram, too, seemed like he could barely keep his open. And while he refused to show his leg to North Pyongan, the province knew it had to be curing like pork from the saltwater, the lips of the wound puffed up, refusing to scab, like his own broken-open burns.

Kangwon said saline water was good for washing out wounds, but to always thoroughly clean any injuries if he ever went overboard. The salt in ocean water wasn't sterile, and would cause infections easier.

But still, both the sailor and Chinese province kept going. So North Pyongan did, too. Even when one of them had to catch his head as it dipped back towards the water covering their raft, his legs still kicked.

As part of their training, North Pyongan and Pak Ga-ram had had to swim laps in the ocean for an hour, until their limbs were trembling and they could barely stand once they were on the shore. Korea had been there, too, somehow going for longer than them, until even he was panting as he dragged himself back onto land. His

province had wondered how he even stood, let alone walked, when his own legs still wouldn't hold him properly, cramped and aching down to the bone.

This was worse.

On and on they paddled, refusing to stop as the sun emerged from the clouds and started to slide down below the horizon. The waters flushed pink, then turned red as blood before dying into black.

North Pyongan couldn't see even the smudge of shoreline now. With no lights allowed to burn at light for fear of the planes and ships, there was nothing. Only an impenetrable blackness, like that under the sea.

'Purgatory,' his mind said blearily. That was where he had been. Not dead, not alive. Purgatory.

*'Maybe the Catholics **didn't** just make it up.'*

He wanted to sleep. He didn't want to fight the current. He wanted to give in to it, to let it rock him in its watery arms and pretend they were those of God again.

But he could hear his sister urging him on, saying she would call him a loser if he stopped now. And he could see Korea's face as he swam laps long after the sailors had returned to the barracks, his eyes intensely focused as he swam towards something North Pyongan couldn't see.

The province wasn't that strong. He couldn't keep himself going through force of will alone.

'The Lord is our shepherd; we shall not want.'

He closed his eyes, shoulders and legs screaming as he tightened his grip on the board, kicking harder.

'He makes us lie down in green pastures.'

Beside him, Liaoxi dry-heaved, unable to cure her seasickness with the ginger tea given to North Pyongan.

‘He leads us beside still waters.’

Pak Ga-ram made a noise between a pant and a sob as his lungs strained, damaged like his province’s from saving him.

‘He restores our souls.’

His comrade had been the one to do that, hauling him from the depths and purging the water from his insides.

‘He leads us in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.’

He wanted to rest. But Pak Ga-ram had saved him, and he needed to return the favour. The path of righteousness was getting him back to shore.

‘Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for you are…’

Everything faded away but the slosh of water, the sting of salt, and the desire to save Liaoxi and Pak Ga-ram.

Swimming, swimming, he just had to keep swimming, he just had to-

“-rade. Comrade.”

The out-of-breath voice finally penetrated the fog in his mind, hoarse and fading.

“Stop.”

North Pyongan almost couldn’t make himself. And when his legs did receive the message from his brain, he didn’t think they would take another.

He raised his head, his eyes cracking open. The sky had started to lighten, the sun rising in the east.

“We’re almost there,” Liaoxi panted, her eyes wide with relief. “If another few kilometres we can bear.”

Neck stiff, North Pyongan looked up, his heart skipping a beat.

The shore! He could see it, a dark shadow where the water ended, the mountains rising into the sky. They looked like those south of Wonsan Harbour, the ones they had launched the sampan from. He could even see the shape of Guk Island before them.

"Land ho," Pak Ga-ram croaked.

They had almost made it.

'Thank you, Lord.'

Shockingly, even though his legs were drifting in the water like seaweed, they were still able to move. The sight of land had filled them all with a renewed burst of energy.

But as they neared Guk Island, trying to beat the rising light, Pak Ga-ram's kicking started to slow.

"Are… you… alright?" Every word from North Pyongan's mouth was an effort.

The sailor stopped altogether, ignoring Liaoxi's reminder that they needed to hurry. His eyes were fixed on the lump of Guk Island.

"Is it… really okay to just head back to shore?"

The two provinces were both silent, and he turned to look at North Pyongan.

"We were told to remove the observation post there. We didn't."

"The task force was… destroyed," the province reminded him.

"Maybe not all of them. I swear Captain Ko made it. And if he did, others might've, too."

"Not enough to complete the mission," North Pyongan said gently.

He could remember the destruction before he had gone under.

The cannons blasting and the water exploding, men sent flying, blown apart in the water. He knew it had ran red under the moonlight.

"And you're injured."

"I can still hold a gun," the sailor protested.

"We might not *have* guns."

Liaoxi had explained that her bag was waterproof, and that she had placed their firearms in it- her sniper rifle, Type 50, and ammunition, North Pyongan's pistol (his Type 49 had been lost to the waves; Korea was going to kill him), and Pak Ga-ram's submachine gun and pistol.

But the bag wasn't specially-treated rubber, like Captain Ko Man-jo's cargo had been in. It was leather coated with melted oils and fats in the traditional way. Water *resistant,* not water*proof.* And not only had it been sitting in an inch of water for three days, but it had apparently been raining sporadically as well. Not to mention both North Pyongan and Pak Ga-ram's firearms had been submerged before being put in there.

"We won't stand a chance," North Pyongan said, making himself kick to stop them from drifting out again. His thighs screamed as he did.

Pak Ga-ram was too tired to move, but on the board, his fingers clenched.

"We were assigned this mission by Comrade Korea and the Supreme Commander themselves," he said fiercely. "They *believed* that Task Force Dokdo could do this. Even if we're the only ones left, we have to carry out their orders."

North Pyongan's thoughts swirled sluggishly, trying to comprehend the words.

Pak Ga-ram's jaw flexed. "If you order me back to shore, I'll go. But I think we should try to fulfill our mission."

None of them were in any position to fight. They were exhausted and injured, with no rations and now only a quarter of a canteen left. Their weapons might not even work. And there would be at least a unit on that island.

He looked to Liaoxi, hoping she would tell him they should return to safety.

But the Chinese province shook her head. “I made a promise not to participate in the command chain. I should keep it if I don’t want your Countryhuman to cause me pain. I’ll only say- whatever you choose, choose today.”

Korea had had that look in his eye when he saw him off, the one that said he didn’t want to see North Pyongan return if he didn’t bring results with him. But he knew his Countryhuman would understand if he took them back to shore under these circumstances.

But…

He didn't *want* to go back to Korea without results. He wanted to prove that he wasn’t useless, that he could lead. And when so many of their comrades had perished, to walk away from this mission without finishing what they had set out to do felt wrong, especially when Captain Ko Man-jo and Jon Kong-mo could still be alive.

‘Pak Jeong-ri. Pak Yun-sung. Choe Ki-bin.’

He couldn't bring them back. But maybe he could save someone else.

Despite his injuries and four days of no rest, there was a glint in Pak Ga-ram’s pine wood eyes.

‘They** can believe in whatever they wish. **You** can only believe in **them.’

North Pyongan knew it hadn’t been his prayer that had got them here. It had been Pak Ga-ram, not giving in to his injury, refusing to become a burden, pushing to get them home.

He would try and believe in him again.

"Alright," he said, before he could talk himself out of it. "But Comrade Liaoxi-"

"Even if you order, I won't leave you," she firmly cut him off. "For China, I also still have a mission to do."

'She only said it that way to rhyme,' he told himself, shaking his head to clear the new muddle from it.

"Then…" He mustered the courage to say the words, just as he mustered the strength to move his legs to push them towards Guk Island.

"Task Force Dokdo will complete its mission."

Yayyyy now that I don't think I'm at risk of going into three books I can make some chapters shorter. But this does mean I just added one to the count already. So we'll see how long that lasts.

People that can be whatever ethnicity you want them to be as a form of cultural assimilation, coming from my observances:

Lenin
Marx
Jesus Christ
Hatsune Miku

Not One Will Be Lost

The sun was starting to climb over the eastern horizon when the wooden raft finally bumped against the side of Guk Island.

None of them could move at first, too stunned by actually having reached their destination, and drained. North Pyongan's body went limp with the suddenness of being shot. Pak Ga-ram's head slumped onto the water resistant bag, and Liaoxi let out a shaky exhale.

"We made it," she rasped.

"It took a bit," North Pyongan agreed, panting. "But we did."

Pak Ga-ram turned his head, his eyes peering out from heavy shadows. "Now what?"

The three of them lifted their gazes.

Guk Island's shores rose above them, rocky and steep. *Very* steep.

"We have no rope," Liaoxi stated, her brows furrowed in concern. "So there is a beach, I hope?"

"No," North Pyongan said reluctantly.

Guk Island sat above the sea like an aquatic inselberg, with almost nowhere to run your boat aground.

"The sides are all like this," he explained. "There's one with a lip below it, but..."

"They'll probably be watching that one," Pak Ga-ram grimly intuited.

"Yes."

They went back to staring silently at the island as their raft bumped into the side over and over again, driven by the waves.

"Do you... think we could rest?" Pak Ga-ram muttered after a moment. "I can do this. I just need... Just a break."

North Pyongan looked at Liaoxi. She ignored him, still refusing to participate in the chain of command.

"We can't head up until nighttime anyways," he decided.

Guk Island was barely more than half a ri wide at its widest, and while it was thickly forested and rocky, it wouldn't be safe to wander around in broad daylight.

"At least they might have lowered their guard after so long," he said, then winced. A commander probably shouldn't sound so pathetically hopeful.

Liaoxi gave him a sympathetic look, and they settled in to wait.

Guk Island's coastline was relatively smooth, except for on the east side, where a chunk was missing, almost like some gargantuan leviathan had taken a bite out of it, leaving two narrow projections of rock protecting a crescent-shaped bay. It was here they waited, hidden by the shadow of the granite cliffs.

North Pyongan strained to hear anything from above, but the constant crash of waves against the rocks drowned everything else out. At least it would also drown out their own voices, and the impact of their raft from the enemy.

"Can you hear anything?" he asked Liaoxi.

She shook her head. "I don't exactly have my comrade's hearing, if it's an ambush you're-"

She cut herself off as they surged forward again, smacking into the cliff. Her cheeks puffed out a little, her pastel yellow skin turning more greenish.

Pak Ga-ram shifted slightly farther away, though they had to stay on the same side if they didn't want to be dashed against the rock. "Sorry, I know you're a woman, but I have to be blunt- please don't throw up again, comrade. We'll sort of be... stuck with it."

Liaoxi moaned miserably, burying her face in her bag. North Pyongan noted with worry that the constant sea spray had gotten it even more wet.

"You shouldn't have given me that ginger tea," he said guiltily.

"Right now, it wouldn't do much good for me," the woman grumbled. "Mark me when I say- when we get back, someone is going to pay."

'Someone' being China. Just because Pak Ga-ram knew a Chinese Provincehuman was here, didn't mean he had to know the Countryhuman also was.

Again North Pyongan had to wonder what reason China had for sending Liaoxi along, what the mission she had mentioned was. But he knew by now that he wouldn't get a straight answer.

The day was long and arduous. As much as North Pyongan loved the rocking of the sea, the unending momentum of being nearly sucked out of the cove by the tide before being slammed back into the island at full force was starting to get to even him. He knew his sister wouldn't have been able to tolerate the long hours of monotony.

None of them spoke much. The other two were being crushed under the same exhaustion that he was, needing to devote their full strength to clinging to the raft to avoid being knocked into the island or sucked into the water.

The mainland was blocked from sight by the southern spur of granite, but North Pyongan still found his eyes drawn that way.

Were Korea and South Pyongan there, scanning the sea? Did they have someone looking for him? He knew they must. Did they think he and Liaoxi had been captured?

New worry sank in his stomach like a stone in a pond. Not only that his sister might do something reckless in order to find him, but...

What if Korea thought he had purposefully defected? That he might have intentionally turned himself over to the enemy, or at least

went willingly?

He wanted to believe that Korea would never think that way about him, but... He knew how paranoid he was. And what if he thought that forbidding North Pyongan from his religion had been the last straw?

He would never. He might not agree with his Countryhuman's decision, but he knew he thought he was doing it for the right reasons.

But Korea had such a low view of religion. What if he lumped North Pyongan in with the right-wing Christians that followed their own wills instead of God's or anyone else's, and thought he viewed his Countryhuman's order as an attack on his beliefs?

It sort of was. But he knew it was more of an attack on *him.* And North Pyongan understood why he had thought he had to do it.

Even if Korea didn't think he had defected, he would still be worried. And so would South Pyongan. Having them both feeling that way at the same time, especially when it was over something his sister could blame their Countryhuman for, could never end well.

It felt like an age before the sun finally disappeared behind the island, and even longer before the red stain finally faded from the water around them.

When it was finally dark, Pak Ga-ram said, "I'll go scout."

"We'll all go," North Pyongan tried, but the sailor shook his head.

"There's no point in all of us going up if they're just waiting on top of the cliff."

"You're injured."

"Naw, I'm fine." The man slapped his chest, giving a smile. "Now that I'm all rested up, I feel good as new."

North Pyongan wasn't convinced. He could see the way the lines

around his eyes drew tight. He had tried to get his comrade to sleep, but the bag of guns made a poor pillow, and not everyone was as soothed by the crash of the tide as he was.

Pak Ga-ram saw his doubt, and sighed. "If one of us gets captured, it should be me. I won't be able to fight as well if it comes down to it, and I'm not a Provincehuman. I can afford to be captured. You comrades can't."

North Pyongan hesitated, but finally agreed. "Fine. But don't take any risks."

Pak Ga-ram promised not to, then shrugged the gun bag over one shoulder. "I'll stash these somewhere safe to dry off."

As the waves carried them towards the cliffside again, he let go, latching onto the rough face before he could be sucked back out, clinging tight to avoid being dragged under.

For a moment, North Pyongan thought he wouldn't be strong enough to do it. But then he gritted his teeth, and started to climb, one hand over the other, using the shallow shelves the tide had carved into the granite as footholds.

The right leg of his pants was torn, and North Pyongan could see through the shredded black fabric that his wound looked just the way he expected.

The provinces held their breaths as the man worked his way up the twenty-foot tall cliff. Only a few feet up, his injured leg slipped on the slick rocks, making North Pyongan tense. But he managed to regain his footing, shooting a tight smile over his shoulder at them.

The going got easier as he moved out of range of the spray, climbing with more confidence until he was pulling himself over the top. He vanished, and the two waited in nervous anticipation for a shout of discovery.

After a moment, a shadow peeked over the edge of the cliff, giving a brief salute before retreating. North Pyongan let out a breath.

"He'll be fine, I know," Liaoxi reassured him. "How are your

wounds, though?"

"Not well," North Pyongan admitted. "As I'm sure you can tell."

Most of his sodden bandages had sloughed off on the way, exposing the burns on his face and neck. If they were anything like the ones on his hands, he felt sorry that she had to look at them.

The scabs had split apart, gorged with water, exposing fresh flesh to be stung by salt. The skin around them had turned a paler blue, the edges almost starting to fray, like fabric or wet pulp paper.

Thinking of paper sent a burst of alarm through him as he slapped at his chest and underwater torso, suddenly realizing that his missing pack meant something else was missing, too.

"My Bible," he said in dismay, spinning to look out at the sea, like even if it hadn't sank below the waves days ago, it would still be legible.

Maybe it was pathetic of him, especially when he was trying to follow Korea's orders to abandon God, but as he realized it was gone forever, he felt more salt well in his eyes.

"Comrade, there's no need to fret," Liaoxi said quickly, nudging him with her shoulder as they were dragged towards sea again. "I saved your pack and put it with my poetry so it wouldn't get more wet."

Relief rushed through North Pyongan like the waves that carried them forward. "You did?"

Liaoxi nodded vigorously. "I tried to find and rescue you, but when I couldn't, I hoped your book would do."

She suddenly turned away from him, gripping tight to the raft, and he remembered the way she had shouted his name as he was sent flying.

"It wasn't your responsibility to help me," he told her. "I should have been able to rescue myself."

Liaoxi still didn't look at him. "I'm glad I could at least save your

book."

Letting her change the subject back, he said, "I... hope you didn't hurt yourself getting it." When she said she hadn't, he looked at the dark cliffside. "Thank you. I know it's silly, but..."

"It means a lot to you."

He nodded, a bit ashamed. "I know F- Pak Chae-eun betrayed me, and it isn't like the Bible is hard to get a new copy of, but..." He fiddled with the edge of the raft.

"There's memories between its pages," Liaoxi said understandingly. "I could get a new rifle, but it wouldn't feel like 'mine' for ages."

It was a bit more than that. That little brown Bible had been the thing he held onto when his sister was recovering from one of her concussions, and what he clutched as she threw herself into the ring to get another. He had held it close as the Kempeitei closed in on the empty farmhouse to punish his sister for taking a life, and hid it under his pillow in the prison cell as they awaited their sentence. When he had left Anju and his sister behind, that Bible was the only thing he had, the only guarantee that things would work out, that justice would prevail and they would all be safe one day.

It was foolish, even from the Christian side of it. He didn't need a material object to receive God's love and protection. He just needed his belief.

But he felt better knowing that it wasn't lying at the bottom of the East Sea.

And his Party membership card was still in there. Korea would gut him if he lost that.

He nodded to Liaoxi. "Thank you, really. Even if it got wet. It's happened before. I can dry it."

He knew even if the pages started to mold, Hwang would be able to fix it.

Liaoxi bit her lip as she looked at him, almost seeming to be

debating something. He tipped his head at her.

When she spoke her voice was lower than before, making him lean in.

"When earlier I said China was an explanation for my acting, the wrong idea on you I might've been enacting." Her tone was serious, but hadn't dipped into that different cadence she had used before. "My sister and I were acting long before we met him; 'tis our own whim."

North Pyongan raised an eyebrow. "And would China want you to tell me that?"

"Maybe he wouldn't," she confessed. "But I want you to know that my Countryhuman also wouldn't make me do anything he shouldn't."

Liaoxi appeared to consider her words for a moment, then said, "Well, 'shouldn't' he definitely has done in lore." Her white eyes met his again. "But he would never make me change who I am at my core."

North Pyongan looked away, his shoulders hunching. Liaoxi didn't say anything else, and they lapsed into silence, leaving only the crashing of waves between them.

After maybe an hour, a rock fell into the water beside them, and North Pyongan looked up to see the shadow leaning over the cliff again. His heart leapt as another one joined it.

He moved to climb the cliff, but the shade beckoned him to stay, and both of the people above began to descend.

As they got closer, North Pyongan could make out a few details on the second man. A lanky frame, short dark hair, and weathered brown skin.

"That's the man that was with the captain that night," Liaoxi noted. "The explosives expert, right?"

North Pyongan nodded. Their original plan had been to distract the

force protecting the observation post before eliminating the post itself, using the dynamite the man had brought in his waterproof bag. Though he noted with concern that he wasn't carrying one as he dropped into the water. He hoped he had only left it up above.

"Comrade." He reached over to clasp his forearm and pull him closer, all four of them squeezed onto one side of the raft, tipping it precariously. "I'm glad you made it. Where's Captain Ko Man-jo?"

His heart sank as Jon Kong-mo's eyes flickered.

"Bastards got him the first night we were here," he spat. "They were on alert, caught us coming over the cliffside. Shot him dead before he could even draw his gun. Would've got me, too, 'cept he booted me down soon as he saw 'em."

North Pyongan closed his eyes, grief staking his chest.

Another comrade from the war against Japan, gone.

"Ssi-bal," Pak Ga-ram cursed.

"You come to get me outta here?" Jon Kong-mo asked.

North Pyongan hesitated, then shook his head. "No. We came to finish the mission."

"Good." The man spat into the water. "I wantta toss those bastards into the sea."

"It's good that you're alive," Liaoxi said, leaning around North Pyongan. "But did your cargo also survive?"

The man paused. "Yuh. That it did."

"Comrade Jon's also been staking the island out," Pak Ga-ram chimed in. "I only made it to the boats before he found me."

"Thought he was one of the bastards creeping around," Jon Kong-mo grunted. "'Bout near fell to my knees when I saw the uniform."

"I thought I was about to be killed," the other sailor said.

The older man waved a hand. "I wasn't gonna hurt you. Just had to use the knife to make sure you didn't scream."

"Could you give us a situation report?" North Pyongan asked, before realizing it probably should have been an order. 'Give me a situation report,' that was what Korea always said. Or just 'Situation report.' Or 'sit-rep,' if it was his sister.

"Sure." Jon Kong-mo leaned over Pak Ga-ram. "'Bout twenty-five, thirty men up there. Hard to get a solid count, but I wasn't getting under or over those numbers."

Probably a task force and some attached communications specialists. At best, twenty-five to four. North Pyongan tried not to wince at that.

"Terrain here's sort of uneven," the man continued. "You know?"

He nodded. Part of his training had been going to all the strategic islands around the northern half of the Peninsula with Korea, surveying them from coast to coast. He let the man explain the layout to Liaoxi and Pak Ga-ram.

The north of Guk Island was raised higher than the south, ledges and crags dipping shallowly above the cove they were in before climbing back into a lower hill on the side facing Kuge-ri. The only parts that was slightly flatter were the southwest sector, where the cliffs sloped down to a less-forested swath, and a small section of shore that was just beyond the southern spur of rock that hid their cove. The latter was where the enemy had apparently moored their boats.

"Motorboats?" North Pyongan asked, and the man nodded.

"Two of 'em. And the post itself with all the fancy equipment's up in the northwest."

Just like reconnaissance had said. The high elevation and angle were perfect for keeping an eye on the harbour.

"No barracks," Jon Kong-mo finished. "They've just set up tarp shelters nearby."

North Pyongan bobbed his head, absorbing that. After a long moment of silence, he realized the other three were looking at him. He blinked.

"Orders, Captain?" Pak Ga-ram prompted.

Oh.

The province's neck twitched, but he thought of SJ and resisted the urge to glance sideways. He knew his sister wasn't there.

"Alright," he said, immediately hearing South Pyongan calling him lame in his mind. "We're outnumbered. But we don't need to take out the entire task force. We just need to destroy their equipment. We can still use the dynamite for that."

Jon Kong-mo nodded, tapping his fingers in the water covering the raft. Liaoxi eyed him.

"So... let's work out a plan." Maybe not the most commanding tone he could've used. But there was nothing wrong with looking for ideas from comrades.

Over the next hour, they threw suggestions at each other, shooting them down or modifying them, until they had a rough plan sketched out.

"It could just about work," Jon Kong-mo said after pondering it one last time. "If we get *real* lucky."

"Of course we'll get lucky," Pak Ga-ram joked, nudging North Pyongan. "We have god on our side, don't we, comrade?"

That hadn't stopped the sampan fleet from being destroyed.

"It will be dangerous," North Pyongan pointed out. "We might not be able to..." He trailed off, knowing that wasn't something a commander should say.

*'**You** can only believe in **them.**'*

"You could die," he said instead, looking between the two human

men and Liaoxi.

"I should be in the most danger," the Chinese province said. "And to that I am no stranger."

"If I wasn't willing to die for my country, I wouldn't be in the army," Jon Kong-mo dismissed.

Pak Ga-ram removed a hand from the raft to place on his chest. "Captain Ko risked his life to save mine. Who would I be if I didn't do the same to avenge him? And I *know* we'll succeed. Not because we're blessed by god."

As the sea sent them into the rocks again, he clapped that hand on North Pyongan's shoulder, his teeth flashing.

"Because we have our captain here."

He was putting too much faith in him when North Pyongan had allowed himself to be tricked, and gotten their comrades killed. When Pak Ga-ram had been the one that had to rescue *him*.

But if he was putting that faith in North Pyongan, then he had to do his best to be worthy of it.

He closed his eyes. "Then we have our plan."

"How're you three doing?" Jon Kong-mo asked as the younger soldier regripped the raft. "Do you think you could spend another night out here?"

North Pyongan exchanged glances with the other two. "If we had to. Why?"

"I think you should give your firearms time to dry," the man replied. "We're already outgunned. It'd be best if we weren't *out* of guns."

"Are yours in good condition?"

"Only got dunked once for about an hour," Jon Kong-mo replied. "Had to hide in the sea from those bastards. Not ideal, but I've been putting everything out whenever I've seen sun these past few days,

so hopefully they'll fire right."

While modern bullets were more protected from water by their metal casings than when firearms had just required gunpowder, being soaked for as long as theirs had could still definitely be detrimental for them. If the powder had gotten wet, the cartridges might be defective, either making it so the primers wouldn't detonate, causing the powder to burn unevenly, affecting accuracy, or swelling them too much to leave the chamber at all.

"If you can hold out, I'll spend tomorrow watching over your weapons while they dry," Jon Kong-mo said. "I'll go through all your ammunition and toss any bunk ones. That way we'll at least stand a chance."

"What do you think?" North Pyongan asked Liaoxi and Pak Ga-ram.

"Having my Type 49 would make me happy," the man said. "I'd be willing to deal with another day of being brined for it."

"Another twenty-four hours?"

Pak Ga-ram hesitated, then nodded, his lips firm. "I can do it."

"If you can so do, then I can, too," Liaoxi agreed.

"Is there any chance Comrade Pak Ga-ram could at least spend the day on the island?" North Pyongan asked Jon Kong-mo, who shook his head.

"Place is too small. It's hard enough for me to keep moving around without being spotted, and I don't have a gimp leg. If you weren't seen today, you should stick here."

"I'll be fine," Pak Ga-ram cut in. "I don't need to move much for my part, anyways."

Should they take the risk? They were only going to grow hungrier and thirstier. And weaker.

But they did need any advantage they could get. And another day might allow his brain to finish fixing itself.

"Then we'll wait," North Pyongan decided. "But do you have any water?"

"I've got a canteen left," Jon Kong-mo said. "Took Captain Ko's off him when he died. I'll toss it down."

"What happened to the captain's body?" the province ventured.

The man grimaced. "Bastards fished him up and took him. Probably dumped him at sea."

"Pray for the bliss of the dead," North Pyongan murmured. That was fine to say. Even if Korea didn't like it, it was cultural.

"Should probably pray for us, too, while you're at it."

"Who needs prayers?" Pak Ga-ram grinned. "We have dynamite."

Jon Kong-mo dipped his head, then started to swim for the cliff. "I'll come by after nightfall tomorrow. Then we'll make these sons of bitches pay."

He left his canteen with them, along with the men's jackets (Liaoxi understandably not wanting to be left in her white undershirt), then disappeared into the night.

Liaoxi stared up after him.

"Well," North Pyongan said, trying to not sound like he was on the verge of passing out. "Here goes another night."

They did their best to sleep in shifts, with him going first. He felt awkward being pressed in so close to Liaoxi, but every time he attempted to move away, she shivered and wormed closer. Without the swimming to warm them, the night sea had started to get too cold for comfort.

And she had to keep her head on his shoulder, he reasoned. They didn't have the bag anymore. Pak Ga-ram was doing it, too, so it was fine. Manners didn't matter as much when survival was on the line.

When it was his turn to rest, he traded places with her, both of them having wordlessly agreed to let the injured sailor rest longer. He felt even more awkward putting his head on her shoulder, but it didn't stop him from passing out.

His dreams were scattered and confusing- Korea's disapproving glare, his Tokarev slammed down between them, his sister's eyes shining with an emotion he never saw from her, Pak Chae-eun staring into his soul, money in hand- interspersed with periods of that same black nothingness he had experienced while drowning.

He thought of SH in the hospital, twitching and crying out in her sleep, refusing to let herself slip into a recuperative coma. He couldn't either. He needed to heal, but he needed to be ready to lead more.

Occasionally he could feel someone pulling him closer as the world tilted, keeping him from sliding into the waves again, until an arm was wrapped around his shoulders, holding him in place, and a quiet hum vibrated against his side.

The day passed in disconnected fragments, like a film reel that had been spliced and put back together. Waking, trading places with Liaoxi or Pak Ga-ram, being tugged to and fro by the ocean like a piece of debris until he was able to close his eyes again and be plunged back into his dreams and that emptiness.

When he finally opened his eyes to the sunset again, he was relieved to find that his thoughts had finally washed ashore, no longer feeling like they were swirling about at sea. Perhaps not completely recovered, but enough to act.

Pak Ga-ram had nudged him awake. "Almost time."

Liaoxi was yawning into his other shoulder, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Comrades. I must say..." She blinked blearily, then gave up. "I don't feel well at all."

"I heard you gagging earlier," Pak Ga-ram confirmed.

"Just bile."

"Still vile."

A small smile crossed Liaoxi's lips before she groaned. "My strength hasn't been made to bend. But I'm *quite* ready to ascend."

North Pyongan looked up, seeing a dark shape lean over the edge, making a hand gesture. "Good. Let's go."

He made them do a few stretches to limber up, then they all pushed off of the raft, catching onto the wall. He waited until the other two had started up to join them.

The rocks were slippery, but his fingers were too pruned to even feel it. They were so wrinkled that he had to wonder if the deep grooves of his finger pads actually gave him extra traction. They made it up without incident at least, and North Pyongan had never been relieved to leave the sea, let alone *this* relieved.

Liaoxi moaned happily, immediately falling to her knees and placing her forehead on the ground. Pak Ga-ram joined her, vigorously kissing the leaf litter under the trees.

"I'm quitting the Navy," he fervently promised. "I'm quitting and joining the ground force and when we're Reunified I'm moving to North Chungcheong. I never want to see the sea again."

"I've always wanted to visit Xinjiang," Liaoxi agreed, muffled by the mulch.

"Landlubbers," North Pyongan remarked quietly, doing more stretches to regain his land legs as he scanned the trees.

"If you two are done with the dramatics, we've got some Yanks to kill." Jon Kong-mo gestured a hand to the ground, where he'd laid out their firearms. "Now, I disassembled 'em all, rubbed 'em down with my shirt, and left 'em to dry since last night. Plucked a few rounds outta the magazines if they looked too swollen, but that doesn't necessarily mean the ones left are good. Don't fire a shot and expect it to hit. And I'd save the 7.62x25mm cartridges for the Type 49s and 50. Tokarevs jam on the best of days. They can't be counted on if they've been soaked."

North Pyongan nodded. Korea was always reminding them of that.

"Your Mosin's the best off, little lady." Jon Kong-mo nodded to Liaoxi. "All the ammunition looks good. But you've only got twenty rounds."

"I didn't bring much of a supply," she admitted. "On my submachine I was expecting to rely."

"You'll still need to." Jon Kong-mo handed her the Type 50. "The rounds in your drums were mostly up to shape, but the loose ones were worse off. I'd say you have enough for one reload."

"If you give the signal, I'll buy you time to rest and do it," North Pyongan promised. "And if I hear you switch to your pistol, I'll come back you up."

Liaoxi nodded, accepting her Mauser C96 back, along with two magazines worth of stripper clips. Eighteen rounds, plus almost three drums worth of submachine cartridges, and twenty bullets for her rifle, although using it while she was being chased would be difficult.

"Comrade North Pyongan, I'll swap my Type 14 for your Tokarev. It might jam on me, but if you do your job right, that won't matter."

"I will," he vowed, accepting the Nambu Type 14, slightly disdainfully.

'Japanese.' Just because they were common in the army, didn't mean he had to enjoy it. It was the reason he used a Tokarev, despite the jamming issues. Korea had never said so out loud, but he thought his reasoning might be the same.

"And you'll take my Type 49. Comrade Pak, here's yours." Jon Kong-mo handed them their weapons.

"Are you sure you'll be alright with just a pistol?" North Pyongan asked as the man holstered his TT-33.

"So long as Comrade Pak watches my back right while I do what I've gotta." He clapped the younger soldier on the shoulder.

Pak Ga-ram saluted seriously. "With my life."

Jon Kong-mo considered him for a moment, then nodded. "Well, we're all set then. Me and Comrade Pak will scout the perimeter while you two get loaded up. C'mon, boy, let's get those legs of yours working again."

He took the other man away while the provinces got ready, North Pyongan happy to slide on his now dry jacket, though he felt a bit guilty that Liaoxi was still completely soaked.

"He's hiding something, that Jon Kong-mo," the Chinese province said as the Korean checked his straps.

He blinked at her. "What?"

Liaoxi closed her ammo pouch, her eyes on the dark trees. "That I don't know."

"How can you tell?"

"The way he chews on the corner of his lip. It let's his guilt slip."

North Pyongan frowned. "Comrade Jon Kong-mo was in the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army."

'And Pak Chae-eun saved my life.'

He shook his head, trying to brush the doubts away. "If he was going to betray us, why wouldn't he have done it last night? All he would've had to do was lead them over to the cliff edge, and we would be fish in a barrel."

"I'm not saying he'll lead us to our doom," Liaoxi corrected. "Just that he's feeling some sort of gloom."

"I believe you," North Pyongan quickly assured her. She had caught Kim Pan-suk's lie, after all. "I'll keep an eye out."

Liaoxi nodded, finishing adjusting her firearms. She looked down her Mosin-Nagant's scope in satisfaction.

North Pyongan's pack was still wet inside, so he slid his Bible into his jacket's inner pocket. He hesitated, then removed his Party membership card, tucking it into his breast pocket, which could actually button shut.

He was *not* going to be chided by Korea for losing it. He had already lost his Type 49, and now had to leave his soaked pack to avoid being weighed down.

"You should let me take the bulk of them," he tried, not for the first time. "You should stay hidden until you're drier."

"I won't be dry anytime soon." Liaoxi wrung a cup's worth of water from her tunic. "Don't worry- I can still run like the winds of a monsoon."

He watched her preen at her own rhyme. "Alright. But if you need a break, switch places with me."

"Depending on how things fall, we might not have a say in it at all." Liaoxi straightened as the soldiers returned.

"Just three down by the boats," Jon Kong-mo reported. "Easy to take care of, but they'll probably send more to defend 'em once things start going."

North Pyongan tried to see if he could see some sign of whatever made Liaoxi think he was hiding something. He looked grim, and Pak Ga-ram was sober, but they *were* about to go up against at least twenty-five men.

He thought of those broadcasts from the south, the ones that had said Korea had killed hundreds of enemy soldiers in Seoul. His Countryhuman refused to confirm or deny whether they were sheerly propaganda.

But the fact that North Pyongan could easily believe it, while he wondered how their squad of four could possibly eliminate two dozen men, said something.

"Well, let's get going." Jon Kong-mo had a long bag in hand now, the waterproof one with the explosives in it. "No more talking.

Sound travels."

He started off, and Liaoxi slid after him. North Pyongan went to follow, before a hand landed on his shoulder.

"Comrade." Pak Ga-ram looked at him, eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "I just wanted to say thank you for believing in us. That we can do this."

"Of course," North Pyongan said, a bit of guilt surging at his initial hesitance. "I... know we can."

His comrade nodded seriously. "I'll do whatever it takes to complete our mission for Comrade Korea and the Supreme Commander. I promise."

The province dipped his head, and they slid into the trees.

Every step needed to be soft and measured to avoid disturbing the leaf litter. On an island with no large animals, even the snap of a twig would be cause for alarm.

North Pyongan grazed his boots along the ground, not putting his weight down until he was sure there weren't any sticks or particularly crunchy dead leaves under them. Jon Kong-mo had practice from four days of hiding, navigating with ease, while Liaoxi moved with light, precise steps. Pak Ga-ram had the hardest time, not only weak from the days lost at sea, but from his injury. Liaoxi had to support him.

They didn't go far before they split, the three going towards the north, and North Pyongan turning south. Pushing aside his worries, he stalked though the island foliage, the faint moonlight painting dappled shadows beneath the canopies as mist started to rise between the trunks.

Around the rest of the island, the trees grew right up until the steep edges. But on the southern side, a patch had been cleared to provide an unloading zone for the materials the enemy had hauled up from below to build the observation post.

It would've been difficult to transport the wood, tin, and equipment

necessary all the way up the island. And if things went well, now all that effort would go to waste.

He could hear his sister's offended voice. *'Blowing things up without me? C'mon!'*

If she had known this mission would involve dynamite, nothing would have convinced her to stay back.

North Pyongan got down on his stomach, careful not to cast a shadow over the cliff edge.

On the small spit of water-level shore below stood three Americans, idling around a couple motorboats moored to the island by metal spikes drilled into the rock.

"Fog's heavy tonight," one remarked, tapping the ashes of a cigarette onto the ground.

"What?" one asked loudly.

"Ah *said* 'Fog's heavy tonight,'" the first loudly repeated. "God, are you deaf?"

"Cut him some slack, Carolina," the third said, his eyes fixed on the sea. "No one can hear anything with these waves. Just keep your eye out for the Reds."

"They ain't going to try anythin' else after we gave their fleet a mommuckin' like that," Carolina grumbled.

"What?"

He shot a exasperated glare at the second man as the third said, "I don't know. I saw a few of those little wooden boats trolling the waters yesterday."

That got North Pyongan's attention. A search party sent by Korea?

He looked towards the mainland, but the cooling night had coaxed fog out of it, and the still warm, sticky temperature was draping a heavy veil of mist over the East Sea to match.

"They might take advantage of the fog to strike again."

The second man shivered, but Carolina just shook his head. "You're just on edge from that big guy we took out. They were just fishahmen."

"We can't risk it," the second man muttered, almost too low for North Pyongan to hear. "We should've called a strike in. Blew them out of the water, too."

"They were *just* fishahmen." Carolina's growl echoed up the cliffside. "My pa's a fishahman. You want to blow him outta the watah, Boots?"

"What? How does that make any sense?"

North Pyongan listened to them bicker as he waited, Nambu in hand, the long muzzle trained on them. When he was sure it had been long enough, he aimed down the sight at Boot's head. Unlike his companions, he wasn't wearing a helmet.

He hesitated, looking at 'Carolina,' who had lit another cigarette. He seemed more moral than the other two, or at least more so than Boots.

The face of the boy from Anju flickered through his mind. He wished...

But he had to complete the mission. And while the man was against killing civilians, he wasn't against killing the rest of their comrades who were fighting for freedom, people who would still *be* civilians if they hadn't had to take up arms to defend their families and country. He wasn't against this war that had murdered thousands.

North Pyongan wouldn't have hesitated if he was Japanese, opposite the way that Carolina only wanted to spare fishermen because his father was one. He had to stop viewing the Western soldiers as any different. Japan may have tortured their country for decades, but America would do the same if given the chance.

He could regret the death of Pak Myong-sol, he could regret that his fear for his sister might have caused him to kill someone that

could've been turned back to the right path, one of their people. He could regret that he *had* to kill. But he couldn't regret what this was.

Justice.

Boots' head exploded in a shower of blood, the crimson droplets glistening like rubies in the mist. Before the other two could react, so had the lookout's. He had been watching for a threat from the sea, unaware that it was already here.

Carolina had time to move, drawing his pistol, lunging for cover instinctively. But there was no cover on the isolated patch of shore. North Pyongan waited until the man's magazine had been emptied trying to buy himself time, then stepped back to the edge of the cliff.

He looked down, meeting the American's eyes in the shadow of his helmet.

It took three shots to kill him, one in the chest as he reloaded, one jammed in the chamber and swiftly removed, and a final one as he raised his pistol again, catching him in the face.

North Pyongan closed his eyes, uttering a shaky breath as he fought the urge to cross himself.

He didn't have time to decide if he should pray for the man's soul. From across the island came the crack of a sniper rifle, followed by the rattle of submachine guns.

North Pyongan inhaled, long and deep, then turned and plunged into the woods.

The trunks of most of the trees were too slender to hide behind, so he settled for a patch of undergrowth, waiting crouched on the balls of his feet, ready to spring, gritting his teeth as he listened to the shouts and gunfire to the near north as Liaoxi tested the main force, drawing them into the darkness under the trees and away from the observation post.

Part of him still said be should have been the one to run, but he

knew they had made the right decision. Even soaking wet, Liaoxi was lighter on her feet than him. And he knew he still wasn't fully recovered.

But when a shout of victory came as one of the American men thought he'd hit his target, North Pyongan's heart stopped beating, only starting again when be heard fire returned.

It was barely a few minutes before the pounding of boots and clank of firearms charged towards him, heading for the shore as they shouted for their lookouts. North Pyongan waited until the bulk of them had passed before popping up, firing with his Type 49, catching one of the last men before diving back into the undergrowth.

His heart pounded as he tried to shelter behind one of the thin trees, bullets spraying around him. He flinched as wood chips flew from the trunk he was behind, showering his lap.

Behind him, one of the men shouted, "Hold fire!" and the group went silent.

North Pyongan could hear the clink of their guns as they surveyed the dark woods.

"Moore, Harris, go check the boats."

The province wanted to pray as he heard footsteps jogging away, but instead he sprang up, firing near-blind at the shadows under the moonlight. Someone cried out, someone barked to, "Return fire!" and North Pyongan gritted his teeth as a bullet grazed his shoulder as he dove aside.

He didn't stop, rolling back to his feet and sprinting after the men he could still hear running for the cliffside, relieved when he heard the man in charge order the squad to hold their fire to avoid hitting their own.

North Pyongan sprinted the ten metres to the edge of the island, pursued by at least six soldiers. He didn't look back, forcing his aching legs to keep moving. One of the men ahead turned around,

eyes widening as he pulled his gun, and the province didn't hesitate, pumping his torso full of bullets. He fell back, over the edge of the cliff, and North Pyongan barrelled into the other before he could react, shoving him after him.

There was no point in trying to take a hostage. He knew he was too weak right now to restrain one of the huge, well-fed foreigners.

Without waiting to hear the man's neck break, he turned and ran back into the woods, bullets whistling by him.

He leaped, rolled, jumped up and fired, getting a few rounds off, possibly eliminating another target, before the Type 49 clicked, jammed.

*'Please please **please.**'*

North Pyongan didn't have time to fix it, forced to flee as the four or five men left pursued.

If he was Korea or his sister, maybe he could have taken them all at once in melee. But he knew he stood no chance.

He pulled his pistol, firing behind him, hearing his bullets strike wood. He had to keep them on him and away from the boats.

The clatter of stone echoed over the island with the gunshots. Liaoxi leading her targets down the northern cliff. She had already eliminated enough to change position.

Gunfire sounded from another sector now, the northwest.

"The observation post!" one of the men cried. "It *was* a trap!"

"Forget the boats," the one in charge barked. "Fall back and protect the post."

They started moving back in a huddle, ready to shoot in any direction if North Pyongan came from it. He quickly unjammed his Type 49, swapped the near-empty drum for the full, then took a deep breath and lobbed something from his belt towards them.

"Grenade!"

The men scattered, and he lunged, gritting his teeth as he fired, trying to get as many as possible before they realized the explosive was defective.

He saw two shades go down before a third caught him in the side. He muffled his cry, refusing to let his gun dip as he finished off the man that had shot him.

When he fell, nothing else moved.

Not around him, anyway. From the heights, he could hear Pak Ga-ram's submachine gun stuttering, and to the near west, down the slope, he could hear the crash of trees as men blundered through the mist, firing at the lithe shadow harassing them.

Feeling his wound until he was almost certain nothing too important had been hit, he started towards her.

Suddenly something slammed into him, sending him to the ground, rolling across it. Twigs lashed his face and hands clawed at him, trying to wrap around his neck. North Pyongan caught sight of wide, furious eyes and bared teeth before they succeeded.

He struggled vainly, trying to pry the meaty fingers off him. But they only tightened, cutting off his air. Already out of breath, the night started to darken more, closing in as he struggled for oxygen, drowning again, this time in dry air.

He knew he wasn't *this* useless. He knew even if he was weaker than his sister and Korea, he could easily win a grapple against this man if he was in good condition.

But he wasn't. He was starving and dehydrated and exhausted and he had *died.* He had died and now he was going to die again. No God, no Heaven, only Korea's disappointed glower once he came back to life to find that the others had been forced to complete the mission without him.

The gunshots grew muted as his struggles grew weaker. He didn't want to fight. He didn't want to kill anymore. He didn't want to

dirty his soul over and over again until there was nothing worth saving.

He just wanted to rest.

His lids fluttered shut as darkness closed in, and it felt like a relief. Unlike drowning, there would be no point where the water rushed in and he was forced to remember what pain felt like. Only that thick, black nothing as he sank into it.

'You're useless,' Korea's voice decreed, his eyes burning into him with a dark flame on Sobaek Mountain.

'What kind of person are you? The kind that would let our people suffer to avoid getting your 'soul' dirty?'

He wasn't. He knew nothing could leave more of a stain on his soul than standing by and doing nothing as their people suffered. He had fought to save them for *years.* Even when he didn't truly believe God could forgive him for it, he had fought for them. And it still wasn't enough.

'Pak Jeong-ri. Pak Yun-sung. Choe Ki-bin.'

*'They are all dead because of **you.** Their blood is on **your** hands.'*

Theirs and so many others. Even if they deserved it, even if he would kill them again, he didn't want to. God, he was so tired.

As the darkness drew in, the sensation of hands faded from around his neck, his last bit of air escaping in a sigh.

Finally. He could dream of Party meetings and picnics by the river. Of SH's awful home-cooked meals and dancing with their people. Of living by the water with his sister.

Of peace.

A voice came from a great distance, from the bottom of the world's deepest well. Not Korea's this time, but his, choked and desperate as he and his sister lay together in the darkness of the air raid shelter.

'I know they deserve that same peace.'

They did. Their people deserved to be at peace, *all* of them. But he couldn't give it to them. He was too weak and naïve and useless, just like Korea said.

He believed in Pak Ga-ram, Jon Kong-mo, and Liaoxi. They could do this without him.

*'You want to get more of the people who trust in us, who **believe** in us killed.'*

He didn't. That was why it was better if he just let this happen. If he didn't, he would just end up making another mistake, getting them hurt, like their Yebong Mountain guerrillas, like Liaoxi and Pak Chae-eun.

*'**You** are only allowed to believe in **them.**'*

He did, he did believe in them. But how could he ask them to believe in him when he couldn't even keep a promise to Tae-min and Han-jin?

*'I **know** we'll succeed. Not because we're blessed by god. Because we have our captain here.'*

Even if Pak Ga-ram believed in him, he couldn't live up to it. He wanted to, he wanted to so desperately. He wanted to protect him, to protect all of them, but-

His own voice again, dimmer, the well growing deeper by the slowing heartbeat.

'I want them to have peace. I know we have to fight for it.'

'That is what you are for!' Korea's voice shouted down at him, and North Pyongan realized that *he* was the one drowning in the well, not the voices. *'Protecting our people!'*

'I want to!' he cried back, the desperate desire surging inside him. *'I **want** to prove I'm not useless, I **want** to be someone they can count on, someone that can protect my sister, my people, my **country!**'*

*'Then **fight back!**'*

With a rushing sound, North Pyongan was rocketed out of the darkness of the well, lunging forward, mustering a final desperate energy to grab his attacker's wrists, prying them from his throat.

He threw him back, inhaling with a ragged gasp. He couldn't take more time to recover, throwing himself forward, trying to see past the black spots crowding his vision, trying to make his limbs obey him.

The American recovered before him, tackling him again, pinning him. White flashed across North Pyongan's vision as his fist met his cheek, flooding his mouth with blood. His head rang, but before the man could hit the other, he grabbed his arm, wrenching it aside, sending him tumbling to the leaf litter.

The province jumped on him, and they rolled across the ground while he tried to pry his pistol free of its holster, unused to the shape of the Nambu.

He got on top and finally freed his gun, bringing it down on the American's head, smashing it into his nose and brow and jaw, anything he could, until the province was covered in blood and he had stopped moving.

North Pyongan didn't climb off the dead man. He slumped over, face-first into the ground, before twisting, staring up at the canopy as he panted, deep inhales that made his throat ache.

His vision was still spotting, his hands twitching weakly as he fought for air, fought to live.

His head was still ringing, but under it he could hear the gunshots and shouts.

And then pistol fire, rapid and from the southwest.

'Liaoxi.'

North Pyongan grit his teeth, rolling over, dragging his legs off the corpse as he struggled up, a hand over his bleeding side.

The mission. He had to help her keep the soldiers off their comrades until they were done.

"Again and again, no matter what you suffer in the process," North Pyongan rasped, staggering to his feet.

Even if it was eternal damnation.

He cut off the soldiers attempting to return to the observation post at the cliff, taking them with a spray of fire, using the last of his drum before shoving the now unjammed one in. He darted behind a rock outcrop, leaning out to spray the men as they scattered through the trees.

A surge of fear filled him as he heard more coming his way, and realized he could no longer hear Liaoxi's counterfire.

Had she been calling for back-up for herself, not for stopping the men?

He tried to lunge out of cover, but the enemy kept him pinned down. He could only peek out to return fire, unable to move or find out if the Chinese province was okay.

He had messed up again. He had made the wrong decision and gotten someone in his unit hurt or worse. Someone he cared about. He hadn't been able to protect Liaoxi and he couldn't protect-

As his submachine gun ran empty, one of the enemy soldiers leaped up, raising his.

Suddenly, a bullet took him in the side of the head, and he went down like a sampan at sea.

"She's back!" someone screamed in fear, and North Pyongan's heart soared.

He took out one of the men aiming up the cliff, then with a shower of rock, Liaoxi was dropping down next to him, Jon Kong-mo's waterproof bag over her shoulder.

"Sorry for leaving you with all these pests without permission," she

panted, hefting the bag. "But that you could handle it, I had an intuition."

North Pyongan frantically searched her for injuries, but only saw rips in her uniform. "Where were you?"

Bullets pinged off the rocks, and Liaoxi shrank back. "Perhaps that we can talk about that once we're no longer having fun. Our comrades are almost done."

The Korean nodded briskly. "Ammunition?"

"Half a magazine left in this one." She flashed her Mauser, then gestured to the sniper rifle and Type 50 on her back. "And these out of bullets have run."

"Only one magazine left here." He ducked out, shooting one of the shadows in the mist down. "Not enough?"

"I'm afraid it will be tough," Liaoxi confirmed. "Our comrades dealt with theirs- now let's show these ones terror."

They fled from the shadow of the rocks, darting in opposite directions, slicing through the fog like destroyers as bullets hammered around them.

North Pyongan couldn't get a good count, but there could have been ten men in the mist. Since Pak Ga-ram had managed to deal with those guarding the observation post, these should be all that was left.

If they hadn't gotten the chance to call for back-up.

One problem at a time. North Pyongan hissed as a bullet glanced off his arm.

The two provinces criss-crossed over the small island, leading the soldiers in circles through the woods, firing the occasional shot to keep the enemy from thinking they had run out of ammo.

But soon his pistol clicked empty, and from the silence, he knew Liaoxi's had, too.

The soldiers realized it, grouping together now that they weren't in danger of being hit, combing through the woods. North Pyongan hunched in a bush, watching them pass just metres away.

A tap on his back almost made him jump, before relief filled him as he saw who it was.

"Do you have any ammo left?" Jon Kong-mo whispered urgently, crouched behind him. The province shook his head, and his jaw feathered.

Wordlessly, he gestured him to be quiet, slowly army-crawling away. North Pyongan followed, until they emerged at the edge of the island, above the boats.

Liaoxi was already waiting there, and wasted no time in sliding down the knotted rope the Americans had used to climb the cliff, the two men immediately following.

"Got any ammo left?" Jon Kong-mo demanded.

"None. I'm done," Liaoxi said, quickly setting about to untying one of the boats from its moorings.

The man closed his eyes, then quietly turned to dismantling the motor of the other.

North Pyongan went to help, before halting.

"Where is Comrade Pak Ga-ram?"

Jon Kong-mo straightened. As he turned, his expression was heavy enough to sink North Pyongan's heart.

"I didn't tell you everything about the explosives," he wearily admitted. "When I went under, the dynamite got soaked. The blasting caps were screwed. Someone has to detonate them by hand."

North Pyongan's lips parted, horror filling him. "Why didn't you-?"

"I know enough people that've worked with Comrade Korea," the

man said, returning to the boat engine. "I knew you wouldn't let one of us take the risk. I told the kid, and he said he'd do it. He wouldn't be like to make it down here with that leg, anyhow."

Jon Kong-mo couldn't keep the clinical tone he was attempting. The grief bled in as he said, "He's waiting for the Yanks to come in. Then he'll take 'em all out with the post."

'I'll do whatever it takes to complete our mission.'

North Pyongan whirled for the rope. "I need to go get him."

"If you had any ammo, I'd say go for it," the man said, finishing with the motor. "The more range he has, the better chance he's got of surviving. But you're both out. All he's got is your Tokarev."

The provinces were silent.

He nodded grimly. "Someone's got to trigger it if we want to make sure these bastards don't just fix up the damage the little lady did. And with that gun..." He shook his head. "I wouldn't give him much of chance. He'll need to be close."

North Pyongan wanted to demand why he wouldn't have let their comrade keep the Mauser or the Nambu then.

But he knew. They had needed the good guns to buy time for the explosives to be rigged, and to keep themselves alive. Just like North Pyongan would have prioritized the two men, they had prioritized their Provincehuman. He and Liaoxi had needed the accuracy and reliability.

But even if the Tokarev's accuracy was affected by the water, it wouldn't matter. It only had to fire, once. All Pak Ga-ram needed was a spark.

"We'll bring the boat by that side," Jon Kong-mo said, not looking at him. "See if he can make it down."

Was there really no other way? Why couldn't they have told him? He could have conserved his ammunition.

But he had already been trying to conserve it. And Jon Kong-mo had been worried he wouldn't take a shot he needed to for himself if he was worrying about Pak Ga-ram.

He had wanted to save him. To save *both* of them. He knew sometimes victory required sacrifices, but to have one like this, when all they needed was more-

He jerked around at the same time Liaoxi did, reaching out as she tore her sniper rifle from her back.

"Get in the boat," he ordered, lunging for the rope with her gun in hand. "Meet us on the other side."

Jon Kong-mo was startled. "Where are you-?"

North Pyongan was already gone, sprinting through the woods, sliding down the southwestern slope to run across flatter ground, trying to head off the soldiers he could hear storming back towards the observation post.

His heart beat hard, his lungs and legs burning, and he fell to his knees several times as he crossed the rocky island. He reached the cliffs, scrambling up, kicking stones free. He tripped, his chin slamming painfully off the ground, pain cracking up his jaw.

His head spun, but he forced himself up, nails tearing on the rocks, until he was finally at the top.

"Comrade!" he shouted, and he could hear the men close behind redouble their pace. "Wait!"

He tore through the trees until he finally burst into another cleared area by the cliffside where a wooden building with a tin roof sat, dead bodies scattered around it. He ran, ripping the door open to reveal a bank of machinery that looked like it had been torn apart, wires protruding from open panels, with sticks of dynamite arranged around the room.

Pak Ga-ram sat on the floor by a stack of them, the muzzle of his Tokarev pressed to the explosives.

He blinked, face paling. "Comrade North Pyongan?

"We need to leave." He grabbed him by the arm, hauling him up.

"The mission-"

"We will complete the mission!" he barked, panic surging in him as the enemy closed in, howling for blood. "But you are coming with me, and that is an *order."*

Pak Ga-ram allowed himself to be dragged from the post, cowed. Bullets thudded into it as they slid around the side, North Pyongan dragging the injured man for the cliff, a sinking feeling tightening his chest as he realized there was no way they could make it around the building to escape into the forest.

"Jump," North Pyongan told his comrade, hefting Liaoxi's rifle.

"But-!"

"Now! *Please!"*

He didn't turn, but he heard Pak Ga-ram take a deep breath and hobble as fast as he could for the edge.

Praying the man wouldn't smash into the cliffside on the way down or be crushed against the rocks before the boat could come, North Pyongan raised the Mosin-Nagant to his eye, focusing on the shack a good distance away. To his relief, one of the enemy bullets had shattered the window before they'd realized what had been done to their post and ceased fire, leaving his shot clear.

He inhaled, trying to stop his hands from trembling as he looked down the scope, aiming for a bundle of dynamite sticks nestled amongst the machinery.

'Please don't let it misfire, please don't let it jam, ***please-'***

He pulled the trigger of the 'empty' gun, and suddenly the observation post was engulfed in a fireball, the unstable dynamite triggered by the spark of the bullet Liaoxi always kept in reserve.

Relief exploded in his heart the same way the flames exploded from the window, blowing boards out and sending the tin roof spinning into the sky, washing his face with heat. Above the rise of explosions, the soldiers shouted and cursed in rage, and North Pyongan spun on a heel, charging for the edge of the cliff.

His stomach swooped as he threw himself from it, clutching Liaoxi's rifle tight as he plunged towards the dark waves forty feet below. He had no time to spot Pak Ga-ram before he was slamming into the surface of the water, the impact almost driving the breath from him again.

But he kept it this time, shooting for the surface, breaking free with a gasp. He kept one hand tight around the Mosin as he scanned the waves, trying to find his comrade in the thick fog.

His hand suddenly went to his jacket, realizing his Bible was getting soaked. Panic shot through him as his hand met nothing.

He had had it at the boats, and he knew it hadn't fallen while running. It had to be here.

He floundered about, trying in vain to spot it in the shadowy waters. His foot brushed something, and he felt a momentary relief before feeling a larger one as he heard splashing.

"Comrade Pak Ga-ram!" he called, before shutting his mouth as bullets started to rain down around them.

He swam towards the splashing, finding the man thrashing about, sputtering and coughing as his head dipped underwater. He must have passed out from the impact.

North Pyongan grabbed him, kicking desperately to stay afloat with one hand on the gun and the other supporting his comrade, trying to swim out of reach of the enemy, even as he felt himself being pulled under again.

Not even church hymns had ever sounded as beautiful as the rumble of the motorboat as it rounded the island, speeding towards them.

"Here!" North Pyongan cried, thrusting Liaoxi's rifle out of the fog, praying he didn't get them shot.

The boat skidded up, and hands reached down, Liaoxi and Jon Kong-mo hauling up Pak Ga-ram, then North Pyongan. He hesitated, looking down into the dark water, then allowed them to pull him up.

He flopped into the boat, immediately starting chest compressions on Pak Ga-ram as Jon Kong-mo threw himself at the wheel, Liaoxi starting the motor so he could get them out of there.

They made a sharp turn back towards the mainland, speeding away from Guk Island as bullets sank uselessly into the sea behind them.

He could see lights to the west, a destroyer coming to investigate the explosion. But by the time it reached here, they would already be back on shore.

"I can't believe you got him *and* pulled that off!" Jon Kong-mo shouted over the rush of wind, filled with disbelief and joy. "I thought you said you were out of ammo?"

Liaoxi laughed sheepishly, and as Pak Ga-ram turned over, starting to cough out water, North Pyongan smiled tiredly.

"Ammunition is like lifeblood," he said to the man. "You would not say you were out only when it ceased to flood."

He met Liaoxi's eyes, and they both burst into wild laughter, much to Jon Kong-mo's bemusement.

"We did it?" Pak Ga-ram rasped from the floor, barely audible.

"We did," North Pyongan confirmed, almost disbelievingly.

The man smiled. "I knew we could. I believed-"

His eyes rolled back in his head, and he passed out again.

"He'll be fine," Jon Kong-mo said. The words were heavy with relief. "He's a tough kid."

North Pyongan barely heard him. He felt giddy, his heart full to bursting. They had actually competed their mission! He had led them to victory without losing a single person from their surviving squad. He couldn't wait to tell his sister. And Korea-

He fell backwards, staring up at the stars as they danced and twirled, hearing Liaoxi say something from a great distance. But he wasn't back in the well. This dark didn't feel like nothing. It felt full and warm.

His last thought was that maybe Pak Ga-ram had been right after all.

If North knew how many people have psychic conversations with him, it would piss him off so much.

Also I started crying watching the video of the new resort in Wonsan. At the same time as these chapters are going on, Wonsan (and the entire coast) were going on six months of being under constant bombardment. Day and night, constant strikes against the shore. It was blockaded for 861 days. Almost *three years.* 80% of the city was turned to rubble. 35000 people had lived there, and they were reduced to soldiers running suicide missions from caves to keep the Americans and South Koreans from landing. At this point the DPRK had no Navy, and the only thing they could do was man shore batteries and use sampan to lay mines. The American admiral in charge said, 'In Wonsan, you cannot walk on the streets. You cannot sleep any time in the twenty-four hours unless it is the sleep of death. Today marks the one hundredth day of the siege. It is a city of death.'
And now it's a modern city with a huge beachside resort! They have a fun fair! And a harbour! People can fish there without being blown up! The amazing resilience of humanity!

Eavesdropping

The plane ride hasn't been enough to put out the fire burning in America's belly. It had just made it burn hotter, spreading through his veins as he was forced to sit there and joke with his aides like nothing was wrong, like he hadn't just been fucking bull rushed at his own damn show, like every single rep in that room hadn't just betrayed the very concept of justice itself.

Because finding Red China guilty *would* have been justice. That Korean broad had convinced him with her story, but after seeing him in that room, he was sure.

He was in Korea.

He'd been too innocent, too bumbling. Everyone else in the room might've had their fucking blinders on, but America *knew* it was all an act. Because even if he couldn't pin down when the bastard'd been formed, he was sure of one thing- he was a Communist. Giving his gloves away, bringing that bitch and her kid rations, the charity the Reds did to make themselves seem like the good guys, to lure the greedy little working folk in, making 'em think they were entitled to that shit instead of having to *work* for it.

Red China was a commie to the core. And Communists lied. He had planned for that limp-wrist reporter to intervene with just the perfect evidence he needed. He had killed that woman. Somehow, some way. He *knew* it.

And those damn knuckleheads at the UN knew it, too. They knew it and they had let him go when they were supposed to vote to find him guilty, after all the effort America had put in to make sure they would. He'd expected the Yugo and the curry-muncher to abstain after they rejected his 'gifts' again, but Brazil, Ecuador, the Netherlands, Turkey, France had all agreed to vote how they should in his follow up calls.

There had only been one he just couldn't seem to get ahold of.

America slammed into the office in his house in Busan, aggressively turning on the lamp and gripping the rotary phone as he dialled the numbers, his blood pounding in his veins like Injun war drums as he held the handset up to his 'ear.' Someone very deliberately picked up on the third ring.

"America."

Like he had known he would be calling. Fuck that pissed him off so much.

"Awfully early to be answering the phone that quick, don't ya think?" he asked brightly, knuckles whitening around the plastic. "What is it, ten in the morning there? Were you expecting a call?"

"Some of us do wake up before one o'clock in the afternoon," Britain sniffed.

"Well, don't worry, I won't keep ya. I just wanted to ask you a little question." America's grip tightened.

"What the *fuck* was that?"

"Always with the language," Britain sighed. *"Am I supposed to know what you are referring to?"*

A spike of heat stabbed America's stomach as he growled, *"Don't play dumb with me, old man."*

Fuck, he'd wanted to work off some of this anger before he called. He hated when the limey bastard knew he'd got under his skin. He could just see that look on his fucking mug, the same one he'd always had whenever America would lose his temper in the old days, watching him stomp his feet and shout. That superior 'holier-than-thou' look as he told him to 'cease throwing tantrums.'

He stormed to the window, throwing it open. Koreans didn't seem to understand the concept of window screens, but he'd take moths in the house over giving Britain the satisfaction of making him flip his wig.

"You know what you did," he said, calmer with the night breeze on him, the nails of his other hand dug into the desk. "That's why you were hiding from me."

"I was not 'hiding from you,'" Britain said in that stupid hoity-toity accent. *"I was paying a visit to the countryside."*

"All day," America said with false cheer. "While those gorillas of yours in their ugly hats refused to let me in to wait."

"Ah yes. I had heard of that little… altercation." He could hear that condescending eyebrow raise. *"Do you really need an explanation as to why a foreign Countryhuman cannot simply walk into Buckingham Palace as he pleases?"*

America's jaw creaked. "You don't get to tell me where I can go or what I can to do. *I* tell *you.* And I *told* you to vote Red China guilty."

"And I told ***you,*** *for the second time might I add, that I have no desire for a war with China,"* the Brit replied with a touch of exasperation.

"What did you say to them?" the American demanded. "What did you give those yellow-belly bastards to turn them against me?"

They'd been on his side when he called, and the reps had the night before as they smoked in his hotel room. He didn't know when the geezer had got to them, but he knew he had.

"Nothing," Britain sighed. *"I did not speak a word to them. I had more important matters to attend to."*

"More important than defending the free world?"

"They all simply feel the same way as I do," the other country continued like he hadn't even spoke. *"I already imparted on you that if you attempted to bring the United Nations to bear against China, no one would go along with it. Perhaps if you had managed to settle the Korean matter, they might have been convinced.*

"But you have not."

Blinding fury shocked through America's body, seizing his muscles, locking his jaw. The phone creaked, the plastic cracking.

That same fucking tone as back then, whenever he'd be dragged to England for an 'audience.' 'Why haven't you been able to produce more agriculture, why haven't you settled more land, why haven't you cleared out the Indians yet, Virginia?' Making judgements from his throne when America was the one on the ground having to do all that shit.

And that same fucking judgemental attitude as South. 'Oh, why weren't your soldiers able to win?' Like *his* soldiers were the ones turning tail at every opportunity, like *his* boys were the ones contributing jack-all to this venture. The Brits' greatest claim to fame was that fucking Glaucoma Brigade or whatever holding off the chinks for a few days north of Seoul. And they'd still been fucking shredded by a bunch of farmers, damn near wiped out.

It was *America's* men doing the goddamn lion's share, *America* leading the charge, getting his hands dirty, while everyone else sat back and whined about policy and 'international law,' just like always.

"Korea is *nothing!"* he snapped into the receiver. "Without Red China and CCCP this place wouldn't have a leg to stand on. But if we eliminate them, every single commie regime is done for!"

Crap. Plausible deniability.

But no. He didn't need plausible deniability. The only 'people' that would have a problem with his words were the commies themselves. Anyone else would understand that that was what was right, what was *just.*

"And how do you expect to eliminate them when you could not even conquer Korea?" Britain spoke slowly, like he was talking to a-

"I could have already," America growled, careful to keep his words vague this time. "But I knew *you* idiots needed help seeing where the *real* threat was."

"You have always been like this," the other country sighed, like *he* was the one being fucking put upon. *"You invent these schemes, get yourself tangled up in them, then act as if nothing could ever have possibly gone wrong once you succeed."*

"Yeah, because I always *do,"* America shot back. "Does the Revolutionary War ring a bell?"

"Quite," Britain replied scathingly. *"But you did not this succeed this time, did you? Perhaps this will finally teach you the lesson that a good punishment evidently never could."*

America's hand went slack around the handset.

"I don't need to learn a lesson."

At hearing his tone, the atmosphere on the other side of the phone shifted.

"Beg pardon-"

"You had better beg," America said coldly. "You don't get to teach me lessons anymore*."*

"Son-"

"YOU DON'T GET TO CALL ME THAT!" America exploded, then slammed a fist on his desk, lowering his voice so he wouldn't be heard from the open window.

"I am *not* your son," he said viciously. "I am the United States of America and *you do not control me anymore. I* control *you."*

There was silence from across the sea.

"And you are going to let me," America said, icier. "Because do you know what will happen if you don't?"

There was more silence, before- *"Are you* ***threatening*** *me?"*

Despite everything, the old bastard still sounded disbelieving, even after America had made him face the truth at their last

meeting. Because *he'd* always been like *that.* Thinking he was so high-and-mighty, that the world bowed before him and nothing would ever change, even now that he was a doddering old fool sitting on a rotting empire.

"No, no, I'd never do that," America said, suddenly light. "We might not be family anymore, but you're still a democratic nation. It took you awhile to get there, sure, but now that you're here, I'd never threaten you." He paused. "So long as you *stay* democratic."

He could hear Britain's jaw clench as he read between the lines.

"I'd never threaten you," he said. "But Red China would. If he wins in Korea, if he gets Formosa back, if we allow him to climb out of the cradle and start toddling, who do you think he's gonna head for first?"

His 'father' didn't answer. He smiled.

"I think it would be the country that walloped him in a few wars, don't you?"

"We were both a part of the Eight-Nation Alliance," Britain said stiffly.

"Yeah, but only one of us burned his Summer Palace to the ground. How would *you* feel if someone torched your big fancy palace?" He let the words linger. "Only one of us is still holding on to the mainland. And only one of us humiliated him for a hundred years. Take it from me."

His voice turned dark. "That leaves a grudge."

"America-"

He cut him off before he could say anything that would just make his blood run hotter. "If CCCP kicked the bucket tomorrow, we could get along with whoever came next. The Russian Empire, he was a good guy. You and him had your differences, hell, I did, too. But you can't deny he was civilized."

His voice lowered. "China *isn't.* Every single one of their

Countryhumans've thought the world belongs to them, that they're God's gift to the Earth."

And they weren't. *America* was.

"This one isn't any different," he told Britain. "You should've seen the way he was looking at your guy, at *all* of us. Like *we* were the savages."

He'd hidden it well, but America knew what hate looked like. And he had seen it in those slanty eyes of his as he smiled at him.

'I'm not the frightened one here.'

The phone protested under his grip as Britain admitted, *"The Chinese are quite different from the Russians. The Orient has always been a place of strange morals. I shudder to imagine what thoughts a Communist China might be entertaining."*

"Exactly." America thumped his fist on the desk. "The Ruskies could be like us if they wanted to be. But the chinks can't."

Even once their country belonged to America, once he had brought them freedom and democracy and civilization, the Chinese would *never* be like them.

"We could smother him in his cradle," he said. "If you're willing to risk giving him time to get strong enough to take his revenge.

"Or you could do what I say, and we could put an end to it *now."*

Another long silence from Britain. America's heart pounded. If the old man said 'no' just to try and prove that he still could, he couldn't stand for it. He would have to go teach him that he hadn't had the power to say 'no' to America in a long time.

"Alright." The word was quiet, almost meek, and it sent a rush of euphoria through the American. *"We cannot walk back our current vote. It would not be proper. But if you acquire the evidence to call another… I will vote true."*

Reluctance dripped from the words. Not at the idea of crushing

Red China, or even at having to go to war with him. Reluctance that he was giving in. That America had *won.*

America's chest rose and fell rapidly, his fingers tapping erratically on the desk. But his voice was smooth. "I knew you'd make the right decision. I guess we can let yesterday go then, huh? This time. Since I'm so nice, can I get some thanks?"

He could hear Britain's teeth grinding.

His tone flattened. "You didn't even show up to the vote. How about you thank me for forgiving you?"

"…Thank you, America."

The American's mouth twisted in a wide grin, satisfaction flushing his body. "There we go," he said patronizingly. "'We' use our manners, don't 'we?' Good man. You can run along now."

Before Britain could hang up, he sharpened his voice into a blade of pure ice.

"And if you *ever* try something like that shit you pulled with your little 'message' again, I am going to *prove* to you that *I* am the one on top now. Understand?"

"I do," Britain said wearily.

America went to slam the receiver.

"America."

The man had that fucking note in his voice again, the one he had when he was comparing them in that mirror of his, like he was still oh-so-superior.

America knew he should hang up while he still had the last laugh. His hand tightened on the phone again.

"What?"

"You can pretend that you are no longer my son," the Brit delivered.

“You can pretend that you no longer have anything to do with me. But you can never change that fact that I raised you.” Pride and despair mingled heavily in his upper-class accent.

*“Everything you have, you have because of **me.**”*

The anger in America’s stomach flared, bursting through his entire body, filling his skull with red and obliterating the office.

He couldn't let him get the last word, he couldn’t let him know he’d got to him.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, old man,” he managed casually.

He didn’t bother hanging up. He just grabbed the phone cord, tearing it from the wall. Then he picked up the entire rotary phone and heaved it out the open window, slamming it behind it before slamming his palms on his desk.

That fucking *bastard.*

He couldn’t think past the pressure in his temples. He knew the limey was just trying to piss him off, trying to make himself feel better, to pretend that he still had some kind of influence.

But the idea that even part of him truly believed that everything America had done, everything he had accomplished, was *his,* filled him with a monumental fury.

It wasn't. *He* was the one that had finished off the Indians, *he* was the one that killed their Tribehumans and made them bend the knee. *He* was the one that had won his civil war, and their war, the one against Britain. *He* had beaten him and all his crooked-toothed, tea-drinking fops. *He* had beaten Nazi Germany and made Japan bow and won World War II. *Him,* not CCCP, not France, and not fucking *Britain.*

America was the greatest country in history because of *him.* Because *he* was the one with a destiny, *he* was the one God had given the world to.

“ME!” he screamed at the wall and someone five thousand miles away as the rage burst out of him. *“DO YOU FUCKING HEAR THAT?! **I’M** THE ONE FIGHTING THIS WAR, **I’M** THE ONE WILLING TO DEAL WITH RED CHINA, **I’M** THE ONE THAT’LL TAKE DOWN CCCP AND SAVE THE WORLD. ME! **AMERICA!!”***

He shoved the desk, sending it and everything on it to the floor, before storming from the room and down the hall.

Grace was on the bed, scrunched up against the headboard. She flinched as he stormed in, already bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, which made the pressure inside his temples throb.

“Why didn’t you come see if I was okay?” he demanded.

Her blue eyes widened. “W-What?”

“Don’t fucking ‘what’ me!” he snapped, ripping off his tie. “You heard me shouting, you heard that fucking crash and you didn’t even call out to ask what it was.”

“I-I’m sorry,” she stuttered, her hick accent bleeding through. “But ah- I- When you’re like this-“

“Like what?” he demanded, advancing on her. “Like what, Grace?”

She drew her knees to her chest and the covers to her chin, infuriating him even more. “Angry,” she said in a small voice.

“I wouldn’t *have* to be angry if *you* people would stop *making* me!” he snarled. “How am I supposed to feel when my girl doesn’t even come check on me after I get back from halfway across the world?”

“I-“

“Do you even care about me, Gracie?”

“Of course ah care about you!” she cried, sitting bolt upright, but still with those stupid blue sheets clutched over her like a shield. “I got you that present, I- I make you dinner, I’m learnin' how to cook for-!”

“So just because you get me shit means I have to ignore it when you treat me like it?” he demanded, looming over the foot of the bed.

“N-No.” She shook her head furiously, long freshly-dyed blonde hair flying. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, n-next time I’ll come see, I promise.”

The words sent a new surge of anger through him.

“Next time,” he growled, stalking around to the side of the bed. “It’s always fucking next time, isn’t it?”

‘Next time I will send you candy, next time I will visit. Next time I will vote true.’

“If you just did it *this* time, we wouldn’t have a problem!” he shouted at Grace.

“I’m sorry, ah d-didn’t- I didn’t know-“

“You *should* fucking know!” he screamed, and her head went rocketing back as he slapped her, slamming into the oak headboard.

She cried out, slumping over, and he yanked her down on the bed by the thigh, climbing on top of her.

“Stop!” she cried, holding her hands out, useless like always. “Please don’t, please stop-“

“You don’t tell me what to do!” He bared his teeth, seizing her thin wrists and pinning them over her head. “I’m not a fucking kid anymore and *none* of you get to tell me what to do! I am the United States of America, and *I* tell *you!”*

“Ah’m sorry!” Grace sobbed, twisting her face away. “Ah’m so sorry!”

He shouldn’t have made Britain say ‘thank you.’ He should’ve made him apologize, not just for the fucking vote. But he wouldn’t give the bastard the satisfaction of lying to his face.

America sat up suddenly, releasing Grace's hands as he looked down at her, cocking his head.

"Are you afraid of me, Grace?"

The girl stared up at him with those Tennessee sky eyes, tears trembling on the brown lashes. She'd learned her lesson awhile ago. She didn't try to struggle or push him off. Her tongue darted across her lips, pink on Rosy Future.

"Yes," she breathed.

He grit his teeth. What fucking right did she have to be afraid of him? After everything he'd done for her, everything he gave her. The only reason she wasn't in some camp tending to sick gooks was because of him, because he'd *saved* her.

But she was telling the truth.

"You're a good girl, Gracie," he said softly, reaching down to run his fingers through her hair. "You know that, right?"

Her chest heaved, her lips quivering, unsure of whether she was supposed to deny it or not.

America leaned down, placing a kiss on her forehead, before climbing off her, wiping her sweat from his mouth.

"I'm going out, okay, babe?" he said, heading for the door. "Don't wait up."

He heard her let out a sob before he slammed the bedroom door.

The red-hot anger was still churning inside him, lighting his veins on fire. He could still feel his blood pounding in his head. He needed to take it out on *someone.*

But not Grace. Not today.

He hadn't meant to kill Angela. But the stock markets had just crashed, and the Panic of 1893 was building. Banks were closing, reserves were running out, companies, companies that America had

stocks in, were going bankrupt, and on top of all that, Britain had sent that *fucking* letter. All he'd wanted was to come home to his girl and have a nice homecooked meal.

And she'd forgotten to thaw the chicken.

As he'd stared down at her on the bed, her green eyes staring lifelessly, and her blonde ringlets spread across the pillow like a halo, he couldn't help but feel like it wasn't her fault. She was only eighteen. You were allowed to make goofs when you were young. And they'd been going steady for two years, and she'd always taken her punishments like a champ. He could've gotten more fun out of her.

It wasn't his fault either, obviously. He wouldn't have done it if she hadn't screwed up. He still would've had to punish her, but it wouldn't have gone that far.

It was *Britain's* fault. Him and that stupid letter, on the same goddamn paper he'd used in the 1700s with the same red wax seal. On the surface it was a letter of sympathy, but America knew that wasn't why the old man had sent it. He was taunting him, *mocking* him.

'Looks like your Gilded Age is winding down. It is quite unfortunate, but you did have a good run. There is never any shame in coming home. I look forward to seeing you.'

How had he been supposed to hold back when that was all he was thinking about? How was he supposed to realize Angie had started fighting again when all he could see was red? And how was he supposed to realize she'd stopped when the only thing in his mind was that fucking smug old man sitting behind his desk with his fucking feather quill, waiting for America to come crawling back?

He wouldn't give him the satisfaction of forcing America to get rid of another one before he was ready. He didn't have 'tantrums.' He made decisions. Grace would go when he got bored of her, not before.

He didn't bother grabbing his wallet as he left. Whatever Korean

broad he met wouldn't be needing money once he was done with her tonight.

'Perhaps if you had managed to settle the Korean matter. But you have not.'

America grit his teeth.

It wasn't *his* fault they hadn't won in Korea, he hadn't gotten 'tangled up' in his schemes. Even after Truman had backstabbed him and MacArthur after they'd pulled their Doughboys back to Busan, things still could've worked out. He could've driven the commies back to the Yalu, and gone after Red China from there.

It was North Korea's fault, still holding the line, still acting like he had anything to bargain with when he was just a backwater little peninsula, not even a real player.

He could just picture Red China sliding back into the country like a snake, wrapping his strings- *CCCP's* strings- around the Nork again. They were laughing at him, he knew. They were *laughing* about that fucking mummer's farce the chink had put on, and how thoroughly they thought they'd tricked everyone.

But they hadn't tricked America. And they hadn't won.

Fine. If he couldn't have China right now, then he would make sure Korea regretted it.

America wasn't going to let Britain get the better of him, or CCCP, or the United Nations and all those cowards in it, let alone the commies. He wasn't the one that needed to learn his lesson- *they* were.

Red China would get his punishment for thinking he could threaten the free world and escape justice, and for thinking he had the power to turn down the world's most generous offer from America himself, he would make sure of that. There would be no more offers for him.

And in the meantime, North would learn his lesson.

—

South lay on his back in the yard, heart pounding as he stared up at the night sky.

He'd come out here to try and get some relief from the burns throbbing on his skin, hoping the night breeze would at least cool him down. But now…

From across the fence and alley that separated his house from America's, he heard the window on the side that faced him slam shut.

He hadn't heard much, just scraps of conversation floating out of the office, and that one outburst. He couldn't even be sure what they were talking about. But the one thing he had heard clearly rang in his head.

*'Korea is **nothing!**'*

He hadn't heard that. He *couldn't* have heard that. There was no way.

America said all the time that Korea was important, that he had to defeat Communism here or it would spread all over the world. And South was his friend. He would never say that his country was nothing, that *he* was nothing. He wouldn't.

There was a muffled commotion from America's house, screaming muted but the now closed window. South couldn't make it out. He didn't *want* to make it out.

Suddenly he froze, his eyes sliding sideways, towards his front door.

The guards stood there, unaffected. Ku Cheol-moo and Seok Ki-cheol playing cards while Wesson smoked. Only Smith was watching him, green eyes hard.

But they didn't stray towards the fence.

South relaxed, closing his eyes. They couldn't hear America. Which meant they wouldn't think South had. If America knew he'd overheard that-

*'You didn't hear **anything.'***

He had to have been imagining it, or- or his 'ears' were playing tricks on him. Or he'd just misunderstood, like South Chungcheong had. America hadn't wanted to pull out of Korea to go to war with China, and he didn't think Korea was nothing.

He couldn't. He'd got South that suit and the applejack for Christmas, and the shoes for his birthday. He'd wrestled with him and flew paper planes with him on July 4th. He bought him presents and food and watched movies with him so he wouldn't feel lonely.

He was *here.* He was here with him when he could be home safe in his own country. Why would he do that if he thought South was nothing?

Tears welled in his eyes, which was pathetic because he *knew* America hadn't said that. He was inventing things in his head again, making himself sad over nothing.

('Nothing.')

South squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to let his chest shake as he breathed, not wanting the guards to see him crying.

He heard America's door open and close, slamming like a gunshot in the night, followed by the rattle of his gate.

South froze, waiting, heart beating in mingled hope and dread. Hope that his friend was coming to see him, and dread that he'd see him crying and want to know why. That he'd find out he heard.

His heart leapt and stomach sank as his guards slid open his gate, and directed America to where he was.

South lay still, trying to relax his muscles, not closing his lids too tight. He was worried he'd be betrayed by his trembling as footsteps

crunched towards him.

"Hey, kid," America hailed.

South didn't move. *'Breathe in, breathe out.'* Slow and steady, like when North would try and nudge him awake for their writing lessons or another escape attempt.

"Kid." America sounded annoyed as his foot nudged South's ribs.

The Korean blinked blearily, opening his eyes. "Mm?" he half-moaned, sounding dazed.

"What are you doing out here?" America, didn't give him time to respond. "Never mind. I just dropped by to tell ya they found Red China innocent."

South's heart pounded as he sleepily said, "Oh. That's… That's good, right? Now you don't have to go to war with him."

He watched him from behind half-closed lids, praying the other man wouldn't see the tears glistening in his lashes.

America stared down at him, his aviators glinting in the moonlight. "Yeah, kid," he said after a moment. "It is."

The Korean exhaled, and he turned to leave.

"Just wanted to let you know, and make sure the commies didn't get ya while I was gone," he said, not looking back. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Night, Southie. Don't let the skeeters eat ya alive."

"Night," South called, and his voice didn't even waver.

When America was gone, he let out a shaky breath.

He'd been too nervous. But the other man hadn't seemed to notice. He'd seemed distracted, shifting from foot to foot.

He looked up, catching sight of America walking away as his gate clanged shut.

But he didn't head towards his house. He went the opposite way, headed off on foot into the dark streets of Busan.

It was past ten. Where was he going?

South Chungcheong's words echoed in his mind. *'Investigate for yourself.'*

It was what she had said after she'd told him what she thought she'd heard America say. *'If you do not believe me, and you will not Command the truth from my lips, then investigate the matter for yourself. Or you may shut your eyes and continue to ignore it all.'*

He didn't have to investigate. The UN already had. And they said Red China wasn't in Korea.

And what if he *did* investigate? What if he found out that everything she had told him was true? That America's men had retreated so fast before because he wanted to make the rest of the world think China was a threat? That he was getting ready to abandon Korea, abandon *South* to go start a war with the Chinese country, leaving North and his puppet army to overrun the Peninsula?

'Either investigate yourself or ignore it all.'

Well, he was choosing the second option. Because what if an investigation did turn something up? What if there were pictures of Taejon? What if Kim Chong-won had been in Busan that day? What if the people on Jeju had been slaughtered by the tens of thousands? What if their soldiers were stealing women to rape in brothels? What if America had hurt South Chungcheong? What if he really did think Korea was nothing?

What if he actually wasn't South's friend, just like everyone said?

He knew that couldn't be true. None of it. America was just headed to the UN Headquarters. Kim Chong-won hadn't been here. South had just been having an episode. And anyone that had died at Taejon or on Jeju was a Communist. They started it, so they deserved it. If America had hurt South Chungcheong, it was

probably because she'd said something awful, like she usually did. And South had given her that new Command, which made up for it.

America *couldn't* think Korea was nothing. He couldn't not be South's friend. He was here, he had *stayed.*

'And not even your own brother did that.'

Investigating was pointless. The more he knew, the more North would have to be mad at him for. Because he'd be fine if he found out Rhee's army had killed people at Taejon, so long as they were just Communists.

But he knew North wouldn't be. He wouldn't understand. He wouldn't get it until he was unbrainwashed and they were Reunified.

And they would be soon. Red China wasn't in Korea. Whether that was true or not, that was what the UN had decided on. America and his army would stay. Even with the Chinese still here, the armistice was still going to be signed.

They could investigate once everything was over, if South Chungcheong and North really wanted to. But honestly, why would they? Everything would be settled, everything would be okay. And even if they found out something awful, what was the point?

America would have won.

What was the point in knowing something if it had already happened? Or if it hadn't happened?

Or if you couldn't do anything about it.

If he asked America about what he heard, it would just be causing problems for nothing, like North wanting to protest against the trusteeship. America was his friend. But if South kept getting paranoid and questioning him every time he made up a problem in his head, he wouldn't be.

It was best to just let it go, and wait for the war to end.

And so South shut his eyes.

My stance on America is that he doesn't consider himself a pedophile and thinks those people are disgusting freaks. He thinks it's perfectly fine for him (417 + chronologically- 344 in 1951- 28 mentally and physically) to date a sixteen year old because 'Hey, back in the day if you weren't married with fourteen kids by age 16, you were an old hag. You know the age of consent used to be 10? I never fucked with that, America doesn't go under 16, 15 if their birthday's in a few months.' And it's like okay, but that was in the sixteen-seventeen-eighteen hundreds. Please update your moral compass because you definitely are a pedophile by today's standards.
He is very much a pedophile enabler, too, as he knows exactly which rich and powerful people in his country engage in those actions because he uses them for blackmail. 'God that's disgusting. But on the bright side, I own that guy now!' What I'm saying is he is saying, 'Release the Epstein list!' while he has a copy in his back pocket.

Also obligatory 'if any other country had a well-known child sex trafficker who had a list of the huge amounts of rich businessmen, celebrities, and politicians that had raped children in a mass pedophilia ring everyone would be calling for a complete dismantling of its political system, government, and the execution of every single person in it, as well as an invasion.' But it's America so its just another quirky little flaw that won't affect anything.

One's Own Destiny

1923

The water of the small falls gurgled cheerfully as it poured over the ledge, chuckling as it wound its way around the boulders scattered at its edge before heading off down the mountainside.

Both the joyful river and the budding blooms of Seorak Mountain- the latest stop on Korea's mission to map the entire Korean Peninsula- denied the way North Pyongan felt.

He sighed miserably, staring down into the clear water as it rippled over stones of amber and onyx.

The river they had crossed to get here, the Bukcheon, was deeper. It shouldn't have been deep enough to matter, if he hadn't been forced to throw himself down and swim to make it across before the Japanese police could emerge from the trees to catch sight of them, and if they hadn't had to mobilize so swiftly when they heard a patrol was coming to investigate reports of poaching around Seoheung-ri, leaving him to make the mistake of shoving his Bible into his pack instead of giving it to Hwang to safeguard alongside their other books.

But he *had* had to do those things. And it did matter.

He'd realized what he'd done as they fled from the river to regroup before vanishing into the Taebaeks, but he hadn't been able to see the damage until last night, when they were finally able to stop running, hidden beneath the ridges of the mountain range.

His Bible had been soaked through, the pages stuck together, still not dry even after hours of running. He'd been too afraid to open it, knowing his heart would break if he ruined it any further.

Korea had said he was overreacting, that it was just a book. He'd made him turn it over, likely to save for kindling.

He knew his Countryhuman was right. It *was* just a book. He could just get a new one. It would be difficult, with the Japanese shutting down more Christian churches and Buddhist temples to replace with their Kokka Shinto shrines. But surely he could find one somewhere.

'It won't be the same.'

That was what he had said to his sister when she offered to steal him one earlier. He had been trying to dissuade her, since he could never let her steal anything from a church, let alone a Bible. But he had meant it, too.

That was the Bible that Father Pak had given him. The first person to ever show them kindness, to give them charity. And North Pyongan had ruined it.

He knew the priest wouldn't care. He had even told him before he left that if he lost the book, it wouldn't matter, so long as he held God's word close to his heart.

But it *did* matter to the province. Enough that South Pyongan had slunk off after her jokes had failed to make him feel better, something that almost never happened.

He couldn't tell Korea that. He was protective of their Russian books and their rough Korean translations because of the value they held. But North Pyongan's Bible was worthless to him.

"Are you still moping over your stupid book?"

The province quickly sat up, trying to wipe at his eyes without making it noticeable, before he turned to face Korea, who stood above the tumble of rocks that led down to the stream.

North Pyongan nodded miserably, ashamed.

Korea's lip twitched in disdain as he jumped from boulder to boulder, until he stood behind his province, talking loud enough to be heard over the sound of the falls. "It's just paper. And not even paper we can use."

"I know." Still, North Pyongan wished he had protested more before Korea had taken it from him. "But… I wasn't done reading it yet."

He looked down at the river as he said it, his reflection wavering below.

He had been trying to work through the book ever since Father Pak had gifted it to him, struggling to learn the letters, made even more difficult by how different biblical prose was from modern speech. And ever since Korea had taught them how to read, he had been using whatever time he could to finally read God's word for himself. But even after almost a year, he had only just finished Genesis 32.

"I just…" He trailed off, knowing the boy behind him wouldn't understand.

Korea made a noise of distaste, and North Pyongan felt something nudge his shoulder. He braced himself, thinking his Countryhuman was about to boot him into the river.

All he felt was another nudge.

"Ssi-bal," Korea hissed irritably. "Turn around."

North Pyongan twisted, blinking at what was held out to him, stunned.

"My Bible?"

"From the way you were acting, I thought you tore it in half or something," his Countryhuman said, irked. "Asking North Hwanghae if he knew how to repair books. It was *wet."*

“I… I thought the ink would run, or the pages would…” North Pyongan looked up at him in disbelief. “You dried it?”

“Yes,” his Countryhuman said, shaking the Bible aggressively. “Now take it before I throw it in the stream again.”

North Pyongan hurriedly snatched the small brown book, tentatively opening it.

The lettering looked fine. Perhaps slightly blurred, and the thin paper felt rougher under his fingers than before.

But it was readable.

“Did you dry it on a fire?” he asked, stroking the page in wonder.

“No,” Korea said sarcastically. “I laid it out on an ondol floor. How do you *think* I dried it?”

Korea had been gone all last night, according to his cousins that had been on watch. That wasn’t unusual. Often he would leave to prowl the woods to serve as an early warning if the Kempeitei came.

But he never lit a fire when he was alone. He made sure they never made one if they didn’t have to. The smoke and light could make them a target.

There were hundreds of pages in the Bible, and as North Pyongan carefully flipped through, he found they were all perfectly dry, not sticking at all.

“This had to have taken all night,” he said worriedly.

“It’s dry,” Korea said, turning away. “Now stop sulking over it. It’s annoying.”

“Thank you!” North Pyongan called as his Countryhuman jumped off the rocks.

“Get back to camp before you fall in the water and drown,” Korea replied, not looking back.

North Pyongan smiled, clutching the good book close as his heart radiated light.

His Countryhuman might not believe in God, but the Provincehuman thanked Him for him anyway.

—

1951

It was dark in the Party Foundation building, and more run-down than the last time they had sat like this. North Pyongan suspected it had become too dangerous to use as an office now that it was the only building over two stories left in Pyongyang.

His body ached, still sore, even after his three-day healing coma. But he kept his back straight in the wooden chair.

Korea sat across from him, staring him down in the light of the oil lamp as he finished his report of what had happened on Guk Island.

“Why did you decide to continue on to the island?” he eventually asked, his voice giving away nothing of what he was thinking.

North Pyongan hesitated, then told the truth. “Because I wanted to complete the mission.”

Korea’s shoulders almost seemed to relax an infinitesimal amount. “I see. And do you have any criticisms?”

“Yes.” North Pyongan took a deep breath, then met Korea’s eye. “I think it was wrong of you to tell me I can’t practice my faith anymore.”

He braced himself for Korea’s anger.

His country examined him coolly. “Is that so? And what made you decide that?”

“I… thought it from the start,” North Pyongan quietly admitted, his hands clasped in his lap. “You can’t say that we’re bound to the same laws as our people, then deny us the rights we’re promised in the Constitution. You can’t pick and choose which of them apply to us.”

Korea’s outburst came, but not in the way he had expected.

“Than why didn’t you *say* that?” his country demanded, slapping a hand on the desk. “If you thought like that from the start, then *why didn’t you tell me?”*

North Pyongan blinked. “Because… it was an order.”

“An order you didn’t agree with.”

“I know why you did it, Korea,” he explained. “I know you’re just trying to keep me safe. But my faith isn’t the reason I trusted Pak-“

“I told you this isn’t about your faith, or Pak Chae-eun!” Korea snapped. “It’s about *you.”*

He stood up to pace back and forth behind the desk before rounding on him again.

“It doesn’t matter if you think you knew why I did it,” he growled. “I violated the Constitution, I stripped away one of your personal rights, and you barely even protested. From the day I met you, you’ve been waving that Bible around like a flag, even before you could fucking read it. It’s the most important thing in the world to you, but when I took it away, *you let me.”*

North Pyongan was stunned, but he still managed to murmur, “It’s not the most important thing to me.”

“That isn’t what matters here!” Korea bated his teeth in frustration. “What matters is that *you didn’t fight back!”*

“You hate when we push back on orders, Korea,” the province pointed out.

“No, I don’t!” he snapped. “I *want* you to push back. I want to know when you think I’m doing something unreasonable, *especially* when I am violating the law. If you think what I’m doing is wrong, *I want you to tell me.”*

North Pyongan was baffled. “Then why didn’t you *say* that?”

“Because I shouldn’t have to!”

Korea spun away, then turned back, calmer. “My problem is not with your religion. It is with you. You’ve always been a follower, North Pyongan. If you aren’t following your god, you are following your sister, or me. Or our people.”

The first three made sense, but the last... “Korea, you *want* us to follow our people.”

“No- I want you to *lead* them.” Korea slammed his fist on the desk. “When you were on Ganghwa, you weren’t sure that executing Kim Kang-sim was the correct course of action. But you still did it because those boys told you to.”

“You said you approved of that,” North Pyongan protested. “And it wasn’t just because they told me they wanted him to die. I wanted him to see justice, too.”

“But you weren’t sure if it was the right thing for you to be there, or for you to be the one to do it,” Korea said. “It doesn’t matter if it worked out and I approve. It *matters* that you thought it would be better if you left it to them, but because they didn’t want you to, you didn’t.

“When I tell you ‘our people are our god,’ that doesn’t mean I want you to blindly follow them,” he growled. “I want you to examine your own morals and beliefs first, and decide if what both you *and* they want is what is right. *That* is what being a leader

requires."

North Pyongan thought he got what he was saying, but…. "Korea, if someone leads, then someone has to follow."

His country slapped his hand down, making the lamp flame flicker. "That is not always true."

He turned away again, rubbing under his eyepatch, leaving North Pyongan to sit in confused silence. Finally, he turned back, his expression set.

"We are on a path," his country announced. "And it is our duty as Korea and his provinces to lead our people down it. But we do not dictate every step. Like the vanguard party, whose job isn't to tell the working class what they should want, but to help them see what they already do, and organize them so that they can achieve it, we listen to those we lead. We all want the same destination- a free, prosperous country. We help them take the best route towards that. And if they take us down the wrong path, then we help them navigate it safely and get back on course.

"Neither us nor our people are following," he said firmly. "Just because we are slightly ahead of them on our path, does not mean we are better than them. We are the vanguard of the vanguard party, and it is our job to guide them, just as they guide us. We are walking *with* them."

North Pyongan barely had time to absorb that before Korea was leaning over the desk and pinning him with his stare.

"But it can be hard for some of our people to realize that," he said grimly. "Some of them think that they *are* following us, and that our decisions about how to get where we need to go are unquestionable. Because of what we are."

North Pyongan nodded. Sometimes he would almost forget that he wasn't solely human. But then an old man would stare at him on the street with wide, awestruck eyes, or an old woman would try to fall to her knees and ask for his blessing.

It was usually only elders, those who had enough years to remember the old set of Provincehumans. When North Pyongan had been a court lady who only ever left her Sinuiju palace wrapped in veils of emerald, refusing to look at or speak to commoners. And when a sighting of Joseon himself had been like Christ returning to the Earth.

No, that wasn't comparable. Christ would have allowed the poor to touch his robes and laid his hands on those begging for relief from their illness.

From what North Pyongan had heard, Joseon leaving his palace was more like if God Himself had descended from Heaven, distant, untouchable, but not half as loving.

"We need to crush that way of thinking," Korea continued. "In our people *and* ourselves. I am not infallible, my decisions are not always correct. But when so many of our people have been raised to believe in Countryhumans and those in power unquestioningly, *some* might refuse to tell me when they think that, even when we invite criticism."

He leaned forward, his eye burning intensely. *"That* is why I need you and the other provinces to challenge me. Because that kind of thinking is exactly what made Rome, the Russian Empire, Joseon, and America turn out the way that they did."

His eye flickered. "And Japan."

North Pyongan gaped, horrified by what he was implying. "Korea, you could *never* be like Japan."

"And how many Provincehumans have thought that way?!" Korea demanded, suddenly fierce again. "How many of them disagreed with their Countryhuman or thought he was leading them down the wrong path, but held their tongues because they thought he knew what was best, or because they 'understood why he was doing it?' How many of them believed that their country could *never* become a tyrant, right up until the moment they looked around and realized

they and their people were kneeling before him instead of walking with him?"

North Pyongan was struck speechless as his country snapped, "I can't-"

His jaw feathered, and he lowered his voice. *"Korea* cannot afford to let that happen. Joseon was no god. And neither am I. We don't follow our people blindly, and they *can't* follow us blindly."

He leaned farther, so that he was almost hunched over the desk, his voice fervent as he told him, "That is why I can't tolerate you being a follower anymore, North Pyongan. I can't have you trailing after me and doing everything I say without question. I need you to believe in yourself and that you know what is right, and to challenge me if I go against it."

There was an edge to his voice, a barely restrained note of urgency.

"I need you to walk *with* me."

North Pyongan looked at his country as he stood behind the desk, lit by the flickering flame of the oil lamp, his bandaged fingertips dug into the wood and his eye gleaming almost desperately.

And he suddenly realized that he was being selfish.

For his entire life, he had always had someone to follow. As Korea had said, if it wasn't his sister, it was God, or him, or their people. He had always been assured that no matter what they suffered, what trials they had to face, in the end, things would work out. His sister and his Countryhuman were unstoppable forces of nature, and God would always see good triumph over evil. All North Pyongan had to do was follow in their footsteps, and everything would be okay.

But Korea didn't have that sense of security. He didn't have anyone he could place his belief in, and wholeheartedly trust to see them through.

He believed in their people, he believed they could free them, but he couldn't believe that they would always set them on the right path, not when there were so many disagreements on how to get where they needed to go. And not when they *didn't* all agree that a free, prosperous country was the destination. Some reactionaries might only be fighting against Socialism because they truly believed it was evil, but plenty of them didn't care about freedom or prosperity so long as *they* were free, so long as *they* were prosperous.

Korea had told him years ago that he didn't need God to provide him comfort because he had people. But how could he feel comfortable when he was always looking over his shoulder, making sure they hadn't dropped too far back or to their knees?

He believed their people were God, but it terrified him that they might see him the same way.

North Pyongan thought of his first days alive, before he had met his sister. How scared and lost he had felt as he fled across the fields of his province with no idea where he was going or what was going to happen. Seeing South Pyongan emerge from the trees and kill that Japanese soldier had felt the same way that spotting Pak Chae-eun's church through the blizzard had. A beacon of safety, of security. Of hope.

And how had *she* felt, fighting for her life every step of the way, only to realize that she was going to have to be the one to protect *him?* He knew his sister wouldn't have accepted him trying to play the role of protective brother, but he still should have been able to when she couldn't.

Whenever he had fallen ill, he knew he would be safe while he recovered. He knew his sister would watch over him. But what had she felt when she was concussed from another fight, or when she had lost consciousness in the blizzard? He knew she wouldn't have been able to feel comforted knowing that he would take care of her, or get her to safety. She only would have been worried for him, worried that her weak, pacifist brother couldn't even defend

himself, let alone her.

It didn't matter if she didn't resent him for it, as with him forcing her to bear his sins for him. He resented himself.

He had never felt lost during those years- he had her and God. And South Pyongan had had nothing but herself. And even if that was enough, it shouldn't have had to be.

Like he had thought it on Guk Island- even if Liaoxi, Pak Ga-ram, and Jon Kong-mo could win without him, they shouldn't have to. They *should* be able to depend on him.

And so should his country.

"I understand, Korea." North Pyongan looked him in the eye as he said it, showing him he meant it. "And I'm sorry."

His Countryhuman searched his face, looking for something, then twitched back, away from him.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," he said gruffly. "Just do better."

North Pyongan placed a hand over his heart, not letting his gaze waver. "I will. I promise."

Even if he truly never believed Korea could become the kind of man or country that Japan was, it didn't matter. So long as Korea feared it, he had to be there to reassure him he wouldn't. He had to be reliable enough that Korea didn't need to question every single step he took, or at least so he didn't need to look behind him quite so often.

He had to believe in himself, so that his country could, too.

"Good," Korea said, turning away from his eyes. "Do that. And not a word to the others about this conversation."

"Don't you think-?"

“No.”

North Pyongan sighed, but knew that no amount of challenging would ever convince Korea to be vulnerable if he didn’t have to.

“Your criticism session for the mission will be withheld until tomorrow,” Korea clipped, still not looking at him. “Return to the hospital for observation.”

“Kangwon says I’ll be fine.”

“This is not one of the orders you should question,” Korea said icily. “You *died.* South Pyongan will be by the hospital.”

North Pyongan ducked his head sheepishly. He hadn’t gotten to see her yet.

But he knew he’d passed Korea’s test by answering his summons first.

“And take this.”

North Pyongan blinked as a red card was pushed across the desk towards him. “A Party membership card?”

“Your old one was soaked.” Korea glared at him. “But you didn’t lose it. That was your one strike. If it happens again, you will have to get down on your knees and beg the Party Central Committee not to expel you. And don’t tell South Pyongan about this,” he added after a moment’s thought.

North Pyongan smiled, going to tuck it into his Bible, before remembering. He put it in the left breast pocket of his uniform instead.

“Comrade Liaoxi told me about your Bible before she left,” Korea said, slightly awkwardly. “I will talk to Comrade Kang Ryang-uk. He’ll get you another one.”

“It’s alright, Korea.” His Countryhuman narrowed his eye, and he

quickly clarified, “I’m not following your order anymore. Not when I don’t think it was right.”

“You are released from it anyway,” Korea said stiffly.

North Pyongan nodded, smiling. “I just don’t need it.”

He couldn’t cling to a sense of security anymore. He had to provide it- to their people, his sister, and Korea.

His Countryhuman examined him, then nodded, turning his back deliberately, a sign that their discussion was over.

North Pyongan stood, walking to the door. He glanced back at Korea, standing alone in the lamplight, his spine straight.

“Korea. Did you torture Paik Sun-yup?”

His Countryhuman’s shoulders tensed. “Even if I did, he deserved it. And it has nothing to do with you.”

“I know,” he said, and he did. “But I want to know if you’re leading us down the right path.”

Korea was silent for a long moment. Then-

“No. I did not torture Paik Sun-yup.”

North Pyongan exhaled. Laying a hand over the card in his pocket, his province slipped from the room.

—

North sighed as he heard the door shut, slumping into his chair.

That had gotten… He begrudged having to share those thoughts.

But it was one problem resolved, hopefully. North Pyongan had

seemed sincere (uncomfortably sincere) as he made his pledge, and he had done well on the island. Out of all of the options- sunk at sea, taken by the enemy, swept away to Japan- he hadn't thought that 'completed the mission' would have been the outcome. And certainly not because he had wanted to.

At least the men of Task Force Dokdo had been avenged with no further losses.

And China was safe. For now.

North Pyongan, Liaoxi, and the two soldiers hadn't been found by the observation post until the morning of Liberation Day, and word hadn't reached Pyongyang until after North's speech. By then it was too late to get word to China for his trial.

Hearing he had been found innocent had lifted a heavy weight from North's shoulders, though Liaoxi had already left for her country before the communique had came through.

China had avoided America's efforts to spread the war to his country once again, and the one in North's was winding down.

The day after Liberation Day, America's Joy had proposed a smaller two-man sub-committee to try and break the deadlocked talks. After countering his effort to restrict the ceasefire to solely American and Chinese representatives by demanding four men, two on each side, the talks had actually seen some progress. North had made sure to send a junior negotiator, as had Peng Dehuai, and had been pleasantly surprised to find that Ridgway (he wouldn't be optimistic enough to say America) had done the same.

Without the pride of the seniors to get in the way, and with the committee narrowed to a more casual scope, they had finally seen progress as defensive lines were drawn for both of their sides, with a buffer zone in between.

Of course, it had taken Nam Il announcing a day later that they would be willing to make adjustments to the current line to make that progress. And North being unable to speak to any of his people

for the past day.

But it had been made. The war- the combat part of it anyway- was drawing to a close.

And yet North's shoulders weighed heavier than ever. Even if the Americans were being genuine, even if an armistice was signed, peace was obtained, and they were seamlessly able to negotiate Reunification…

He had let his people down. Not only by being unable to free their country.

The Countryhuman ran a hand roughly over his face, sighing.

He was a hypocrite. He had said all of that to North Pyongan- about how they had to lead their people, to *guide* them- and he hadn't even been able to look them in the eyes on the anniversary of the happiest day in most of their lives.

What sort of example did it set when he hid away in a broadcasting booth and rattled off a speech that he hadn't even been paying attention to? He had been praised for it the few times he couldn't escape the civilians heading towards him, but he knew they had sensed the difference from his usual ones. They hadn't been approaching him because they wanted to tell him his words had affected them. They approached because they were seeking reassurance. Because they had seen him stumble.

He knew Liberating their country hadn't been on only him. He knew that even if he could have changed their course by refusing to wait after they had taken Seoul the first time, that things could still have gone wrong.

He *knew* he wasn't solely at fault for their stalemate. But he was for Liberation Day.

North had let his people down when he couldn't Liberate their country. But he had let them down even more by refusing to stand tall for them despite that.

It couldn't happen again. He was not a god, but he *was* the person his people and provinces looked to. He couldn't afford to falter because he was too weak to deal with his failure.

They all needed to believe in themselves, and believe that they could win. And they couldn't do that if they thought their country didn't believe in them. They needed to know that it wasn't them he was doubting.

Whether his next speech was on Foundation Day, or sooner to celebrate the signing of the armistice, North would make it up to them.

And maybe he would even have his brother by his side when he did it.

The fact that the Yanks tried to cut the Koreans out entirely from their own armistice talks will never not irritate me. If I were Rhee I would have killed those guys. But I guess he was too busy ordering civilians that wanted the war to end to be killed. And embezzling.

I do think this is clear, but if you ever wonder why one of North Pyongan's beliefs doesn't line up entirely with Protestantism, it's on purpose. For example, him believing that bad actions send you to hell, even if you believe in God, when most Protestants believe that not believing is what does that. His view is 'Well, if you're committing that awful sin, then you don't truly believe in God, even if you think you do. And if you do good, you're working for God, even if you don't realize it.' There are obviously a bunch of sects with different beliefs, and generally most religious people seem to selectively choose the parts of their religion to follow, but he's especially bad for that. He was handed his Bible, that one prayer, and the Ten Commandments, told that faith in God saves and that God loves everyone, then set free on the world. His faith is basically him going 'I was told that God is good and I think this is good. So God would surely support this.' *finally able to read the

parts of the Bible where God calls for collective punishment and supports slavery* 'Well, I simply don't think He would do that.'

I like to think that when the Nakba was going on in 1948 (it is still going on), North was informed of what some Christians (Zionists) believe about Palestine being promised to the Israelis and sort of aggressively confronted North Pyongan about it to make sure he wasn't an idiot.

North: I heard *some* people think the Israelis have a right to ethnically cleanse Palestinians because the Bible says 'god' promised the land to them. What do *you* think about that?

North Pyongan with the most withering look he has ever given anyone: Korea, those people are from New York and Eastern Europe. The only thing 'promised' to them is sunburn.

Believe In Me

North Pyongan had intended to devote himself to completing the project his sister had started for him, then visit Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin to reassure them that the talks were going well, and they might soon be able to go home.

And then, the morning after his talk with Korea, the American Eighth Army launched one of its most devastating artillery barrages since the war began, even outmatching the fire directed at the PVA on their last offensive.

They threw themselves at the center of the Peninsula, targeting a height just west of Haean-myeon that they had been attempting to claim since their summer offensive began, sending in waves of Rhee's puppet army, freshly retrained and back on the line.

All along the front, fighting broke out again, a band of puppet soldiers even storming the neutral zone at Kaesong, ambushing a platoon of the PVA's military police stationed there to make sure the KPA and their own soldiers wouldn't repeat the mistake they had before. Their commander had been cut down, and another soldier grievously wounded. Hours later, the Jeep with their negotiating team in it was strafed by an American plane on its way to the talks. By the next day, the front was aflame once more, the Americans were denying they had anything to do with it, and the fragile peace that North Pyongan- and maybe even Korea himself- had been daring to hope for had crumbled before their eyes.

It made him want to falter. To send South Pyongan or SH or Kangwon to speak to the boys while he hid, to avoid stealing their hope from them again.

But Korea wasn't faltering. He seemed different than before North Pyongan had been sent on his mission, looking he and the other provinces in the eyes even when they weren't having conversations as intense as the one before.

And after filling them in on what had happened earlier, he had gone to speak to the military police platoon personally, the first time he had willingly engaged with any soldiers in weeks.

So North Pyongan could do this. If anyone needed a guide right now, it was Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin.

"I can come with you this time," South Pyongan offered as they finished setting up the completed project, and started across the eastern hills. "I did most of the work, so Korea can't bite your head off if I do."

She hadn't left his side since two nights ago, when she had burst into his hospital room and almost broken his ribs. Not in a hug this time (his sister showing affection in front of others took *much* more than a few days' separation), but in a wrestling grip as she berated him for 'trying to meet God.' Only Kim Yong-hwan and her medical gloves had been able to beat her off of him.

North Pyongan couldn't help but notice that Korea had been unusually lenient, allowing the Southern Pyongan to help out in the military hospital, even though it was clearly just an excuse for her to stay close to him, and even assigning North Hamgyong to finish their project yesterday (something North Pyongan was sure they would hear about tonight).

He knew the order to separate themselves hadn't been repealed. And it shouldn't be. Perhaps it had been partly another test- Korea attempting to force him to challenge his decisions.

But it had also been necessary. North Pyongan couldn't follow anyone anymore, not even his sister.

"It's alright," he said, and this time he meant it.

South Pyongan raised an eyebrow. "For sure? I know you're pretty upset about the talks falling through."

"They haven't fallen through yet," he said firmly. "And we voted against accepting them anyway. If the Americans' intentions for peace aren't honest, then trying to negotiate with them will just

drag the war out. I wish we could end this with less violence, but it's more important to finish it as soon as possible."

He blinked slowly at her, and she blinked back, communicating in a way the bodyguards tailing them couldn't hear.

The Pyongans had been reunited for a second time. Their Countryhuman and his brother were still waiting to be.

They stopped at the base of a hill. "I could still come back you up."

"I'll be fine." North Pyongan smiled at his sister. "I don't need you to."

She shifted foot to foot, her eyes dipping to the ground. "Okay. I guess I'll see you tonight then."

He touched her arm, and she made a face before heading off with the two men assigned to her, already chatting casually with them about organizing a football match with all the other guards.

But he saw her glance back over her shoulder. He gave her another smile, though he wouldn't pretend it didn't still feel like he was a board having a nail pried out of it whenever they parted.

After asking his bodyguard that hadn't stayed to guard the project area to hang back, North Pyongan started up the hill.

The birds in the trees sang their late summer songs as he threaded through the foliage, following a narrow footpath through the greenery. The sunlight dappled the forest floor with golden light and shadow, and with each step he took through it, he grew heavier with dread.

He wouldn't have Liaoxi here with him this time. The Chinese woman had been gone by the time he woke up, unable to leave even a note. Though Korea had said (with a glare that he couldn't quite understand) that she had asked if he would tell him she said goodbye.

He didn't know if she or her sister and China would return. But

even if she had came back right now, he would still have to do this alone.

Tae-min and Han-jin might be their boys, but they were *his* people.

He found them in one of the crude dug-outs carved into the hill, where they had been living since Han-jin had been discharged from the hospital almost three weeks ago. He'd dug it with Chagang, making sure they had a place to stay while he worked with Korea to get the materials he needed, both of them dipping into their personal funds to keep the burden off of their State.

The curly-haired peasant boy was sitting under a tree outside, staring blankly into the forest, Tae-min nowhere to be seen. He tensed as North Pyongan politely cleared his throat, before going slack again.

"You're back," he said, and even though he no longer sounded as empty as he had in the hospital, despondence still layered his words. "Did your super-secret military op succeed?"

"Yes. I can tell you about it later." North Pyongan looked around. "Where's Tae-min?"

"Inside. Sleeping." Han-jin drew a finger through the dry dirt on the ground. "He sleeps a lot lately." He paused, then wearily admitted, "I think I do, too."

North Pyongan refused to lapse into awkward silence to search for words. "At least after today you'll both be able to sleep somewhere more comfortable. Please go wake Tae-min up."

Han-jin climbed to his feet. North Pyongan didn't miss the way he rubbed his chest as he crawled into the dug-out, soon emerging with Tae-min, clutching his hospital-issue cane.

He dipped his head, not saying anything as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. But he couldn't wipe away the dark circles painted under them.

"Have you two been eating?" the province asked.

Now that they were both registered civilians and out of the hospital, Tae-min had received a ration card for his disability. But Han-jin wasn't injured enough. He *could* work- it would just be difficult for him to perform the manual labour he knew how to. With the food situation, they unfortunately had to be as stringent as possible with distribution.

Tae-min nodded, and Han-jin said, "A Worker's Party member's been bringing us stuff on top of Tae-min's rations." His eyes flickered before he shook his head. "And blue noona brought some rice on Liberation Day."

South Pyongan had told him about that. He knew she'd been given the extra rations by their distributors.

But the Party member bringing them extra worried him, considering Korea was the other person he had asked to watch out for the boys. He would have to speak with the Premier soon, and make sure at least some of their Countryhuman's rations were going to who they were supposed to.

"That's good," he said. "Do you have everything with you?"

"We don't have anything," Han-jin said dully. "Just…"

He and Tae-min's eyes slid to each other, then away.

North Pyongan made sure to keep his voice firm. "Alright. Follow me then."

The boys followed without protest. The silence behind him made the province uneasy.

The two had been… off ever since that day Tae-min had overheard Han-jin begging North Pyongan to help his friend. Not exactly unfriendly or cold, but more… awkward. North Pyongan kept looking back to make sure the uneven terrain wasn't too much for Tae-min. It allowed him to catch glimpses of the boy stumbling, Han-jin reaching out to steady him by the elbow before flinching back like he'd been burned.

They had been strange about touching before, pulling away from

each other whenever someone glanced at them. But not when they thought no one was looking.

North Pyongan had thought Tae-min had been more embarrassed than angry, but perhaps he had been wrong.

'Please let them get through this. They can't lose each other.'

He no longer had to avoid speaking to God, but as the prayer crossed his mind, he still felt guilty.

He couldn't ask Him to resolve the boys' issues. North Pyongan was the one here, so it was up to him.

"We should take a break," he announced when they had just left the foothills and started towards the southern slope of Mount Taesong.

"You don't need to do that for me," Tae-min said, surly. "I'm fine."

"There's nothing wrong with needing to rest." Remembering what he'd thought about doctors having to be slightly manipulative, he added, "I do. I'm still recovering from my mission."

A spark of curiosity kindled in Han-jin's despondency. "What happened?"

"I… almost drowned." Korea had told him not to tell any of their people that he had died. While he didn't completely understand why, he figured it was best for the two boys, if he wanted them to…

'Oh.' Perhaps he did understand.

"I'm not quite healthy again yet," he said, which was true.

Kangwon said his insides were healed, but his outsides hadn't quite caught up. Several of his burns had become infected, just like Pak Ga-ram's leg, and his cousin had had to cut off a fair amount of waterlogged flesh to stop it from developing necrosis. It wasn't bad enough that he couldn't walk, but it was enough to make him feel like a ship's hull being scraped for barnacles whenever he did.

“We can both rest,” he said to Tae-min.

The boy looked at the ground, but nodded.

They reached a spot where the trees that spilled off of the mountain had been clear-cut, leaving stumps. Tae-min lowered himself onto one, wincing. Han-jin reached to help, and he leaned away, making the peasant boy withdraw like he’d been struck.

“I need to piss,” he mumbled after a heartbeat of uncomfortable silence, heading up the slope without another word.

Tae-mine’s gaze remained fixed on the ground, not looking over his shoulder until Han-jin had almost disappeared, just missing the look his friend cast back at him.

North Pyongan fidgeted on his own stump, reaching for something that wasn’t there before he clenched his fingers.

“Are you two alright?” he asked gently.

It was obvious they weren’t. But Tae-min understood what he really meant.

“Yes.” His knuckles whitened. “Han-jin’s just being an idiot.”

After a second, he heaved a sigh, leaning over his cane like a much older man. “Don’t listen to me,” he muttered. “He isn’t the idiot. I am.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?” North Pyongan ventured. “Doctor Kangwon said neither of you were comfortable opening up to him.”

He had sensed the tense energy between them just as North Pyongan had. But trying to coax it out of them had gotten even Kangwon nowhere. Eventually, his cousin had just told him to let it go, that it was something they needed to work out themselves.

North Pyongan had a feeling he knew something he didn’t, but he couldn’t tell what.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Tae-min muttered, avoiding his eyes.

“It might make you feel better,” the province said. “I might be able to help.”

The boy’s gaze flicked up to his, and he almost seemed to hesitate, like the idea was tempting.

Then he shook his head, looking at the ground again. “You won’t. There’s just… something wrong with me.”

North Pyongan shook his head. “There’s nothing wrong with you. Even if your leg will never heal, you can still lead a good life. Plenty of veterans from the Anti-Japanese People’s War lost limbs, and they’re just as cherished as everyone else.”

He debated about adding the next part, then decided he would. The two boys had grown up in a religious town, and while he knew they felt like they couldn’t depend on God to deliver the justice they wanted, they did at least partially believe. The words might bring a little comfort.

“I won’t tell you that God has a plan, and everything happens for a reason,” he told him. Even if he believed it, he had realized long ago that was almost never a comfort to those going through grief, even other believers. “But I will say that no matter what happens, so long as you do good, He loves you. And Korea loves you, too.”

He placed a hand over his heart, letting him know he was included in that.

Tae-min drew his good leg up to his chest, burying his face in it.

“I’m just… I feel so useless,” he said shakily. “I can barely walk. I can’t even go get my own rations. You had to get special permission for Han-jin to be able to pick them up. He does that, and he gathers wood for the fire, and makes the fire, and fetches water and cooks the food, and I…” His arms wrapped tighter as he drew his other leg up, his cane abandoned.

North Pyongan understood. “You feel like you can’t do anything

for him."

The boy nodded miserably. "I hate that he feels like he needs to protect me, but he's right. Ever since we've been kids, he's had to look after me, even when it gets him in trouble. With Kang-sim…" He trailed off, then murmured, "Han-jin's always been better than me at everything. Working the fields, helping out around the farm, making people like him. Sometimes… I think Father wished he was his son instead."

The words struck a chord in North Pyongan's chest. "Do you resent him for that?"

"Yes," Tae-min said. "No." He sighed. "I don't know."

"You resent yourself," the province murmured, and he nodded reluctantly.

"At least I used to be able to help him with his schoolwork, and get Father to stand up for him when he got in trouble for beating Kim Kang-sim," Tae-min said quietly. "Now I can't do anything."

North Pyongan knew the boys weren't the same as he and his sister. But they had grown up together, and remembering Han-jin's sincere desperation in the hospital as he pled for him to help his friend, even at his own expense, the province felt comfortable telling Tae-min, "I don't think he resents you, either."

"I know he doesn't," the dark-eyed boy murmured. "Han-jin's… He's too good for that. He's too good for me," he added, quieter.

North Pyongan thought of his own fears about not being strong enough for his sister, or how recently he had felt like he was disappointing Korea, letting his country down again and again.

But his sister had never blamed him for making her take on his sins for him, or for not being strong enough. And in the end, Korea still trusted him to do better, to pick up his pace and walk with him in the vanguard. Even after his decades of not being enough, his Countryhuman was still willing to trust him to change, and to make sure he never became something he couldn't.

“I don’t think we’re ever not good enough for the ones that love us,” North Pyongan told Tae-min, and the boy inhaled sharply. “God, our friends and comrades, our… your parents. If we don’t feel like we’re enough for ourselves, then we should try and do better. But I don’t think we should ever question if we’re deserving of their love."

“Please… stop using that word.” Tae-min had hid his face in his hands, but North Pyongan could still see that it was flushed crimson in embarrassment.

He smiled, reaching over to touch his shoulder. “You’re good enough, Oh Tae-min.”

The boy let out a shaky breath, trembling as he pressed his face into his knees. North Pyongan pretended not to see him sliding a hand up to wipe across his eyes.

Cracking sounded from the woods, and Tae-min shot up, unfurling to try and sit normally, wincing as his leg straightened.

“There was a guy sort of lurking up there,” Han-jin remarked as he trekked back down towards them. “Is he your secret service, or should I be worried he was spying on me peeing?”

He stopped, narrowing his eyes as he took in Tae-min, his cheeks still tinged red as he determinedly avoided looking at him.

“Was he saying weird things about me?” the farm boy asked North Pyongan suspiciously. And perhaps with a touch of real anxiety.

“You’re the one who says weird things,” Tae-min muttered, climbing to his feet. “Let’s get going.”

He started to limp away. Han-jin looked at North Pyongan.

“All good things,” he assured him, praying he had managed to get through to the other boy.

It took another half hour to reach the area he wanted- a small dip low in the eastern foothills of Mount Taesong. The area was

sheltered, but sunny, and not far from one of the hidden market areas.

It didn't look as scenic as it could have, since the undergrowth had been cleared away, and the grass trampled on. But both of the boys stopped when they saw it. Or rather, what stood in it.

“A house?” Han-jin asked, a note of tentative hope in his voice.

It was more of a shack, with wooden walls, no windows and a tin roof. But there *was* a roof. And a proper door.

“I’m sorry it isn’t what you’re used to,” North Pyongan said, knowing that both Tae-min and Han-jin had been raised in impressive homes on Oh Kyung-tae’s land. “But I told you I would work something out for you.”

Tae-min looked more put out than his friend. “And I said we didn’t need you to pull strings for us.”

“I didn’t pull any strings,” North Pyongan replied. “The State is trying to provide as many people with housing materials as we can. I just made sure you got yours.”

“Couldn’t someone else have used them?” Tae-min looked down. “We’re not even from here.”

“You’re not the only refugees,” the province told him. “And if people trust us enough to deny the enemy propaganda and brave the bombings, then we need to prove to them that their faith isn’t misplaced.”

“But-“

“Tae-min,” Han-jin interrupted. “Stop being so stubborn. I can’t…” His fist curled. “Neither of us can build a house right now. And living in the ground isn’t good for you. If Comrade North Pyongan went through the trouble of doing this for us, we shouldn’t complain.”

Tae-min bit his lip, but reluctantly nodded. “Thank you,” he murmured.

North Pyongan shook his head. “Thank Comrades South Pyongan and North Hamgyong. They’re the ones that built it.”

He would leave out he and Korea’s personal contributions. Tae-min already felt guilty enough.

“And a few comrades in the Worker’s Party and Democratic Women’s Union donated what they could.” North Pyongan gestured at the house. "You have a cooking pot and bowls, and blankets for bedding. And a divider sheet, since the inside isn’t big enough for two bedrooms.”

Now even Han-jin looked hesitant. “Is it… really okay to accept all of that? I mean, I’m not ungrateful, but…”

“Our government organs exist to help our people,” North Pyongan told him firmly. “No one gave anything they couldn’t afford to. And if you feel like you have to, you can make it up to the Women’s Union.”

“How?” Tae-min asked warily.

North Pyongan couldn’t hide his smile. “I got you jobs.”

The two boys blinked, exchanging stunned glances.

“…Both of us?” Tae-min ventured.

North Pyongan nodded. “The Women’s Union is organizing efforts to build houses along routes that our soldiers and the Chinese often take to offer them somewhere to rest. They’ll be cooking meals and repairing uniforms for them.”

With the updated security measures that didn’t allow anyone to offer a place to stay to someone without proper documents from the local People’s Committees, it allowed their soldiers to still have somewhere to rest.

“The women will feel safer having men there to watch over them.”

And most of them were missing sons and daughters that had

been sent to the frontline. Two orphaned boys barely on the cusp of manhood would definitely stir one or two mothers to look after them.

Many refugees at least took something with them, or someone. Family heirlooms, clothing, a wife or parents. But Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin truly had nothing but each other. Connecting them with the local community would ensure that someone would be able to look out for them, even if North Pyongan was called away by Korea.

This idea had been SH's. He had asked a few of his cousins to keep an eye out for jobs for the two boys, and after having attended the Premier's talk to the Women's Union on Liberation Day, where he had directed the roadside houses to be built, she had come by the hospital to share the idea with North Pyongan yesterday, then shot off to arrange things.

"You'll keep an eye on anyone suspicious, and help the women with their tasks," he continued. "Han-jin, you said you know how to sew. And Tae-min, this will be your chance to learn."

"I could teach you," Han-jin said eagerly.

"Or one of the women could," his friend muttered, dimming his enthusiasm slightly.

"Either way," North Pyongan cut in. "You'll be employed. You'll both have ration cards and an income."

Plenty of the women were only volunteering, since they already received stipends from being dependents. But a few had wages organized by the Women's Union. North Pyongan didn't know whether SH had pulled any of her own strings to make sure the boys would be included in that, since she had dodged the question when he asked. But the important thing was that they would be getting paid.

Both the boys were frozen in disbelief, not comprehending his words. Tae-min's knuckles were clenched tight around his cane.

“I got you something else, too.” North Pyongan passed by them, opening the door to the house, and taking one of the items he had left there earlier.

He took a deep breath, and turned around, presenting it to Tae-min, whose eyes widened.

“A new cane?”

“Doctor Gangwon made it for you. And he made this for Han-jin.” North Pyongan pulled a wooden tiger figurine from his pocket, holding it out with the other hand. “I thought it might help you feel more at home if you had something more personal.”

North Pyongan couldn’t help but feel a little anxious as Tae-min hesitantly took the stick, running his hands along the smooth maple wood branch that the province had found for his cousin to carve, examining the magpie head the top had been worked into. Han-jin turned his tiger over in his rough hands.

Neither were overly elaborate, but they were well made. Gangwon might be too shaky to make stitches, but he could still wield a carving knife with skill.

“I know it’s not much,” North Pyongan said, trying not to let his nerves colour his words. “But it’s something.”

“Yeah,” Tae-min said quietly as he wrapped his hand over the new cane. “It is.”

Han-jin looked at him, then down at the little tiger in his palm, curling his fingers around it.

“I… don’t know when we are going to be Reunified,” North Pyongan admitted, refusing to collapse under the weight of their sorrowful looks. “I don’t know when you’re going to be able to go home.”

He couldn't do what Korea did- look them in the eyes and promise them it would be soon, even when he didn’t think it would be. He wasn’t strong enough to bear their disappointment when their hope was taken away again.

But he could be honest.

"But Korea, the Worker's Party and our People's Army are all working hard to make sure that you will," he told them. "You can count on them to do everything in their power to bring peace to our country.

"And until then, you can count on *me* to watch out for you." He spread his hand over his heart. "Please never feel lost or alone. You aren't. I'm here for you. And even when I'm not, I'll make sure that you only have to reach out, and you will receive the support you need. I promise."

Maybe he wasn't worthy of their belief. But he could do his best to *become* worthy of it.

"Why would you do this for us?" Tae-min asked quietly, running his thumb over the beak of the magpie.

North Pyongan replied with confidence, "Because I want to."

"We… don't have any way to pay you back."

"Tae-min," Han-jin cut in. "He doesn't need us to pay him back. He's just doing it because he cares."

The boy blinked solemnly at North Pyongan, letting him know he understood. The province dipped his head.

"I do," he confirmed. "I don't need repayment, and it isn't a burden to look after the people I care about."

"We aren't even from your province," Tae-min protested, his words raspy.

"You don't have to be," North Pyongan replied. "Korea is doing away with provincialism. Someone from Jeju Island is just as important to North Pyongan province as someone from Sinuiju. You may not be from my province, but you are still my people."

"But…"

“Tae-min,” Han-jin firmly interrupted him again. “Not everything has to be about debts. Did Mister Oh ever expect me to pay him back for putting me through school?”

Grief flickered in the depths of Tae-min’s dark eyes. “No.”

The farm boy nodded. “Right. Me and Pa did our best to, but I never *had* to.” He hesitated, then reached out, gingerly placing a hand on his friend’s thin shoulder. “Sometimes people just do things because they… care. Yeah?”

Tae-min’s muscles had tensed at the contact, and he refused to move his gaze from the cane. But he didn’t shrug the other boy’s hand off.

“Yeah,” he conceded, his voice a bit choked, finally lifting his eyes to North Pyongan’s. “Thank you. Really.”

North Pyongan made himself smile, his heart aching. “Thank *you.”*

‘For placing your faith in me.’

He helped the boys settle in, then spent the rest of the day hunting for more sturdy branches for Gangwon to carve for the lame. He felt light, but strangely heavy at the same time, his heart full, but his soul weary.

It wasn't enough, he knew. As much as the boys appreciated what he and his comrades had done, nothing but victory would be enough.

And not even truly that. He could never bring their parents back to life, or their families or neighbours. He could never make it so that the massacres committed by the Ganghwa Commandos had never happened. He could never bring back the home they had lost.

‘Our people are our God,’ Korea had said.

But God was easy to serve. His Commandments might not always be simple to follow, but they were clear. His word might sometimes become muddled by man, but in the end, His directive was

straightforward- be good, do good. Believe. And what was good was decided by Him, one being, set in stone and undeniable.

How did you follow the word of a god with millions of voices? How did you do good for a god that had uncountable different opinions of what 'good' was?

The people of Sinuiju, rallying against a man who claimed to be godly while he fought for his own selfish gain and thought it right. A good man letting himself be lead to something he knew was wrong because he was hurting from the loss of a son, a son who had likely been good also, and only misled by the influential trying to cling to their power. Christians on the steps, willing to call down fire on their neighbours because they had been told they were being oppressed, and Christians in the crowd, willing to tear them apart to stop them.

The people of Ganghwa, fighting over whether or not Kim Kang-sim should be punished for his crimes, even those that agreed he should be divided on how. A father that stood by while his son committed atrocities, and used his wealth to commit his own, but still held enough love in his heart to weep over his body. A father who was willing to have another's child executed to protect his own. A priest that was willing to let a monster go free, and a woman who went to church every Sunday willing to lie on the Bible to make sure he wouldn't.

A man willing to help a boy and his sister, set him on the path to religion, then sell him out forty years later for a few won because it was what he thought their God would want.

The people of all Korea, split between those who wanted to be free, and those that only wanted money and power, and would sell anyone and anything, including their country, out to see it.

And even though that split was nowhere near proportional, even if the few who truly didn't want a free and prosperous Korea couldn't be considered to be on the path with them, those that were were still divided.

Factionalists like Jo Man-sik, Nationalists like Kim Ku, right

deviations and left deviations, people who thought they knew what was best and what was good and how to get there.

Tae-min and Han-jin, hurting, grieving, confused, and vengeful.

North Pyongan had read the Bible now, front to back, twice. He knew God was vengeful. He knew He suffered no slight.

But it was easier to ignore that aspect of Him, to focus on the calls of 'love thy neighbour' and ignore the pages that demanded an eye for an eye. He didn't have to re-read them.

But he couldn't ignore when their people did it. And if he didn't deliver what they desired- vengeance, justice, peace- they would make it known.

He would never have to face God's disappointment unless he died. But if he let their people down, he would have to look them in the eye every day and know that he had failed to serve them properly.

North Pyongan stood watch outside the bunker as the moon rose high overhead, not letting his cousins replace him.

Korea returned late, whistling a soft signal as he slid from the trees and into the shadowed clearing, stopping in front of North Pyongan.

His province stood, keeping his voice low so as not to wake his sister stretched out on the ground at his feet.

"You want me to worship a God that asks for everything."

He couldn't see the expression on his Countryhuman's face under the shadow of the mountain.

But Korea didn't hesitate as he said, "I want you to guide our people, who *deserve* everything."

North Pyongan took in his words, then slowly brought his hand up to his brow in a weighty salute.

Korea gave him a long look, then padded past him, disappearing

inside the mountain.

North Pyongan supposed those divided voices were why he couldn't be a follower. He had to hold firm in his beliefs and what *he* believed was good, not only to make sure Korea never strayed from their path, but to prevent himself from being torn apart by the desires of the god at their heels.

In the end, the commandment he had to carry out was the same either way- be good, do good.

Believe.

North Pyongan accidentally giving Tae-min a 'God loves you even if you're gay' speech without realizing himself (nor will he ever, even when officiating their 'wedding') that Tae-min is gay.

Another iiiiinteresting thing I noticed while checking Wikipedia for my maps is that not anywhere do they mention in the English article for the Battle of Bloody Ridge that it was staged coincidentally at a time the talks were going well, and that the US lied about not being involved, claiming it was only the South Koreans at first, even though they had actually began a limited operation the day before. I know with enough certainty to stake my limbs on it that if the DPRK had done that, the article would mention it. I am confident I would not end up like that limbless fetish girl.

Teaching and Learning

1919

"Can you believe that Pak Won-ho? 'Why shouldn't my father own half the land from here to Busan?' I don't know, maybe because he's in *Japan* half the time? What an ass."

"Says the boy whose father owns half the land from here to Pyongyang."

"Yeah, but I don't think he *should.* My father is a prick."

Hwanghae smiled as he listened to his two students bicker over landownership, flicking to the final page of the book he had been reading.

Only Choi Jung-nam- a landlord's son- was his actual student from the high school. The other- Suzuki Yoshi- was a girl that he had found teaching herself to read at an advanced level, and volunteered to assist.

The two were part of 'Professor Hwanghae's Extracurricular Club,' which was an elevated way of saying they met in an abandoned shack on the edge of Seoul once a month so he could lend them banned books, and discuss topics that he couldn't with the other high schoolers for fear of imprisonment from Japan. Or worse, fear of being fired.

"Well," he said, cutting them off as they discussed exactly what they thought of Choi Jung-nam's father. "I was only able to get my hands on one book this month. My minders have been reaching new heights of vigilance lately."

Indeed, it had been most difficult to sneak out this night, and had involved an awkward drop from a second-story window. Luckily, he had landed in a pile of fallen leaves, and his precious spectacles had been uninjured.

“Think it has anything to do with those rumours?” Choi Jung-nam wondered.

“Rumours?” Hwanghae adjusted his glasses.

“How is it you manage to scrounge up banned books, but you haven’t heard people talking about there being a hunt for Provincehumans?” Suzuki-san asked, brushing aside a strand of escaped hair. “Everyone’s talking about the bounty that was put out on them. Your guards are probably making sure no one tries to kidnap you to collect it.”

Hwanghae raised his eyebrows. He had searched for information on his fellow provinces before, of course, and even managed to find that one was working nearby, in the old City Hall. But the letter he had sent had not been returned, and on the others, he had never managed to find anything more substantial than hearsay. He had assumed that they were all employed elsewhere, under Japan’s supervision, as was the case with him and South Chungcheong, the one he had attempted to contact. Perhaps one of them had gone rogue recently, resulting in the bounty.

“I’ve been hearing different things,” Choi Jung-nam said lowly, glancing around the threadbare shack. “In Father’s circles, they’ve been saying that they’re looking for Korea himself.”

“Korea!?” Hwanghae burst out.

Gracious, the country himself had gone rogue? Then again, he had no idea if he hadn’t already been. One would think that if the Korean Countryhuman was supportive of Japan, the foreign country would take advantage of that fact and have plastered pictures of them all through the news. Since that wasn’t the case, there was a good chance that the country had instead done something such as ‘escape.’

Hwanghae shook his head. "We don't have enough information to speculate on rumours. Though if you’d like to information-gather, I’d appreciate hearing what you find next month.”

“Sure thing, Prof.”

“Of course, Hwanghae-sensei. I can ask around at the newspaper.”

If either Choi Jung-nam or Suzuki-san had ever found referring to a boy that looked to be slightly younger than them (and was also a good foot shorter) as Professor or Sensei, they never mentioned it. Though some of Hwanghae’s less open-minded students had.

“Very good.” Pushing aside thoughts of rumours and bounties, Hwanghae placed the book on the table. “Who wishes to read it first?”

Suzuki-san went quiet when she saw the small, beat-up paperback, and Hwanghae quickly found a mental folder that he had misplaced.

“Oh, apologies, Suzuki-san,” he said, abashed. “Your father was an intellectual in the Communist Party, was he not?”

In his exuberance at getting his hands on a Japanese translation of the much-contested *‘Communist Manifesto,’* it had slipped his mind that that was the reason one of his students was here in Korea in the first place.

“You don’t have to read it, if you don’t wish,” he quickly informed them. “Unlike some of our other material, there could be severe consequences for getting caught reading this one.”

He winced after he said it. Of course, the Japanese girl would be aware of those consequences.

Most of the banned literature Hwanghae smuggled to the two would only result in an imprisonment for Suzuki-san or a fine for Choi Jung-nam, if his father decided to step in. But due to the recent crackdown on leftist ideas, more and more banned books leaned that way politically, and the punishment for reading them could be even harsher.

Hwanghae could never put aside his thirst for knowledge in favour of fear, but he also couldn’t expect his students to do the same.

“No,” Suzuki-san said after a moment, taking the small tome and

flipping through it. “I suppose I should take a look at what ideas were so important that Otou-san had to be executed for believing in them.”

“Me, too,” Choi Jung-nam said quickly.

Hwanghae couldn’t help the proud smile that spread on his face. He had truly chosen well with these two. When Choi Jung-nam had handed in an essay on why he thought Japan’s Occupation of Korea was detrimental to both of their people, instead of reporting him (as he was expected to) Hwanghae had instead asked if he wouldn’t like to meet up to discuss those ideas in more detail, and also turn in a different essay so he wouldn’t be expelled and perhaps fined. And when he had encountered Suzuki Yoshi surreptitiously filching a book on mathematics from the local store, defending herself by saying it was unfair that poor women couldn’t receive proper schooling, the teacher had instead bought it for her, and offered to give her that schooling. He had even pulled a few strings to get her a job at the paper.

It wasn't much, but he hoped by nurturing their more open-minded, progressive natures, there could be at least two more intellectuals in the world that didn’t simply go along with what those in power decreed.

“I can lend it to you once I’m done,” Suzuki-san was offering to her fellow student. “Or if you’d like to read it first…”

Choi Jung-nam awkwardly ruffled his hair. “I was thinking maybe we could, uh, read it together? I know this spot by the river where no one would see us. S-So we wouldn’t get arrested, y’know?”

Suzuki-san flushed, tugging on a strand of her chestnut locks. “I’d like that. How about after your classes tomorrow?”

“Cool!” Choi Jung-nam exclaimed, then cleared his throat. “Yeah, that sounds great. I’ll bring some lunch.”

Hwang politely cleared his throat, and they both jolted, looking like they’d forgotten he was there. He hid a smile as he changed the topic.

“Have you started thinking about your university admissions yet, Choi Jung-nam?”

It was the boy’s final year of high school, and since there were no academies of higher learning in Korea, he would have to leave the country, most likely to Japan.

“Father still wants me to go to Tokyo,” he muttered, kicking at the leg of the rickety old table. “But I’d rather stay here and try to make a difference.”

“You won’t be able to make a difference if you don’t receive an education,” Hwanghae pointed out. “Nothing gets accomplished without intellectuals. You’re an incredibly bright boy, one with the finances to seek a higher education. You must take advantage of that. Don’t you think Suzuki-san would if she could?”

“You should go,” the Japanese girl agreed. “You have the privilege to. I’ll be cross if you don’t use it.”

Choi Jung-nam sighed. “I know, but-“ He froze. “Do you hear that?”

Hwanghae froze as well, inner ears staining. There. The slightest crunch of gravel from the overgrown path outside.

“Quick, into the pantry,” he whispered. “Someone is coming-“

“Someone is already here,” a woman’s cocky voice said, and the door slammed open.

Choi Jung-nam jumped in front of Suzuki-san, blocking her from the newcomer. Hwanghae stepped between them. As professor, it was his job to protect his students, even if he had all the fighting ability of a wet rag.

“Shut up,” the person in the doorway hissed at the shadow behind them. “Keep on guard.”

“Yes, sir,” the same woman as before agreed, and the stranger snapped, “Don’t call me that.”

He stepped past the threshold, and shut the door, strafing the occupants with a glare before settling on Hwanghae. “Hwanghae province?”

“Y-Yes?” Hwanghae ventured, heart pounding in his chest. By the furtive movements and whispers, combined with the cloak which covered the male before him, he assumed it wasn’t someone from the Kempeitei or the government. But that didn’t mean that it was someone without ill intent.

Wait. The face in the shadows of that hood was pale, far paler than that of any human. And the eyes reflecting the candlelight looked large and white. The rumours that Choi Jung-nam had mentioned…

Hwanghae blinked. “Korea…?” he ventured.

The person *‘tch’*ed, casting a look at the human students before pulling his hood down.

Hwanghae’s hypothesis had been correct. It was the Korean Countryhuman. Maybe more important questions should have been on his mind, but all he could think was, *‘Aha! So **that’s** why Japan never had him in the papers.’*

Instead of the flag of Chosen, that which displayed the Japanese rising sun, his face was emblazoned with the Korean Taeguki. That certainly wouldn’t have been good optics for someone trying to impress that Korea was completely under his control.

“It’s me,” Korea grudgingly confirmed, simple words for such a monumental moment. “I’ve come to free you.”

The myriad of questions that had been bubbling in Hwanghae’s mind were dispersed with frightful quickness.

His brows shot up. ”Pardon?”

“I don’t have time for this,” the country growled. “We need to get away from Seoul, and you’re coming with us.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

Ah. A man of few words.

“I’m going to need more to go on than that,” Hwanghae protested.

Korea gritted his teeth, looking once more at the humans. “Can they be trusted?”

Hwanghae looked at them, Choi Jung-nam staring at Korea with an expression of awe, and Suzuki-san hidden behind him.

“Of course,” he said readily. “Choi Jung-nam is one of my best students, and Suzuki Yoshi-“

“’Suzuki?’” Korea cut him off with a dark tone. “She’s a Jap?”

Oh, that couldn’t be good. Hwanghae sidled a little farther in front of the two students.

“Yes, she is. And she’s also one of my-“

“Come out,” Korea ordered, pulling a pistol from his cloak.

“Let’s not do anything rash here!” Hwanghae protested, raising his hands. He was beginning to understand why Japan had put out a bounty on him. One didn’t simply obtain a Japanese-made gun peacefully.

Suzuki-san stepped out from behind Choi Jung-nam, hands clasped tight in front of her, but head held high.

“Yes, I’m Japanese,” she confirmed. “But I have nothing to do with the Occupation.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Korea returned.

The atmosphere in the house was like a powder keg, simply waiting for someone to light the fuse. Hwanghae could only dart looks between the two, unsure of what to do. He couldn't lay hands on his Countryhuman, but he also couldn't allow him to lay hands on his student.

“Only because the government executed my father, and my mother had to flee here from the shame.” Suzuki-san bit her lip, then stepped closer to the Countryhuman, her palms outspread before her, avoiding Choi Jung-nam’s attempt to catch her. She was visibly nervous, but putting on a respectful face.

Hwanghae noted the way Korea’s fingers tensed around the grip of the gun. “Ah, Suzuki-san…”

“It’s alright.” She stopped a few feet in front of the pistol barrel pointed at her chest, then dropped to her knees.

“What are you doing?” Korea barked.

Hwanghae realized what she was doing as the girl bent over, placing her forehead on the ground in full dogeza.

“I’m sincerely sorry for all the trouble my country has caused yours.” Her words were soft, but clear. “If I could take responsibility for him, I would. But I can’t. I can only apologize on his behalf. Moushi wake gozaimasen, Korea-san.”

The country had pressed himself up against the door, flinching back from her apology.

“Apologies don’t fix anything,” he muttered, not looking at her. Hwanghae had the feeling her bowing was making him distinctly uncomfortable.

“I know.” The girl hadn’t moved from her prostrated position. “But they’re all I can offer.”

“Get up!” Korea snapped. “Stop doing that.” Thankfully, the gun was now tucked closer to his body, protectively instead of threateningly.

Apology given, if not accepted, Suzuki-san obediently got to her knees, and Choi Jung-nam stepped forwards to pull her to her feet, putting a guarding arm around her.

“I’ll vouch for her,” he said firmly. “Suzuki-san won’t breathe a word about you being here, or what you’re doing.”

“I vouch for her as well,” Hwanghae quickly added. “She’s an exceptional student and bears no love for the Japanese authorities.”

“Alright, fine,” Korea grumbled, still backed up against the exit, as if frightened by the girl’s remorse. “Just don’t do that again.”

“Sorry.” Suzuki-san bowed again, lightly this time. “I wanted you to know I was sincere. We don’t all support what His Imperial Majesty or the Crown Prince are doing.”

Korea still wouldn’t look at her fully, looking at Hwanghae instead as he tried to recover his former bravado. “I don’t trust her, but it doesn’t matter. Japan has probably guessed what I’m doing by now, anyway.” He narrowed his eyes. “Knowing won’t be able to stop us.”

“What are you doing?” Choi Jung-nam asked excitedly.

“Freeing my provinces, then my people.” Korea gazed directly at Hwanghae, commandeering demeanour having made a full return. “We’re going to organize a revolution.”

“You plan to overthrow Japan?” Hwanghae blinked in shock.

“Not just Japan,” Korea growled. “Everyone that ever collaborated with him, and all that lord their wealth and status over the people. We’re going to free Korea *completely.”*

Hwanghae couldn’t help but think that his choice of illicit reading this month had been timely. “Do you have any idea how difficult that will be?”

The country dismissed his concerns. “No more difficult than what our people suffer everyday.”

Much more difficult, actually! It was simple to suffer. Seeking an end to that suffering was *much* more of a challenge. Though Hwanghae supposed he understood what Korea meant, and was just being pedantic from the astonishment of it all.

“That’s amazing!” Choi Jung-nam exclaimed, eyes alight with eagerness. “And he wants you to help, Prof!”

Hwanghae recovered, pushing up his glasses. “I’m afraid I just can’t do that.”

Korea glowered at him. “And why not?”

Choi Jung-nam cried, “What are you taking about, Prof?! You have to! You resent Imperial rule just as much as us.”

“And I would be willing to help your revolution with information work,” Hwanghae conceded. “But my talents aren’t suited for engaging in combat, and most likely living wild in the outdoors. I would better serve you here, distributing pamphlets and influencing the minds of our youth.”

“And how exactly are you going to do that when Japan locks you up?” Korea crossed his arms. “I’ve already Liberated three of my provinces-“

“Heyyy,” the same girl from before called from outside, followed by a boy shushing her.

“-so it’s only a matter of time before Japan starts raising security on those who remain in captivity,” Korea finished, ignoring the interruption. “Do you really think he’ll let you keep your job when there’s a chance I could come for you?”

Hwanghae pursed his lips. He was right. His minders had already started to step up their surveillance. He might not even be able to sneak out next month, let alone distribute more leaflets or banned materials.

It was a genius move, really. Even if it hadn’t been Korea’s intent, he had pretty much guaranteed that any provinces he encountered would have to join him, as what he was doing would risk whatever small freedoms they enjoyed.

“Hwanghae-sensei.” Suzuki-san stepped forwards, ignoring Korea’s fierce glare. “You *have* to go with him. Isn’t this the kind of thing you want?”

“Well, yes, but…” Hwanghae gestured helplessly.

He had always believed that freedom would be something delivered to him by someone else, someone with arms training, biceps, and 20/20 vision.

"If you're worried about us, don't be. We can take care of ourselves," she assured him.

"And we could even help you from here," Choi Jung-nam chimed in. "Or I could come with you!"

"No," Hwanghae said firmly. "You must get an education. If you feel the need to take up arms, wait until after you graduate university."

"He's right," Korea said unexpectedly. "Once we're free we'll need specialists to rebuild. Right now, you can contribute best by learning and spreading ideas to the other students, while we begin to organize militarily."

Hwanghae raised a brow at that. So the boy wasn't quite as impulsive as he seemed. He was actually thinking ahead. *Far* ahead.

Choi Jung-nam had deflated. Suzuki-san blinked comfortingly at him. "Don't be disappointed, Choi-san. We can fight back in other ways."

Hwanghae really had no other choice, but he still had to say, "I'm not quite the revolutionary you were most likely hoping for."

Korea stared at him for a disconcerting amount of time, eyes narrowed, then asked, "Were you the one who printed flyers about the March First Movement?"

Hwanghae blinked, surprised to have that brought up now. "I believe there were many who did that. But yes, I wrote some. Suzuki-san used her internship at the newspaper to have them printed for me."

Korea glanced warily at her, and she dipped her head. "And would any others use the word 'indubitably?'"

The province pursed his mouth in a moue, studiously ignoring his

students muffled laughter. “Most likely not. I have a feeling I was one of the most educated advertisers.”

Korea nodded, as if confirming something to himself. “I read your pamphlet. You would have risked punishment from Japan for that.”

Indeed. Hwanghae could vividly remember the way his hands had shaken as he typed out the call to action, and how nauseous he had felt for the next few days, waiting to find out if Suzuki-san had succeeded at her task or if the Kempeitai were about to break down his door and have him removed from the school. And also possibly life.

“But you still did it,” Korea continued. “You put out the call to unite our people, and they listened.”

“Not that it succeeded,” Hwanghae said, not without a touch of bitterness. He had hoped that that would have been the day that Japan or at least his leaders, might be swayed by the speeches of the organizers.

“Because words aren’t enough.” Korea’s gun had finally left his hand as he straightened up, squaring his shoulders. “They’re a start, but they aren’t what will free us. For that, we need action. And we need *you.* You have the makings of a revolutionary. If you come with me, I’ll turn you into one.”

Hwanghae had to admit, there was something rousing about the way he said that. And clearly words *hadn’t* been enough. While he had great faith in the power of language, he also knew when to admit that power, however great, wouldn’t succeed.

“Professor Hwanghae!” Choi Jung-nam grabbed his arm.

Suzuki-san took his other one. “Hwanghae-sensei!”

“Very well,” he sighed. “Not that I truly have a choice. If I’m going to lose my position, at least it won’t be due to being fired.”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit, Prof!

“Ganbatte, sensei!”

“Let’s go, then.” Korea turned for the door.

“A moment, please. I need to say my goodbyes.” The Provincehuman turned to his students, who seemed to realize for the first time that joining Korea would mean they wouldn’t see him again.

“We’ll miss you, sensei,” Suzuki-san said quietly.

Hwanghae nodded, feeling suddenly choked. “I’ll miss you, as well. Choi Jung-nam- make sure you go to university.”

“I will,” he murmured, looking down.

“And Suzuki-san- keep up your internship. Don’t let them pressure you out solely because you’re a woman.”

“I won’t, sensei.” She wiped her eyes. “And if you ever need anything printed, you know where to go.”

He nodded, taking a deep breath. “Both of you, continue your studies. You’re my favourite students, and I’m very proud of you. Remember to always search for truth, and question what you’re told. Your best defense is-”

“Critical thinking,” they chorused.

“And your best offense is-“

“Our intellect.” The three chuckled at the classroom call-and-response.

“I’ve taught you well,” Hwanghae said with no small amount of pride. “Make sure you grow into fine, intelligent adults.”

“We will, sensei.”

“For sure, Prof.”

“Alright,” he said, wiping his suddenly misty glasses as he turned to Korea. “I’m ready.”

“Finally-“

“Wait!”

Korea glared at Suzuki-san. “Oh for the love of- What?”

The girl wrung her skirt in her hands. “I just wanted to say, please don’t think we’re all like the army or the government. There are people in Japan that know what they’re doing- to you *and* us- is wrong. And they’re fighting back. So please don’t think we’re all the enemy.”

“I have yet to be proven otherwise.” Despite how icy Korea sounded, the uncomfortable look had settled over his countenance once more.

“Then I hope one day you feel you are.” Suzuki-san had picked up the white and red book off the table, holding it to her chest like a talisman. “We want to see Japan free of our government as much as you do. Please remember that. That’s all I wanted to say.”

She bowed slightly, and Choi Jung-nam patted her arm.

Korea hesitated, then left the house without another look at her. “Come on,” he said gruffly to Hwanghae. “Enough stalling.”

When Hwanghae had arrived at the shack that night, he had crossed into it a teacher. Now, as he stepped back over the threshold and into the early fall air, he left a revolutionary.

—

1951

Hwang arranged himself in the recording booth of the underground Broadcasting Station, reviewing his notes once more, making sure he had all his facts right, while attempting to deny himself the satisfaction of examining the portable wire recorder stationed on a nearby side table.

He nodded in satisfaction, tapping his papers on the table he sat at, his eyes straying towards the grey box with its switches and

currently unoccupied recorder heads. An Armor Model 50, manufactured by the American General Electric Company, likely having been sold to the Republic of China at some point during World War II, that had now made its way into Korean hands.

'Portable' was truly a poor descriptor. It could be lifted, certainly, but then again, so could Hae. Yet he would never describe *her* as portable.

The box was too hefty, and even though it didn't require a source of electricity to work, it was still a burden for war correspondents to haul around the battlefield. Hwang had coordinated with them before, and while they hadn't gone so far as to complain, he knew they would vastly appreciate a more compact way to record audio.

He'd always been enamored with the concept of audio recorders, both for the human ingenuity that had gone into inventing a way to transfer waves of sound into coils of steel, but also for the practical value. Music, pre-recorded classes, dead drops, espionage. The applications were practically unlimited. If they had possessed audio recorders during the Occupation, they could have recorded lessons for their people, limiting the amount of time spent in their homes, and so the danger their presence brought them.

Of course, the night classes would always be more effective with Korea and the Provincehumans delivering them face-to-face. But they also could have left behind messages of encouragement to keep morale up when they couldn't do it in person. And the vast amount of speeches Korea and the General had made during their years at war could have been recorded for posterity, instead of written down from memory or copied from faded transcriptions done by soldiers whose shorthand was nearly indecipherable. Hwang had always wished to transcribe Korea's words, but had never had the supply of paper or writing utensils to do it.

But an audio recorder would have solved all those issues, especially in the later years, when models such as the one next to him had become available. They would be even *more* useful if they were reduced in size, perhaps able to fit in a pocket. The components would have to be downsized, and the batteries made smaller. But they would still need to be able to maintain a good

charge if they were to be used in the field.

It made Hwang a bit glum to know that the Soviets or Americans would likely beat them to that, and that his people wouldn't be able to focus on pursuits like those for some time. Every mind would need to be devoted to methods of cleansing contaminated soil, creating more effective fertilizers, and any other invention that could quickly improve their quality of life amidst and after the bombings.

He could remember a time towards the end of his period as a teacher at Jungdong High Scool when a Japanese 'colleague' had shown him a newly acquired Mikami brand camera, and not-so-subtly implied that a country such as Korea could never hope to produce technological marvels such as it.

Hwang had bit his tongue on retorting that perhaps his people would have more time to invent if the vast majority of them didn't have to spend their days slaving in fields so that the man's belt buckle could strain the way it did. Which was wise of him, since he had gotten in enough trouble for not-so-subtly implying that the Japanese camera looked a remarkable amount like an American Vest Pocket Kodak, which had been invented some years earlier.

That was the kind of rhetoric that Imperialist nations liked to spew- that they deserved their position of authority because they were more advanced and civilized than the nations they occupied, on account of the latter's failure to produce grand inventions that changed the world.

And barring the way they purposefully stunted education in those occupied countries (it had taken a decade of Occupation for a university to be built in Korea, and even then, Korean attendance had been limited, and engineering and scientific courses hadn't been offered until just before World War II had officially broken out), the colonizers also ignored inventions that *had* changed the lives of the people living in those countries, and likely their own without even realizing it- the advanced tools and stone-quarrying methods that came out of the African continent; the many techniques of Indian fabric production; the homi, heated greenhouses, rain gauge, practices of seaweed and soybean

cultivation, and a thousand other inventions that Hwang could and would attribute to his own country. The Imperialists also chose to overlook the fact that it was their exploitation of those 'lesser' countries that allowed them to invent many of their own creations, and that kept those countries from inventing their own.

By shifting the burden of production and resource extraction to colonized countries, those in Japan or America were left with more time and capital to invent, while Koreans, Puerto Ricans, and Indigenous Americans were left with less. And by using cheap foreign labour, as well as stealing their own workers' surplus value, corporations in Imperialist countries could spend millions on development, creating commodities to keep their masses content, while those providing the resources and labour went without.

Of course, that kind of focused innovation was useful, and necessary in the modern day, where humanity tended to no longer be grouped in family clans or tribes, only needing to provide for their immediate group. With most people united in nations, they needed to be able to constantly innovate, to find new ways of feeding, clothing, and housing millions, along with everything else that was needed to maintain a stable, healthy populace.

Which was where Socialism came in. By providing basic necessities for their people, and putting the means of production in their hands, they would have far more time and capability to focus on creation, and that wasn't mentioning the added motivation of their efforts now being for themselves instead of a foreign nation or domestic boss. While the State would turn their surplus value back over to them by using it for those necessities, and to invest in focused innovative projects. Not for capital, but for quality of life, and without stunting the development of any other nation.

'North Hwanghae, focus.'

Ah. Hwang could hear Korea mentally scolding him. That meant his train of thought had escaped him again.

The point was that having to devote all of your resources to survival left very little time to create for pleasure. And for the recent past and foreseeable future, the vast majority of Korean

efforts had to be devoted to survival.

For even longer, it seemed, with recent developments.

The door opened, and Hwang jolted away from the audio recorder, hands innocently behind his back.

He had expected his interviewer, but it was instead one of his cousins.

"SH?"

"Is she here yet?" The woman glanced around the small booth. "No? Good."

Hwang blinked as she darted forward, attempting to step back, but stymied by the table.

"SH-"

She only grabbed his collar, straightening it out. "I'm not going to bite you," she chided.

Her voice was light, but a strained current ran under it.

Hwang cleared his throat, a touch ashamed. "Of course not."

He wasn't afraid of his cousin. He understood why her outburst at Hungnam had occurred, and knew he wasn't in any danger from her.

But she had been… tense lately. And with much of his time being spent at a POW camp, with easy access to American prisoners, he was always slightly on edge, waiting for her to attempt to persuade him into allowing her to do something… unsavoury.

"I'm aware you wouldn't bite me," Hwang assured her. "I'm not your brother after all."

When she didn't answer, brushing invisible lint from his shoulders, he ventured, "How are things between you two, by the way? Has he attempted to… converse with you at- *Urk!"*

SH slid the knot of his red tie tighter against his throat. "Honestly," she *'tsk'*ed. "Didn't I straighten this before you left the bunker this morning? How did you loosen it already?"

"Perhaps we've gone a little too far in the opposite direction?" Hwang wheezed, and his cousin granted him the mercy of breathing again, loosening the knot to a respectable degree.

'Refrain from asking about North Hamgyong. Noted.'

He'd hoped to discover if his quarrelsome green cousin had checked in on his sister as Hwang had advised. Asking him certainly wouldn't produce an answer.

Well, not one that wasn't 'fuck off.'

"Really," SH sighed, pretending that she hadn't just choked him as she adjusted his cufflinks. "You came almost straight here. How are you already a mess?"

"I honestly could not tell you." Hwang guiltily tucked in the other half of his black suit jacket that he must have pulled out while reading, as with his tie.

"For someone who's always reminding us to be presentable for the public, you're so messy sometimes. You really need to follow your own advice."

Perhaps it was a good thing Hwang had mostly learned to hold his tongue during his Occupation days. Otherwise he might have gotten choked again for pointing out that certain other people could follow their own advice about certain other things, such as emotional vulnerability.

SH plucked at his jacket, fixing a wrinkle, then stepped back, satisfied. "There. You're presentable again. Keep it that way, please."

"I will," he vowed. "My interviewer should be here soon. And, ah, thank you."

It wasn't as if he was going to be on camera or anything, but

journalists tended to be two things- observant and nosy. And while whoever was going to interview him today may not address his state of dress in the article itself, they very well could share it with their comrades. And considering certain goings-on, appearing even slightly nervous or rumpled wouldn't do.

"You're welcome," SH said.

"But that isn't the only reason you came here."

The smile his cousin had worn since she walked in tightened slightly.

"No," she admitted. "We received word from the enemy. They say that our clarification came too late."

"Ah." Hwang adjusted his glasses. "I can't say I didn't expect it, but… It is unfortunate. Perhaps we should have been more clear initially."

SH's jaw feathered. "It wouldn't have mattered. America was just looking for an excuse."

"As ever," Hwang sighed. "How did Korea take it?"

SH looked at him steadily. He dipped his head.

Well. At least they wouldn't have to fear a return of his bad (worse) mood and self-imposed isolation.

Though still. Hwang had to wonder if it was solely because he had expected it, as he had, or if…

No. It wasn't his place to speculate.

"Did he say if I can share that in the interview?" he asked.

"He wants you to," SH said, then looked over her shoulder as the door opened.

Hwang's eyes widened as he saw the person standing there.

“Ms. Cho Sok-young?”

“Comrade North Hwanghae.”

The woman bowed at the waist, and SH made her departure, her eyes narrowing as she passed her, undoubtedly thinking about what Hwang had relayed about her experience in Sincheon.

He noted with worry that her knuckles turned an even paler shade of white before she left, though he was promptly distracted by Cho Sok-young hustling forward so she could clasp his forearm, and accidentally shaking hers instead.

“I didn’t expect you to be my interviewer,” he said with anxious excitement. “Comrade Kim Sun-hi informed me you were considering joining the Mobile Broadcasting Unit a few months ago, of course, but Kangwon never mentioned you had actually done it, even though-“

He cleared his throat before he could ramble any further.

His cousin had met with the woman a few times in between offensives, in order to provide grief counselling, and observe her mental state.

Did that sound too clinical? Perhaps. Anyhow, their last session had only been three weeks ago, and all Kangwon had said was that it seemed she was mentally sound.

Cho Sok-young smiled sheepishly. “I told him to keep it secret to surprise you. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.” Hwang realized he was still pumping her arm up and down, and promptly released her, apologizing. “How have you been? Have you been eating? Are you well?”

She looked well, though in comparison to her state the last time he had seen her- as they went their separate ways, her carrying on to Kanggye with the broadcasters, and he about to undertake his arduous march to Chongjin- anything would’ve been an improvement.

Her long, tangled black hair had been snipped to just below her chin, and brushed straight, her bangs tucked back behind her ears, of which precisely one lobe was missing, a victim of the mountain winter. She might've been a tad more slender, due to the lack of food, but at the same time she seemed healthier, not hunched over or shaking. And the shadows under her eyes and haunting her cheekbones had vanished, leaving unblemished brown skin.

And yet her eyes were the most noticeable change. From the moment he had met her in that field to the moment they parted, they had either been rolling wildly in her head as they gleamed with terror, or shining with tears as she stared dully into space.

There was still a sorrow in their dark brown depths, as was only expected after what she had been through. But they no longer resembled those of a frightened prey animal.

"I am well, thank you," she said, and her voice, too, was calmer than he had ever heard, not tinged with desperate fear or weighed by grief. "I'm not a broadcaster yet, only a correspondent-in-training. But I think I'm going to be."

"Excellent," Hwang said with enthusiasm, taking a seat at the table. "Broadcasters- all journalists, really- are more important than ever in our struggle as the enemy spreads slander against us. We need you to tell our people the truth."

"And I'm more aware of it than most." Cho Sok-young smoothed down the black skirt of her choson-ot as she sat across from him. "I think that's why I was sent here today, despite not being fully ideologically educated yet. That and…" She looked down, fiddling with her goreum. "I know you."

Hwang suddenly realized she must be feeling as awkward as he was.

They had only ever interacted when they were both at their worst, exhausted, terrified, and wounded, physically and emotionally. He had supported her for a thousand ri, she had shared her most traumatic experience with him, he had kept watch over her while she slept, patting her arm whenever she stirred with

a nightmare, and she had clutched at his uniform and sobbed into his chest when they parted.

But they hadn't exactly had a conversation before now.

He cleared his throat nervously, trying not to let that be another thing to impede his interview prowess. "Well, shall we begin?"

Cho Sok-young looked relieved. "If you're ready."

He assented, and she reached over, setting up the wire recorder.

"Just so you know in advance, if I go off on any tangents, you have permission to cut them from the final material," Hwang informed her.

Cho Sok-young sounded slightly bemused as she said, "I'm sure everyone will want to hear as many words from our Provincehuman as possible."

Hwang wished that were true. But experience told him it was not.

He was fully aware of his tendency to ramble, and how… enthusiastic he could be while doing it. It had gotten him censured while teaching under Japanese rule, gotten him praised while teaching nowadays, and gotten him pointed glares from Korea at Party meetings.

And it certainly didn't come in handy for interviews or informationals. Honestly, he was relieved when he'd heard SH would be joining him in communications. He'd long told Korea she should. He was skilled at the behind-the-scenes portions of information and publicity work, but his cousin had a optimism and confidence (and brevity) to her that lent themselves well to public speaking.

He had volunteered for this interview today as part of his effort to gain more expertise in an area he was weak in, but no matter how good he became, he knew that SH would always have him beat on at least one count- people would much rather hear things from a pretty woman than a pencil-thin man who was squint-eyed even with his glasses.

Hwang adjusted his lapels a final time, issuing a stern directive to himself to not let his nerves or love of speaking send him on a verbal detour, then folded his hands on the table as Cho Sok-young counted down to flipping the switch on the recorder.

"Thank you for agreeing to an interview, Comrade North Hwanghae," she said as the reel whirred.

"Of course," he said, biting down the urge to correct her on his name. "As someone who is heavily involved in Party information work, I'm well aware of how valuable our war correspondents are to our efforts. Any request both Korea and I can fulfill for you and your comrades, we will."

There. Not too many words, not too few. And the perfect amount of context provided.

"And we truly appreciate it," Cho Sok-young said, glancing down at her notebook open on the table. "To start with, would you be willing to provide a statement on the current state of the ceasefire talks at Kaesong?"

"I would be." Hwang inhaled subtly, keeping his voice even. "As I'm sure you're aware, the talks have been called off."

Cho Sok-young nodded grimly. "Our side was the one that withdrew, correct?"

"Indeed." Hwang shifted in his chair. "The intention was to call them off for the day in protest of the Americans' handling of our complaints over their violations of the talks. Not only did a band of their puppet soldiers invade the neutral zone and cut down a valued allied commander in cold blood, but one of their planes opened fire on a vehicle of negotiators on their way to discuss peace."

When admitting to it, the Americans had said their Jeep wasn't painted with the proper identifying marks. While Hwang hadn't been able to confirm or deny that, and as such wouldn't speak on it, he *would* say that if their positions were reversed, he would hope his own pilots would show a bit more restraint if a singular vehicle of the same make of the kind that had been visiting the neutral

zone for the past month or so came from the same direction it usually did, flying white flags.

He didn't share the information with Cho Sok-young, nor did he share that the attack against their military police quite possibly could have been carried out by Rhee's army or one of the southern reactionary gangs with a complete lack of awareness from the Americans (though he was skeptical that an armed brigade could invade a heavily-surveilled neutral zone without at least one commander giving tacit permission). It wasn't wise to give your enemy any benefit of the doubt, especially when they were already giving themselves plenty.

"And not only that," he continued. "But just two days ago, a United Nations' plane bombed Kaesong directly."

Cho Sok-young bobbed her head seriously. "We heard. The enemy is accusing us in their media, aren't they?"

More than she knew. Hwang was careful to keep his finger on the pulse of the cables they received of American news headlines, no matter how much it made him want to shake whoever ran *The New York Times* until he had knocked some sense of journalistic integrity into them.

"Yes," he agreed smoothly. "Despite only a limited investigation conducted under cover of night, they seem convinced that one of our planes made it past their radars to bomb our own city."

"And do you think there's any possibility of that?" Cho Sok-young brushed her hair behind her damaged ear, clearly uncomfortable voicing the question.

Hwang would say that when he had thought Hae had been calling him cynical, he had *more* than been able to see that. It wasn't so much that he was, it was just that he thought about all outcomes and possibilities, which could come off that way.

He was aware that a ceasefire wasn't entirely popular amongst the upper echelons of their military and government, or even vast swathes of their soldiers and civilians. And with how Korea had

apparently reacted- or not reacted- upon hearing that the Americans had called the talks off entirely…

He would admit (to himself, not to anyone else) that the possibility of them bombing the zone themselves had crossed his mind.

Yet he still told his interviewer, “No,” confidently. “There isn’t. If we were looking for an excuse to call off the talks, the Americans had already given us several- the attack on our brigade and their refusal to properly investigate, as well as their firing on our negotiation team. And not to mention the new offensive they launched at the front. Any one of those things would be grounds for us to step away.”

He wasn’t entirely sure that Korea would never violate the results of the Provincehumans’ personal votes. But he *knew* he wouldn’t go against a decision made by their Party.

And he *had* seemed genuinely frustrated upon learning that Rhee had eagerly interpreted their call for a break as a permanent one, rushing off to direct the radio in Beijing to announce it was only supposed to be for the day that very night, as well as making sure the message to Ridgway hoping for a continuation of the talks was sent immediately this morning.

Cho Sok-young looked comforted by his words, nodding in relief. “I’m sorry to even ask.”

“No, no, I understand,” Hwang placated. “It’s important to clear any doubts in people’s minds, especially with the propaganda directed against us.”

If no one had heard any, then enemy lies shouldn’t be brought up at all. But with the sheer amount of broadcasts contaminating their airwaves, and leaflets being dropped over their country, those falsehoods needed to be crushed before they could seed doubt.

“Did you know that before this most recent offensive of theirs, just as Comrade Nam Il issued his statement about discussing the current line, and our sub-committees were starting to make gains,

Ridgway released an interview in the *US News* where he professed that we had no intentions on making peace?" Hwang asked with professional neutrality.

Cho Sok-young shook her head, eyes wide, then quickly said, "I hadn't heard."

Hwang felt the urge to discuss all of the press communiques the Americans had been issuing, such as those they had sent to the Japanese press, informing them they were seeking a line between the current front and Manchuria, just days after telling their own press they had no intentions on land grabbing, well within him. He pushed it down, forcing himself to stay on topic.

"That's right," he said with an effort. "Just as they said from the very day after we adopted the agenda for the talks that we were only attempting to use them as a excuse to build forces. But who has been training the southern puppet army in the interim, only to unleash them on us at a moment when an agreement seemed near?"

He winced slightly. Usually call-and-responses were for the classroom or particularly fiery speeches, not interviews.

"The US," Cho Sok-young murmured, quickly scribbling something on her notebook.

"Exactly." Hwang straightened slightly. "Since the talks began, they've been using the slightest excuse to pause them, and made it quite public that they didn't expect them to succeed, preparing their civilians to accept the lie that we would attack our own military police or bomb our own land. Even now they're refusing to admit any hand in the latest offensive, placing the blame solely on the reactionary army."

They were apparently completely withholding the fact that their army was involved, acting as if Rhee's had conducted the attack without permission, though with how their Command had been completely turned over to the Americans, that was near impossible. And Hwang knew for a fact that the American army had already been conducting preliminary operations the day before.

Cho Sok-young blinked at that. “How can they not know their own army is attacking us?”

“They’re thousands of kilometres away,” Hwang replied. “Even our children are face to face with the atrocities the American Eighth Army is inflicting on Korea. But *theirs* have no inkling of what their own soldiers do. The only source they have is their own news, and the press embargo MacArthur placed on them at the end of last year makes that incredibly untrustworthy.”

Not that media that depended on the bourgeois to survive was ever trustworthy. No matter how unbiased it claimed to be, it would always lean one way- towards capital.

Hwang saw an opportunity to say something he’d wanted to earlier, and added, “The investigation into the shooting carried out on our military police even barred United Nations’ correspondents.”

Cho Sok-young wrote something else in her notebook. “Is there any word on whether or not America will return to the table?”

Hwang fought not to flatten his lips. “Yes. I’m afraid this won’t be new information by the time this interview comes out, but you are one of the first to hear it. The Americans have taken their interpretation of our break and ran with it, rejecting the missive hoping for them to show reason.

“The talks have been broken off completely.”

They had been broken before, of course. But the Americans had been the ones to do it. There was only so long they could spend refusing to discuss peace over minor matters before they seemed unreasonable to the international community. Now that they could spin it to seem like Korea and China were the unreasonable parties, and their armies were embroiled in fresh combat that ‘had nothing to do with them,’ it seemed less likely they would return anytime soon.

Cho Sok-young closed her eyes. Hwang lifted a hand, hesitating on whether to touch hers in comfort, then quickly set it down as her lids slid open.

“I see,” she said, with a waver under her neutral interviewer’s voice.

Hwang awkwardly cleared his throat. “I believe when you take an objective look at the facts, it’s clear that this was their intention all along. While we’ve been striving for peace, they’ve done everything in their power to stymy it. And while Korea is always open to discussing a ceasefire should our opponents decide that they wish to negotiate in earnest, we have no need to go begging for one. We were prepared for this possibility, and both our troops and our Chinese comrades are ready to continue the defense of our homeland.”

“And…” Cho Sok-young glanced at her book. “Do you have any words for those soldiers?”

Sensing that the most serious part of the interview was over, Hwang relaxed slightly, heading into the usual reminders for soldiers- how to effectively utilize terrain, the importance of mortars in the defense of the many hills the enemy was trying to capture in this latest push, conserving every bit of ammunition they could, and taking proper care of their firearms, as well as going over tactics learned from the days of the Anti-Japanese People’s War.

He would admit that he wasn’t as much of an engaging storyteller as South Pyongan. He had a tendency to overexplain and delve into every facet of the situation to make sure the listener had proper context.

But during the push to Busan, a young soldier had come to him after seizing the ridge at Obong-ri for the first time, and excitedly told him that he'd suggested following one of the tactics Hwang had shared with him on the way to his unit, and it had successfully allowed them to capture their target. So he was careful to go into at least a *little* detail on his experiences with mountain warfare.

He finished off by encouraging them to stand firm and recapture any heights taken by the enemy immediately. He knew he wasn’t able to light a fire the way Korea did, but it would still do their comrades good to know their Provincehumans were thinking of

them, especially for any of the soldiers from he and Hae's province.

After, he used the chance to address their writers, encouraging them to produce higher quality articles for the military magazines, as he had been, and to keep their creative focus on the war.

The interview lasted for around an hour, at which point Cho Sok-young glanced at the audio recorder and said, "I think that's time. I wouldn't want to keep you from the war effort any longer."

"This is a part of the war effort," Hwang assured. "As Supreme Commander Kim Il-sung says, 'To stop broadcasting is as catastrophic as stopping Korea from breathing.' And in that metaphor, that makes our broadcasters and correspondents our lungs. I'm honoured to help keep the oxygen of information flowing."

He was proud of that one. Yet he had the feeling that South Pyongan was going to tease him for it anyway.

"I assure you we're the honoured ones, to be trusted with our country's breath." Cho Sok-young dipped her head. "Do you have any final words for our comrades listening?"

Hwang cleared his throat, trying to project confidence as he addressed the wire recorder. "You should feel that no difficulty is too large to overcome, and no sacrifice too great to make. So long as we carry forward with the spirit of those revolutionaries who spent their lives fighting against the savagery of Japan, giving their all and never faltering, we will prevail against America and his puppets now. Long live Korea."

"Long live Korea," Cho Sok-young murmured with emotion, then flicked the switch to the 'off' position.

Hwang exhaled, his shoulders loosening.

That was what their people had needed to hear on Liberation Day, in person, not over the airwaves. And from their Countryhuman.

Yet the Premier had denied his request to force Korea up on the

stage, allowing him to… Hwang felt like the word ‘hide’ would likely get him injured if Korea ever found out he was thinking it. The Premier had allowed him to sequester himself away in a broadcasting booth, not even finishing his speech with ‘Long live.’

‘Well, nothing for it now.’ Hopefully Hwang could convince Korea not to do the same on the Day of the Foundation of the Republic.

Cho Sok-young was exhaling as well, trembling slightly as she wound the spool of wire up.

“You did well,” Hwang moved to assure her, the small room now seeming too quiet without the sound of the recorder.

“Thank you,” the woman said politely. “I was a bit nervous.”

Strange how she could be nervous giving an interview after all she had been through.

Then again, he supposed that applied to him, too.

“I couldn’t even tell,” he told her.

“You did well, too.” She sat back down, hands in her lap. “I don’t think you went on many tangents.”

Noticeably not ‘any tangents.’

Hwang nodded, still proud that he had managed to limit himself, but unsure of what to say now.

They had fallen into a comfortable rhythm while conversing an interviewer and interviewee. But now the atmosphere seemed a bit awkward again.

Should he inquire? He wasn’t as sensitive as Kangwon, so he likely shouldn’t. But if he *didn’t* inquire, wouldn’t it seem like he didn’t care?

“Can I ask you something off the record?” Cho Sok-young said before he could make his decision.

“Of course.”

She looked up from under her lashes, expression grim. “Do you really think we can win?”

Hwang knew- even if he wouldn’t admit it to his cousins, and *certainly* not to Korea- that Reunifying their country with their army had stopped being a possibility awhile ago. They were overextended, their supply lines could barely reach the front where it was now, let alone if it were extended into the south again, and they had no way to hold more of their shoreline than they already were.

He wouldn't say it was impossible. Experience had taught him that that very few things truly were. A small band of guerrillas could become an army of thousands. Laws and programs that had seemed like paintings of tteok could become reality. A near-blind boy forced to watch what he said while he was used as a puppet by Imperialists could become a general and true professor whose only concern when speaking was to not annoy his listeners.

But it *was* highly unlikely.

Not that he could share that with Cho Sok-young. Avoiding any mention of even the possibility of defeat was necessary.

“We will win,” he assured her. “The enemy lacks the strength to even reach Pyongyang now, let alone wrest the north from us. And with our Chinese allies, new cadres, and more soldiers and civilians being awakened ideologically every day, we are far better off than we were last fall.”

Aside from the supply issue.

“And as I said last October, our General Kim Il-sung, the Worker’s Party, our people, and Korea remain. And will not give in until we have reclaimed every inch of land stolen from us. We won’t let the enemy win.”

Cho Sok-young lowered her head, the lines around her eyes easing. Hwang, too, felt a sense of ease at the words.

Even if they couldn't Liberate their southern countrymen the way they had aimed to, they *would* still be Liberated. In all of the things that he had once considered impossible, only to be proven wrong, there were two common denominators- their people and Korea.

"Thank you," the woman said quietly. "And… I promise this is even more off the record, but…" She took a breath, raising her eyes to his. "Will the people that destroyed my hometown be punished?"

"Many of them already have been," Hwang said carefully. "But yes. The Korean people will not accept being Reunified under a reactionary government. Those with the blood of innocents on their hands will meet their comeuppance."

It would be more difficult, both counteracting what would surely be United Nations attempts to sabotage any vote they had, as well as their monitoring afterwards, likely using any exercise of their justice system against traitors as an excuse to label them as a violent regime necessitating further economic embargoes.

But Hwang knew their people would not tolerate letting their torturers go free. And neither would Korea.

They hadn't in Sincheon, from what he hadn't been supposed to hear.

Cho Sok-young dipped her head, her expression unreadable. Was she relieved that those who had hurt her had been killed, and those like them would be punished? Or had she moved beyond her sheer terror, and now only wished for an end to the violence?

Perhaps Kangwon or SH would have been able to tell. Hwang couldn't.

"Have you not been back to Sincheon?" he worked up the courage to venture.

Cho Sok-young had flinched at the name, like his sister did. "No," she said after a moment. "And I- I don't think I ever will."

"Why not?" Hwang asked before he could stop himself, quickly adding, "There's no need for you to answer that."

“It’s alright,” the woman said softly, holding her goreum in a hand. “I’ve spent my entire life there, but… When I think about going back, seeing the reservoir I used to swim in, the house we lived in, the- the place where I got married.” She took a shuddering breath.

“It’s all covered in blood now. Even the people.” Her slender throat bobbed. “I knew him, the man that-" Her knuckles clenched around the ribbons of fabric. "Not well. I’d only seen him around town, hauling firewood for sale. But I *knew* him. And I knew the woman that killed him. She was my neighbour. And I- I’m so glad she did, but when I think about going back there, and never knowing who around me has our neighbours’ blood on their hands, who deserved it, I-“

She drew in a sharp breath, her eyes filling with tears, making Hwang flutter his hands in distress.

“I’m so sorry,” he said anxiously. “I didn’t mean-“

“It’s alright.” Cho Sok-young inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly, a technique Hwang knew had came from Kangwon. “I’m alright.”

“Are you?” Hwang asked, wishing he had asked it first. “Not as a pleasantry, but truly- are you alright?”

“I… No. I don’t think so,” she answered, voice cracking. “I miss my parents and my sister and my Ju-taek. I miss my home and I… I miss who I was before all of this.”

Hwang didn’t know what to say to that.

Cho Sok-young took another shaky breath. “But I will be. I just need more time and… distance.”

Hwang shouldn’t have told Hae to return to Sincheon. He shouldn’t have even suggested it.

He wished he knew what to say to comfort the woman before him. He wished he could console her and help her through her grief like Kangwon or SH would have, or even just offer her a shoulder to

cry on like North Pyongan.

He wished he were more like his sister.

But all he could do was hand her a crumpled handkerchief and say, “I’m sorry.”

Cho Sok-young dabbled at her eyes with the cloth. “Don’t be. You saved me. If you hadn’t found me in that field and brought me to Kanggye…”

She shook her head, as if shaking away the grim possibilities. “I never really thanked you for that.” She bent at the waist, her hair sliding from behind her ear. “Thank you, Comrade North Hwanghae. And I’m sorry for my behaviour during that time. I acted improper, and I held you back. I even separated you from Comrade South Hwanghae and let her…”

She trailed off, and now Hwang could easily read her expression, so reflected was it in his own heart.

“Don’t allow yourself to feel guilty for that,” he said, even though he had trouble with that himself, even after his talks with Hae. “Both Comrade Hae and I were fulfilling our duties. And both she and I are fine.”

She raised her face hopefully. “Nothing happened to her?”

“No,” Hwang said after a moment. Nothing as truly terrible as what had been done to the woman, and nothing she needed to hear about, anyhow. “And she accomplished quite a bit of good in her time there.”

“That’s…” Cho Sok-young’s face crumpled, new tears welling, in relief now. “That’s good. I’m glad.”

Hwang nodded decisively. “Don’t burden yourself with our decisions. Focus on recovering.”

The woman nodded thankfully. “I’ll try.”

“And feel free to call me ‘Comrade Hwang,’” he finally mustered

the gumption to say. “Most people do. And I think you certainly have the right.”

“Alright,” Cho Sok-young said shyly, pushing her hair behind her ear again. “But in that case, you should call me by my first name.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly-“

“I don’t have anyone to call me ‘Sok-young’ anymore,” she quietly interrupted. “I would appreciate it.”

Hwang hesitated. The concept of calling a close-to-middle-aged woman by her first name made him want to hide under the table.

But since he didn’t know how to extend any other comfort to her, it was the least he could do.

“Very well then… Comrade Sok-young.”

He flushed in embarrassment, and certainly couldn’t manage to leave off the ‘comrade.’ But a small smile graced the woman’s face.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Hwang escorted her out of the Broadcasting Station, promising to keep in touch. He watched her walk away with the wire recorder case in one hand, and her notebook under her arm, before exhaling and departing for Kim Il-sung University to meet with his fellow teachers to pick up the books on sign language they were helping him hung down, and the Student Corps, most of whom had survived the occupation of the city, and were now throwing themselves into their educations once more.

He wished he could do more for Ch- for Sok-young. And for the students from the south who hadn’t heard from their families in months. And his sister.

Even Korea was at least able to make people forget their emotions for a moment by redirecting them elsewhere, rousing them to fury or hope. Hwang couldn’t even do that.

He shook himself, putting his thin shoulders back and adjusting

his glasses with purpose as he left the city with his bodyguards.

His clinicism was just another weak area to improve. When a student fell behind on division, he would give them a list of equations to work on every day, until the methodology for solving them became second nature.

Yes, he was fully aware that there were very few things more clinical than comparing consoling those in their grief to solving math problems. Which was just more proof that he had to work on his emotional side.

And he would. He would push himself, doing what he could until being empathetic and comforting came naturally. He may never be as skilled in the field as his sister, but he could at least feel like he wasn't letting people like S-Sok-young down.

And he would start by promising to go to Sincheon in Hae's place.

My poor baby Hwang has the least amount of province POVs so far (Ryanggang excepted).

As Hwang says, there was one university in Korea, but it wasn't founded until 1924, and only let limited amounts of Koreans in, and also didn't include classes on engineering or science until World War II, at which point Japan wanted cheap (and expendable) Korean labour for the war effort. If you ever notice that a lot of Korean scientists from that era (roughly 1930s-1960s) studied in the Soviet Union, it's because their own programs were deliberately hamstringed by Japan to prevent their development.

Also I've literally never mentioned this but Seoul was called Keijo during the Occupation. I just have everyone call it Seoul 1) because North and comrades definitely wouldn't call it by the Japanese name, and 2) for simplicity.

Easier Alone

North stormed towards the bunker, viciously smacking a low-hanging tree branch out of the way.

Seeing South Hamgyong standing at alert in the dark with her gun pointed at him didn't improve his mood.

"It's me," he snapped, even though he knew he'd forgotten to make the signal, and should be glad she was being vigilant.

She immediately sensed his mood, frowning as she stowed her gun. "Korea are you-?"

"Shut up," he growled, stalking past her.

"You could stay out here with me and talk," she suggested.

"No." North wrested the wheels to the side, tearing the heavy steel door open. "And if you leave your post I'll put you up against the wall."

SH aborted her step towards him, her sigh cut off by the door slamming.

The flashlight beam coming from the end of the hall abruptly disappeared as South Pyongan ducked back into the female provinces' room. North was tempted to follow her, to use on-the-spot-sparring to soothe some of the restless itching under his skin. His province was hiding from the possibility of a lecture, not a fight, and would probably welcome the violence as much as him.

He made himself stop at his door. Hae would be sleeping. And he had to stop giving in to his temper. He shouldn't *have* to release his anger. He should be able to deal with it.

'Dealing with it' meant slamming his door and locking it, not against China now, but against SH or Kangwon trying to irritate him, and pacing back and forth in his small cement room with no

light.

His blood boiled in his veins, making him bare his teeth at the wall as he spun around, kicking his bedroll out of the way in an attempt to win more space.

He didn't want to be in here. He wanted to be in the office, working to try and distract himself. But the General had sensed his growing restless fury and firmly told him to get some rest for Foundation Day tomorrow.

North didn't need rest. He *needed* to kill Japan and America. He needed to tear them limb from limb and crush them into dust.

It wasn't the situation at the frontline. The Americans were saying they'd accomplished their goals with the last offensive, but it was just a bluff. North had lost a few heights, but his soldiers and the Chinese had regained most of the important ones. The line had barely shifted, and the Yanks had finally come clean that their troops were involved in the attack. And it wasn't the talks still being suspended. He'd expected it, especially since he'd read that damn news article.

It was the fucking San Francisco Treaty.

The talks had been going on for four days. Right now, twelve hours behind Korea, the treaty could be being ratified. North should be pleased that Japan's 'right' to his country was finally being officially renounced.

He wasn't. Not when the only voice that had mattered in the treaty's creation was America's, when the it would allow Japan to rearm and remilitarize, now under American auspices. Not when it turned a neighbouring country into an American military base, guaranteeing that the planes and ships that were using it as a launching base to kill his people would become permanent. Not when it denied he and his people the reparations they were owed, and when he and China, whose countries and people were Japan's greatest victims, hadn't even been invited.

Not even the reactionaries or the Chinese Nationalists had been,

and North would have *despised* if they had attended, if South's puppet government had been granted that legitimacy by the United Nations while their rightful governments weren't, but at least maybe then someone other than CCCP, Czechoslovakia, and Poland might have protested. Rhee might have the Yankee boot too far down his throat to, but Chang Kai-shek had fought the Japanese personally and might have stood against it.

North paced back and forth with jerky motions, barely able to get two and a half strides in the room was so small.

That was why the Yankees had sabotaged the talks. They had dammed near admitted it. On the same day as Nam Il had announced they were willing to compromise, the *Wall Street Journal,* a rag that catered to capitalists, had ran an article informing their bourgeois readers that CCCP suddenly announcing he would attend the conference was a plot to throw a spanner in the works of the treaty by demanding 'Red China's' attendance. If China's people had signed a ceasefire in Korea, it would have made them appear reasonable, like they wanted peace. It might have given China a voice against Japan.

They had outright speculated that America's intent was to make demands that North and China would refuse to accept, such as not settling on the 38th Parallel. So when North had forced himself to be reasonable enough to concede to that unacceptable demand, and it had seemed a deal could be made before September, America couldn't allow that. 'The State Department would prefer no ceasefire deal until after the San Francisco conference ends.'

And now it was. And North And South and their people wouldn't get the reparations they were owed *or* the peace they needed.

He sensed the wall coming and turned sharply on a heel.

It hadn't even been them America had been concerned with keeping from the conference. It was China. Korea wasn't the end goal of his invasion of their country. It was China. It was CCCP. They had been kept from the treaty, kept from the conference, because America wanted Japan rearmed and wealthy, planting the seeds of future conflict by refusing to make clear which country the

Kurils belonged to, so that Japan could be used against CCCP in the future.

Korea had been denied justice because of Japan, and he couldn't even take any grim satisfaction in the fact that the other country would now experience what being colonized felt like because he just *had* to be class conscious and understand that being owned by America would just make the Japanese proletariat's job harder, and leave Japan alive for longer.

He couldn't stand to think of that smug bastard sitting at that conference as he was told he didn't have to repay Korea for what he had done to them. All of his villages burnt to the ground, all of his comrades hunted down and butchered like dogs, thousands of his women and workers stolen away to another country to be violated and exploited, that jangseung with mechanical kanji carved into it, *'PUNISHMENT FOR DISOBEDIENCE.'* Every single one of those punishments and the ones that had came before. Coughing blood onto the floor from a broken jaw, holding South while he sobbed over his snapped wrist, his leg lying limp, disconnected from its socket and aching even now, that stupid scar and 'something worse.'

And now the country that had done all of that, the one that *deserved* punishment, was being released from it. Being put under an American trusteeship wasn't enough, it would only make Japan's working class suffer, and as much as North wished he could blindly hate them the way he had used to, he couldn't. The people that had done it had been pardoned, allowed to keep their power. The *country* that had done it had been pardoned, allowed to pretend that he hadn't invaded Korea, hadn't slaughtered their people, stolen their names and land and language and culture, locked them up and made them suffer for *thirty-six years.* He had been told he owed Korea *nothing* for what he had done to them.

And he could remember what he had done. North knew it. Japan hadn't changed. If he had, he wouldn't have let himself get off so easily. He would have begged to be put to death.

Japan remembered. He remembered and was under America's control. He could remember that cold cement room and what had

happened in it and he could tell the other country.

North grabbed at the scar on his chest, nails digging through the fabric of his uniform as he spun.

He should have killed him. He had left him alive for his people and because he had thought the Countryhuman would die anyways, either in the flames of the war he had started or at the hands of his own people.

But he hadn't. He had killed himself and somehow survived, like some sort of sick joke against North specifically, in a different form, but alive, the same, and now under a master whose boot wouldn't be so easily overthrown.

He didn't care if it was a fitting punishment for a man that considered himself a god to now be the one under someone else, to be forced to obey. It wasn't enough. He wanted Japan *dead,* he wanted him and his memories destroyed until there was nothing left of what had been done to he and his brother except for in their minds. And then they would Reunify, and the memories would be solely Korea's, locked away forever.

He should have killed him. He should have killed him he should have killed him he should have killed him he should have-

North's stride carried him too far and he smacked into the wall face-first, pain lancing through his eye sockets. He rebounded, snarling out loud at the cement as he drew his fist back to strike.

His arm froze, trembling in the air, and with an effort he pulled his hand back to his side, abruptly spinning away and slamming his eye shut, taking deep, slow breaths in the pitch black.

He wasn't a child. He wouldn't lash out at an inanimate object that would only injure his own hand and nothing else.

The stupid breathing technique that Kangwon had once tentatively suggested never worked. It only made the itching under his skin worse and the heat in his blood build with an awful pressure, like bellows stoking a fire.

North went back to pacing, trying to calm himself.

He had spared Japan because he had to. He could hate that, but not that he had. It had been what was best for his people. He still knew that. Like the ceasefire.

The conference was almost over. It was unfair that he hadn't been invited, and that Korea hadn't been consulted in drafting the treaty. But he couldn't change that. He could only win his war, have his government be recognized as the rightful government of Korea, and open negotiations with Japan to get the reparations his people were owed.

Not in person. He knew he couldn't be trusted in the same room as Japan and his cold, feline eyes.

And one day, the people of Japan would rise against their fallen 'god,' and he would be gone. And America would be, too. Korea would be one and no one else would remember.

He had to get control of his temper. Anger was good, but he couldn't allow it to make him act so immaturely. He couldn't allow things he couldn't change to affect him like this.

His hands curled into fists, blunt nails breaking scabs on his burnt palms. *'I **should** be able to-'*

He couldn't think about it anymore tonight. Tomorrow was the Day of the Foundation of the Republic, and even if it seemed like another fucked-up joke that the treaty that would allow Japan to dodge paying what he owed to Korea was being signed a day before his Foundation Day, he couldn't let his people see it affect him. The anger was good, it would help. But only if it was sharpened like a spear, not wild and uncontrolled.

North flopped down on his bedroll, pulling off his eyepatch and rubbing at the scar under it.

Then he begrudgingly sat up, carefully removing and folding his tunic, undershirt, and pants before putting on his identical long-sleeved undershirt and pants. He would have to wear his spare

uniform tomorrow. The dress one would have been better, but it had been unsalvageable. And he felt uncomfortable requisitioning the materials for a new one he would only wear for a couple days a year.

'At least I didn't wear it to the inspection of the Parallel,' he thought with dark humour. He would have glowed in the dark on that first night.

The pressure inside him was still there, but the itching had eased somewhat. North exhaled, staring at the dark ceiling, ignoring the soft knock that came at his door an hour later, and SH's softer, "Goodnight," barely audible through the steel.

Even without China and his provinces here, North still couldn't rest easily. He found himself straining to hear the sound of the front door, listening for any sign of intruders, and for his provinces.

It was stupid. He knew whoever was on watch wouldn't let an enemy get the best of them. SH had known it was him coming, but she'd still been on guard. If any of them thought there was a real threat, they would all be mobilized and ready to face it in a second.

And he knew it was stupid that he couldn't sleep when China *was* here. Even if he didn't have a five-inch thick steel door between them, he knew the other country wouldn't do anything. He'd had his chances- on Bukhan Mountain, in Seoul, at Chorweon, on the battlefield, on that road outside Anbyeon. And he knew he wouldn't hurt his provinces either. He'd slept in the City Hall shelter with them before. There was no reason to. He wouldn't gain anything.

But still that little voice whispered in North head, *'What if he did?'*

He didn't *have* to gain anything. Japan had never truly gained anything from his 'lessons.' Even if he had those twisted expectations from North, there hadn't been anything he'd gained from beating South, too.

If China *did* hurt his provinces, either for some murky purpose or just because he wanted to, it would be North's fault. It was his duty to protect them, to make sure nothing like what had happened

under the Occupation happened to them again. And even if he had to put their people above them, as he had during the tactical retreat, if something happened because he hasn't been cautious enough, because he had let his guard down…

If China did anything to his provinces, he would have to destroy their alliance. And he knew just as he couldn't trust himself to be in a room with Japan, he couldn't trust himself to handle it diplomatically. If he ever found out that the other Countryhuman had assaulted one of his female provinces, or hurt any of them…

North would kill him here and now. He would collapse China and throw all of the Chinese people into chaos, leaving them prime for America to conquer. Korea would lose an essential ally, and likely CCCP, and he would forever be painted as traitorous and unstable, *if* he survived the onslaught from the hundreds of thousands of PVA soldiers stationed in his country turning on them.

And North knew he would still have to do it. He couldn't let someone get away with harming his provinces, even if he was his only ally.

He knew by now that China wouldn't do any of that. But when the cost would be so high if he did, how could North allow himself to rest?

It was good he had left. He couldn't sleep when he was near him, and he couldn't sleep when he wasn't.

He didn't know if the other Countryhuman was coming back. With how quickly Liaoxi had to leave, still half-dead on her feet, he doubted it. He hadn't received any word about the trial or anything else from him. Only a letter on Liberation Day, cordial and impersonal, like the fake letters he'd given him before, just more proof he hadn't been in Korea.

He must have come to his senses and realized that no debt was worth risking his country for. Especially not when he had to deal with North's temper and… everything else. Maybe he had told his Premier and Chairman how the Korean had been treating him, and been forbidden from returning.

Good. It meant North Pyongan wouldn't grow any closer to Liaoxi. North regretted telling China he would tolerate anything between the two until the war was over. He couldn't risk his province developing feelings for a foreign Provincehuman, not when he was starting to improve. Not ever.

It was more than relationships between Countryhumans being difficult. The more North thought about it, the more sure he was that they shouldn't happen at all, personal *or* political. Ming and Qing both taking Joseon as a tribute; CCCP and his annoying embraces and how he knew what foods North's provinces liked best; America holding his brother captive, what Japan had done to he and South and all their provinces, a thousand other examples throughout history. China.

Countryhumans weren't meant to have *any* sort of relationship with one another. They were meant to stay in their own borders and protect their people, and leave the international politicking up to their politicians.

North knew he could never do that. Even if it was how things *should* work, it wasn't. He needed to represent his country. And more than that… He hated the idea of passing his responsibilities off to others, letting them speak for him.

But he also hated that Japan could remember what it felt like to carve him open while he screamed, and that America had put his arm around his brother the day he had Divided them, and that the last time CCCP had visited, he'd given North kompot from a different flask and told him it didn't have sugar in it. He hated that he had letters from the Soviet and China wishing him a happy Liberation Day in his bag in the corner, and that he would likely be receiving more tomorrow. He didn't want them to know him and *he* didn't want to know *them.*

He shouldn't have sent that letter back then.

It was good that China wasn't coming back. He didn't want him to. He didn't want to worry about diplomacy or debts or that their people weren't as delineated as he wanted them to be or why he put up with North. He just wanted to focus on the war, focus on

winning freedom with his people like he had for decades. The only other Countryhuman he ever wanted to see again was his brother, for the short time before they were both just Korea.

North's back ached, deeper than the skin. He pressed it harder to the bedroll, curling his legs up to his chest, then stretching them out, lying straight in the dark as he tried to force himself under.

It was easier when it was just him.

***Showing North Japan cutting him open with a tachi and CCCP hugging him* 'Can you tell me the difference between these two pictures?'**
North, deadpan- 'They're the same picture.'

Father tells me we will die in a tsunami eventually. He is leveraging this against me to try and make me move, along with how long it's taking me to relearn Japanese. But it doesn't work because every time I am filled with righteous fury. *Why* do I have to *re* learn Japanese, Father? I am going to learn how to curse people.

Never Again

"KOREA! *KOREA!"*

North shot bolt upright off the floor, Tokarev in hand before he was even fully conscious, heart pounding like the fists on his door.

His provinces were right outside, which meant he didn't have to clear the hall, leaving him free to tear the door open and launch himself into it, grabbing the nearest person and shoving them behind him as he placed himself between them and the entrance, pistol pointed, ready to destroy the threat.

He blinked, seeing no one standing in the grey square of pre-dawn light that led to the outside.

The dregs of sleep drained from his mind, and he grimaced, remembering what day it was. He turned to glower at his provinces, who were all- Kangwon included- clustered behind him, eyes glinting in amusement.

"Happy birthday!" they chorused loudly, Hae vigorously waving a red bandana in the air from where he had tossed her.

"Really?" North demanded.

"What?" South Pyongan grinned cheekily. "Did you think you were safe after last year?"

"I would *think* you would know better than to try this stupid prank when we are at *active war,"* North growled, irritated by how fast his heart was still beating.

They'd done this on his first Foundation Day, too, startling him from the half sleep he had finally forced himself into in preparation for the events, and tried to do it the year after. He had been ready for that one, but with how furious he'd been last night, and with last year…

Sang's eyes soft and sad. 'Korea. Please let us do this."

Anyway, he'd forgotten to be prepared.

"Shouldn't've ruined our fun in '49 then," the annoying woman drawled. "Or woken up earlier."

"We did have an unfair advantage this year," Hwang pointed out from over her shoulder. "I was already awake on watch."

"This had better not become a tradition," North growled. "If it does, I'm shooting one of you. And it's going to be you," he directed at South Pyongan.

"We're making it a tradition," North Hamgyong grunted from the back.

His cousin grinned. "Maybe I'll even let you get a shot in. Y'know, as a birthday present."

"It isn't my birthday," her Countryhuman grumbled, finally stowing his gun. "It is the DPRK's Foundation Day. Don't hug me," he warned Hae.

She pouted. "But everyone should get a hug on their birthday."

"Not my birthday," North repeated, retreating back into his room. "Now leave me alone. I need to get ready. And you do, too."

He looked at SH, who dipped her head and hustled her cousins off, reminding them to wear their best clothes, gently guiding Hae as she tried to sidle after North.

He huffed, shutting his door.

He would never understand why they (and their people) insisted on trying to foist this on him as his birthday. He hadn't been born on September 9th. He hadn't been born at all. He had been formed, and there certainly wasn't anything to celebrate about August 22nd.

'Come on, North. Please? It's our birthday.'

‘That’s why we need to try again!’

“Tch.”

North dressed in his less-worn tunic, straightening his cuffs and hem, and smoothing down his pockets.

As he wrapped his belt around his waist and pulled it through, his jaw clenched. Even buckled as tight as it would go, it still hung loose.

He would have to make a fourth extra hole with his knife. But he knew the action would sour his mood. He would wait until he was with his Premier, then do it.

Until then, he cinched it as tightly as he could, and tried not to think of belts festooning his arms and torso, and the acrid smell of napalm and white phosphorus as he left the bodies they had belonged to behind. And how they were still waiting for him.

How many of those he would speak to today had lost someone at the Raktong or on the way south? How many were waiting for him to bring someone left behind home?

North reached into his bag, even though he knew he shouldn’t, removing three items. A sketch of Seoul, carefully folded, a small shard of pottery with flakes of maroon blood still clinging to it, and a small rock that was apparently shaped like a heart.

He turned the last one in his fingers, trying to see the aorta.

He’d never understood Gyeonggi’s fascination with stones. During the Occupation, the boy had collected so many he’d started to have trouble keeping pace when they were on the march. So North had made him dump them all out, keeping it to a strict ‘one-rock’ policy. He couldn’t understand why his province would want to keep useless objects around, even if they were pretty. But Gyeonggi had looked so dejected that he had promised he could have a collection when they had a house.

North knew exactly how many people were waiting for him to bring them home.

Gyeonggi had known as he handed him the ‘heart’ last Foundation Day, just like Sang and the others had. He had seen that look in their eyes as they tried to pretend they could still reach Busan. They might not have known he was going to send them off.

But they had known North was going to let them down.

And he still couldn’t see the heart in the lopsided grey stone.

He placed it back in his bag with the shard and sketch, fingers reaching for something else, the one thing he had kept on his person after giving the materials in his secret compartment to his Premier for safekeeping.

He stopped himself. His people needed surety and hope. He couldn’t think about the past today. At least not the things he would change from it.

North shook himself, leaving his room, where he immediately ran into SH and Hwang lurking outside.

“Korea,” the latter said, standing at attention with a serious face.

“What?” North sighed, sensing he was going to be irritated.

His province placed his hand over his heart. “If I may be so bold as to advise you, I believe you should make a public speech today. They’re much more effective at raising morale.”

“I am,” North said.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to imply that not giving an address publicly on an important national holiday *lowers* morale,” Hwang babbled on, not hearing him. “But *making* one certainly raises it. On top of that it’s beneficial for our people to see that you’re not suffering too badly under the aerial bombardment-“

“North Hwanghae,” North cut him off firmly. “I am making a public speech today.”

“Oh.” Hwang blinked, looking mildly put off. “But I made a speech of my own to convince you to.”

“I don’t need it.”

His province pursed his lips. “Can I give it anyway?”

“No.” North turned to SH. “Is that why you’re here, too?”

“Me?” she asked innocently. “No. I’m just here to tell you I finished the project. Which I *would* have told you last night, if-“

“Good.” North turned on a heel. “Everyone in the GAZ in five minutes or you’re walking.”

SH sighed as Hwang asked which project North was talking about, only to be told it was secret.

“Even though there’s no reason for it to be,” SH said, loudly enough for the Countryhuman to hear.

“The reason is ‘I said so,’” North tossed back.

In under five minutes (four minutes and fifty-five seconds in South Pyongan’s case), the provinces were all piled into the GAZ, North had fended off another attempted hug from Hae, and they were rolling toward the city.

Once they left the trees and came around the ridge of Jangsan, North could confirm with his eye what he already felt. The bombings had started early.

To the distant west and south flew formations of enemy planes, black against grey, already started on Sunchon and the stretch of terrain between Pyongyang and Hwangju, severing the rail tracks that led to the south again.

They would be especially heavy today, just as they had been for the past few weeks. At first so the Yankees could destroy everything they could in case of a ceasefire, and now to punish North’s people for breaking off the talks, even though it had been *them* that had refused to come back, even after Nam Il had called for an open investigation into the Kaesong bombing and the release of all documents between them to the UN.

Their proposal had been rejected, of course. But the Americans weren't being blamed for refusing to return. Korea was, for refusing to grovel for them to come back.

And now they had to be punished for it.

There had been seven hundred sorties yesterday alone, ravaging the coast from Kosong to Wonsan, strafing the frontline, targeting their tunnels from Haeju to Nampo, and cratering the Sunan airfield again. North knew they could expect more today.

They were always worse on holidays.

A light mist hovered over the fields, sparser over the dead patches where napalm and bombs had 'gone astray.' Yellowing stalks of corn grew tall in the distance, waving as unseen people moved through them, plucking fully-grown ears, as they would well into October. The harvest of the most important crop- rice- wouldn't begin until later in the month. But the emerald carpet of soybeans around them was already being picked through, and would continue to be until the corn was done. Then the barren plants would be cut down and tilled back into the earth like the fields of golden wheat already had been, rushing to get the winter wheat and barley planted before the frosts set in.

They were coming. The days were getting shorter, the mornings were taking longer to warm up. North could feel the ache starting to settle into his bones again.

It had been a relief, for those few years, not to feel the weight of dread hanging over him, and crushing his chest as winter crept closer. Or at least having it not weigh as heavily.

The pale light of dawn showed that the peasants were already in the fields, hoping to get what harvesting they could done before the early fall sun burned away the dew and drew the planes their way.

And maybe for one other reason. The men and women all seemed to be working coincidentally close to the road. Close enough that it was easy to raise their hands and call out, "Happy Foundation Day, Comrade Korea!" as North drove by.

A few of the children (who seemed far too enthusiastic to have been woken up early on a weekday solely to gather the various namul planted between the fields and the road) ran after the truck on stubby legs, crying “Long live!”

One older boy even sprinted after the vehicle for several metres, before North rewarded his efforts by slowing down, allowing him to lob a pear through the window with the last of his strength and gasp out, “Happy birthday, Comrade Korea!” before falling to his knees on the dusty road.

“Thank you!” SH shouted at him from the back bench, accepting the pear from North so she could cut it into slices for the other provinces. “You *could* humour them, you know.”

“I did,” he replied, keeping his eye on the road. “I waved and thanked them.”

“You could’ve stopped.”

North *‘tch’*ed, briefly glancing behind them to see the victorious boy being piled on by his peers, jealous that he’d actually managed to get something to their Countryhuman.

There weren’t any pear trees nearby. And there were too many other harvestable vegetables.

He could tolerate the sheer assortment of home-cooked meals, hand-knitted clothing, and miscellaneous charms, jewellery, and useless trinkets that were sent to him and his provinces before the war, even if he didn’t know what to do with them.

But now with their food situation dire and production so difficult, his people needed to keep everything they could for themselves. A few weeks before last Liberation Day and this one, he'd had the Party issue multiple directives in every magazine, newspaper, radio broadcast, and public announcement he could, telling the masses that if they felt they had anything to spare, they should share it with their neighbours or donate it to the State, and if they *really* felt they had to give their Countryhuman something, to send him a letter telling him about any issues they were facing. And they had

sent out more reminders for Foundation Day, when the bulk of presents usually came.

"I'm not giving anyone else a chance to pay tribute."

SH sighed in the way that someone about to repeat something they'd said several times over would. Because she was. Annoyingly.

"It's not 'tribute,' Korea. They're presents."

"Tribute would require the bestowing being compulsory," Hwang said from beside her, handing Hae's slice of pear to her while SH leaned out the open window to pass the rest to South Pyongan, North Pyongan, and North Hamgyong in the truck bed. "But since you sent out that notice not to gift you anything, that means any gifts you receive are given purely out of personal desire."

And that 'personal desire' was because he was their country, and they felt like they owed him. Even when they didn't.

North might have accepted that most of their people that had given him presents during their first Foundation Day, or the second, had done it out of thanks, solely because they wanted to celebrate the first Korean state to ever belong to the Korean people, and out of appreciation for how long North had fought for that.

But now…

Just like his provinces, they knew he had let them down. They had never owed him anything, but now they *knew* that. They only wanted to give him things because they felt like it was expected.

North's knuckles whitened around the hardened rubber wheel. "I don't want anything."

"Not even a pear?" SH reached over the back of the seat, holding the fruit slice up to his face.

"If you put your fingers near my mouth, I'll bite them off."

"*O*-kay then." SH sat back, handing the final piece of pear to Hae, who eagerly devoured it.

North eyed her. Her usually round cheeks were starting to look slightly hollow beneath the bandages covering them.

Kangwon leaned around Chagang, smiling knowingly. “A smile might’ve been nice, at least.”

North turned his head so he could glower at him, as South Pyongan shouted from the back, “Better wait for the sun to rise in the west first!”

She yelped as North hit the brakes, sending her tumbling into side of the truck bed.

“Pothole,” the Countryhuman deadpanned, pressing on the gas again as his province cursed him out.

Once in Pyongyang, North headed directly for Jonsung complex, meeting with the Premier and receiving his customary letters from CCCP and Joseph Stalin, as well as something that made him side-eye the man.

The lines around his black eyes crinkled. “You said the masses shouldn’t get you anything. Nothing was said about personal comrades.”

“It was implied,” North huffed, refolding his new white dress uniform and crisp black pants.

Kim Il-sung just smiled. “Happy Day of the Foundation of the Republic, comrade.”

Neither of them mentioned how many holes were in North’s new belt.

He left the uniform with his Premier for when he needed it tonight, and tucked the Soviet messages into the pouch on his now properly-fitted belt. He would read them later. After last night, he didn’t have any interest in foreign words, even those from comrades.

When Peng Dehuai met him in the city to congratulate him on his Foundation Day and deliver letters from Mao Zedong and Zhou

Enlai, North didn't ask if he had any others for him.

As he marched through the streets, forcing himself to take main roads and not slink away from his people's eyes, he almost kept expecting China to pop up, appearing from nowhere like he always did to harass him.

But North knew he wouldn't.

Pyongyang had been emptied of nearly all its people, and no one could enter any city freely now- it put them at too much risk. But a population of over five hundred thousand reduced to only essential workers was still in the thousands. They lived in one-story houses on the city's edge, or in underground bunkers turned to factories, or had permission to travel in from the caves in the hills every day. But they were there.

And it seemed like every single one of them was waiting for North.

A unit of Rehabilitation Corps women swarmed him as he made his way down Stalin Street, five of them latching onto his arm at the same time to eagerly wish him a 'happy birthday,' before their commander hustled them off to fix a bridge. A group of men with strips of cloth around their foreheads walked with him for a few blocks on their way to the paper mill. Outside the flattened school district, a gaggle of dirt-streaked children surrounded him like a flock of sparrows, asking rapid-fire questions until he reminded them that children were supposed to be safe in the hills, not roaming the city.

They shrieked in faux-alarm, taking off down the streets in a chorus of laughter.

"Happy birthsday!" a younger boy lisped as his older brother dragged him away.

Ssi-bal. North wanted to be on the frontline right now. Last year had been his ideal Foundation Day- celebrations in the cities for his people to enjoy while he was on the frontline, only having to put up with a few personal well-wishes, his soldiers too preoccupied with

combat to insist it was his birthday or try to force presents on him.

*'It would have been ideal if we had **won.'***

North grit his teeth, forging on.

The delays turned a thirty-minute walk into an hour, though it didn't bother him. His purpose today was to meet with as many people as possible after all.

But first, his province.

Gangwon sprang up from his hospital cot as North finally gave up waiting and slowly opened the door.

"Korea!" he said, eyes wide. "S-Sorry, I didn't hear you knock."

"It's fine." North said, then had to repeat himself. The overexaggerated, slow lip movements that Gangwon needed to understand his words didn't come naturally to him.

"Happy birthday," his province said, hustling over to the side table, where he picked up an object wrapped in red cloth. "I m-made you something."

He turned around, presenting it to North, who stared at it with his eye narrowed, then at the other man, communicating in a way he didn't need to hear to understand.

"It's n-not a waste of resources," Gangwon quickly clarified, then admitted, "It is… kind of useless. B-But I was using it to practice, so even if it's useless to *you,* it's not like it was *completely* useless."

"Don't chew your nails," North ordered loudly, and he yanked a green fingertip away from his mouth.

The Countryhuman unwrapped the object, revealing…

"A wooden tiger?" He skeptically held the figurine up.

"I had to pract-tice to get the proportions right for Hyun Han-jin's housewarming gift," Gangwon stuttered. "Do you like it?"

He was much more nervous than Kangwon or North Kangwon had ever been. But North could still see that echo of his brother and who they'd used to be in his expression as he anxiously watched him, waiting to be told he'd done a good job.

"It's well-made," he praised, because it was. "Are you steady enough to hold a scalpel yet?"

Gangwon deflated slightly. "N-No."

North's jaw tightened, though not at him.

They had been lucky to make it out of the Occupation without any lasting effects. Physical ones, at least. And those were what mattered. South Gyeongsang had her pinched wrist nerves from sewing, washing dishes, cooking, cleaning, and all the other repetitive tasks she'd been forced to do, and North Chungcheong had complained about an old sprain twinging at the Raktong.

But the female province could still wield a gun and hold a pencil, if not for extended periods of time. And North knew the male one wouldn't have complained if it was serious. And even North Hamgyong's back problems, which had made him wake up swearing during several winters, almost completely immobile until Kangwon worked at him with his hands, had stopped causing as much trouble once his body had grown.

If North let himself feel it, he knew his own body would be a knot of aches and pains, even outside of winter. The jaw he held suspicions had never set properly, his many-times-broken wrists, the ribs that had been kicked in too many times to count, and the equally countless times his toes or fingers had been broken. And his hip, of course.

But he didn't. And so it didn't affect him.

They had escaped thirty-six years of Occupation and war relatively unscathed. And in five of them, America had beaten one of his provinces into submission, broken another's nerves, and made him permanently deafen himself.

And taken North's eye.

He would pay for it.

North pulled out Stalin's letter, stared at the white envelope, then nodded decisively, using the short stub of pencil he'd brought to write on it, showing the words to Gangwon, though he was still driven to say them out loud.

"It's progress," he said. "You couldn't have carved anything last year, let alone this." He held up the simple, but not crude, tiger. "By this time next year, you'll be able to operate again."

He could see the accusing question in Gangwon's hooded eyes. *'And by this time next year will the war be over? Will we have everyone back?'*

North made himself not look away. "You'll be fine."

Gangwon's lower lip trembled in the way Kangwon's always had- and still did- when receiving praise. He did look away, ducking his head to hide his blush.

North examined the little wooden tiger again. It didn't look anything like the Joseon-era paintings of foolishly grinning felines with bulging eyes, made to mock the yangban. It was carved to look real, sitting with its back straight and its tail wrapped around its paws, almost seeming to lean forwards. Its striped face was intense, special attention clearly paid to its eyes, which were fixed with ravenous intent on some invisible prey.

He pocketed it just as the door opened, placing himself between Gangwon and the intruder, then immediately wishing he hadn't.

"You," Kim Yong-hwan said venomously, her eyes narrowed like that of the tiger.

"You dare address your country like that?" North asked coldly. "I should have you expelled from the Party."

"Do it," the woman shot back. "Make my workload a little lighter. Then I'll have more time to hunt you down. Do you know when the

last time I saw you was?"

North didn't flinch. "After the end of the enemy's counteroffensive in June."

"After the end of the enemy's counteroffensive in June," Kim Yong-hwan repeated scathingly. "And how many thousands of tons of bombs have fallen since then?"

"A few," North sketched. *'Hundred thousand.'*

The nurse's lips pinched until they were roughly the size of a needle's head. "You are coming with me. Now."

North huffed. "Fine."

Kim Yong-hwan looked suddenly wary, and Gangwon's eyebrows shot up.

"Fine?" the woman said suspiciously.

"Fine," North repeated, moving away from his province. "I'm wearing white for my speech tonight. I don't want to bleed through it."

"Did you say… s-speech?" Gangwon asked hopefully.

Ssi-bal. His provinces had been talking about him with each other. He had been sure they were, but it still irritated him to have his suspicions confirmed.

"Yes. You'll be there. I don't care if you can't hear."

"With how loud you bluster, he could hear you if he had no ears at all," Kim Yong-hwan said dryly.

Keeping in mind that he *didn't* enjoy intimidating his people, even when it was the world's most grating nurse, North simply said, "You have fifteen minutes. It starts now."

The hallway was more lively than when he'd came in, almost every door open, faces peering from them that lit with excitement

when he emerged.

"Comrade Korea!"

North made his way down the hall though grasping hands and shouts of his name (and that irritating 'happy birthday'), reaching out to accept forearm clasps and accept letters from wounded soldiers and their family members.

'Too many family members.' And too early. They had known he would be here. And since he had been… absent when it came to their soldiers lately, it had to be because they expected him to visit Gangwon.

Which meant word of him was spreading.

Kim Yong-hwan bullied her way through the crowd, not letting North stop for a second, even when Pak Ga-ram limped to his door on crutches and cheerfully passed him a letter.

"You're delaying Comrade Korea's exam!" she snapped, wisely not informing them of the real reason he was here. "You can fawn over him later."

Under her breath she muttered, "I *warned* those new girls not to go spreading it around you were here. Tell Comrade South Hamgyong I want more 'no gossiping' posters for the hospitals and I want them to be as threatening as possible."

Normally North would be glad to linger and run down the minutes on Kim Yong-hwan's allotted treatment time. But his wounds needed to look as well-tended as possible today, so he apologized to the patients, promising to speak to them after, and kept pace with the nurse through the grey halls.

She kept eyeing him, like she was expecting him to try and make an escape. But he matched her stride until they reached the sterile examination room, which was already prepped.

Kim Yong-hwan slammed the door on the commotion outside, then removed her face mask, rubbing her hand over her eyes.

The woman was usually blunt and brisk, but she had been more snappish than usual.

"Is everything well in the hospital?" North asked, though if it wasn't, Kangwon would have told him.

"Just the usual. Too many patients, not enough supplies." The nurse waved a worn hand. "We'll get through it. No more trying to delay this."

"No antiseptic," North ordered, making a mental note to ask An Il-rae to make sure her comrade was getting enough rest. "Just clean and bandage them."

"I'm sorry." Kim Yong-hwan arched a brow, back to imposing. "Are *you* the Head Nurse here?"

"No," North replied icily. "But I am your Countryhuman. And *you* are running out of time."

The nurse *'tch'*ed, launching into action, grabbing a fresh face mask, slipping on hospital gloves, and snatching a roll of bandages and jar of fresh water, leaving the bottle of antiseptic where it was.

North took the opportunity to remove his tunic, maneuvering it over his head to cover his front, as usual.

He tensed as she sat on the edge of the cot with him, instructing him to turn his back to her. The position wouldn't have been as bad if he'd still had two eyes. But as it was, he had to fight the urge to turn his head to his blind spot every few seconds, knowing he would be chastised for moving.

The chill air of the hospital brushed against his burns as the bloody fabric around his torso was carefully unwrapped and set aside.

"You've been keeping them in fairly good condition, at least," Kim Yong-hwan said as she appraised the rugged topography of his blue skin. "Though I can see a bit of pus here. Would it kill you to disinfect them once in awhile, and not just reuse the same bandages? Or at least let Comrade Kangwon do it for you."

North would rather *all* his wounds become infected than let Kangwon clean them again.

He kept his mouth shut as Kim Yong-hwan continued to chide him, trying not to twitch too much. He hated not being able to see her hands, even if he could feel them brushing at his burns with a damp cloth.

"Do it harder," North ordered. "The scabs are going to break open anyways."

His jaw clenched as his point was proven, a new pain spreading across his lower back.

"Oh those *bastards,"* Kim Yong-hwan hissed in annoyance. "I *just* cleaned there."

North could tolerate her hands more than Kangwon's. She worked with a clinical precision, and needed no more reminders to apply as much pressure as needed. Any light touches came from a physician's desire to not worsen his injuries, not from… anything else.

"Once you aren't needed as a war surgeon, would you consider becoming a personal physician?" North tried to sound neutral.

"For *you?"* Kim Yong-hwan snorted. "I would rather become a bovine veterinarian and jam my hand up a cow's arse every day. With full respect, Comrade Korea."

North *'tch'*ed.

"Just let Comrade Kangwon do it," the nurse said, dabbing at a final spot on his side. "That boy's the only one that actually wants to take care of you."

"I don't need him to 'take care of me,'" North grumbled. "I just need a doctor for check-ups. And for someone that doesn't want to take care of me, you harass me about it enough."

"I *want* my Countryhuman to be hale and hearty," the nurse retorted. "But if I could snap my fingers and have it done, I would.

Turn around. And stop hiding your chest like a blushing maiden."

"It seems like you forget how to show your Countryhuman proper respect," North said frostily, reluctantly complying. "Would spending a year in a mountain village in Chagang province as part of the Mobile Medical Corps remind you?"

"If I didn't have to deal with you squirming and pouting at me?" Kim Yong-hwan asked. "Yes."

North curled his lip at her as she started to work on his chest, scrubbing at the burns on the edges of his scar.

He was less tense now that he could see her as she worked, enough to pull out a few of the letters the hospital occupants had given him, reading through congratulations and well-wishes written on scraps of paper.

It gladdened him to see that Pak Ga-ram asked him to congratulate North Pyongan for him, and mentioned that the province had came by a few days ago. He had never had an issue with being empathetic and checking in on their people. But it was still impressive that he'd done it without South Pyongan.

The sailor would be being released in a week or so, and sent to the shore batteries on the east coast, keeping his feet firmly on dry ground from now on, as he had requested.

Still, North was vaguely irked as he read through all the messages. He'd asked for any complaints they had that he could solve, but the closest any got to it were multiple soldiers asking him to have them released early so they could return to the front, and one man mentioning that the hospital food could be better. And North was fairly certain that was a quip.

He knew realistically that most main complaints still weren't things he could solve directly. The food issue, the housing issue, the lack of medical supplies and ammunition at the front. Anything he could do about it, the Party was already doing, or thinking of ways to solve it. They were preparing free winter clothes for the displaced, they were trying to get housing materials to those

without shelter, they were building more local factories. North couldn't stop the napalm from torching their crops, or conjure rations and supplies from nothing.

But he wanted something he *could* fix.

He jolted suddenly, jerking back from Kim Yong-hwan, snapping, *"Don't!"*

She sat back, arching a brow at him. "It needs cleaned."

"I'll do it." North put a hand over the curved burn running down his torso, even though four hands wouldn't have been enough to cover it.

The nurse examined him, then sighed. "Fine. But I'm watching to make sure you do it well."

North did, meticulously scrubbing at the gash, gritting his teeth at the feeling. It still didn't hurt- the ever-widening edges stung, but where it had carved into his flesh and muscle was still blackened and dead. It just felt… wrong. It put an uncomfortable pressure on his insides, making him think about Kangwon's worry about it developing to a fourth-degree burn, the kind that ate into bone.

An injury to their land apparently wasn't supposed to be able to do that Countryhumans, but then again, no country had ever been bombed like Korea was being bombed. Not even Japan, Germany, or Britain during the last World War.

North finished cleaning where the burn curved around his side, looking up in time to see Kim Yong-hwan's mask slip.

Her sharp brows were furrowed as her eyes traced his scar down to the burn, her lips pressed flat, but no longer in irritation.

North would take a proper medical course when this was over. He would be his own doctor.

The nurse's severe expression slammed back into place like the door of a prison cell as she realized he was done.

"I notice you sit still well enough when *you're* the one trying to work," she said archly.

North stayed silent until she was done rebandaging him, then stood, shrugging on his uniform.

"I'm done here. Go back to harassing your other patients."

"They don't need me to harass them. Oh, and Comrade Korea?"

He eyed her warily.

"Happy Foundation Day." Kim Yong-hwan gave him something that was almost a dry smile. "I'm glad to see you stopped sulking."

"I don't 'sulk,'" North sulked.

"Mhm," she skeptically hummed. "You didn't *use* to, at least. So I don't know why you started this year."

Because back then it had only ever been losing the battle. He had always known they could still win the war. But this time…

He had let them down completely.

"But I'm glad to see you're over it," she continued. "I won't be able to make it to the speech, but save me a few words."

She opened the door, releasing him from her clutches.

North couldn't *stand* her.

He did his rounds around the hospital, speaking with the ill and injured soldiers, thanking them for their service, encouraging those who would return to the frontline, and reassuring those who would never fight again.

They thanked him for his care with tears in their eyes, and he felt like a fraud.

It was *his* fault they were here. It didn't matter if it was an American bomb, a reactionary bullet, or a virus that had put them

in the hospital. They wouldn't be here if the war had ended when it was supposed to. If he hadn't hesitated.

Every single man and woman that would never walk again, that had to learn how to write with a different hand, who would never see with two eyes again was because of him.

But he knew he couldn't hide out in the office all day. They were here because of him. So he had to be here for them.

Keeping that thought in mind, he left the military hospital, visiting City Hospital One, then the local ammunition factory, and every other factory he could reach on foot. He visited the market spaces in the hills, unannounced, so not too many could have time to gather. Crowds would attract the planes.

He walked the outskirts of Pyongyang, visiting every dug-out and cave he knew of, searching for more. He made sure to visit North Pyongan's two wards, making sure they were settling into their job of guarding the aid station on the north road, and fighting off the attempts of the women there to treat him like a visiting soldier who needed a bowl of tofu jjigae and his uniform washed.

"Really, Comrade Korea," an older woman with a hairnet trapping her curly black locks fussed. "We just made it, and there's plenty. My own family made the tofu."

"I've already eaten," North lied. "Save it for our soldiers."

"Can we at least sing you a song?" another woman asked from the window of the small rest house.

'Why don't we just celebrate today? I can sing you another song.'

*'I don't **want** a song. I **want** to get us out of here.'*

"…Alright," he acquiesced now. A song didn't waste anything. And this wasn't the same as back then.

"Oh! Tae-min can sing, too!" Hyun Han-jin enthusiastically volunteered his friend. "He has a great voice!"

"Hyung!" the other boy snapped, but was too late to stop the older women from dragging his chair over to them, and making sure he knew the words of the song they'd been practicing.

As they sang *'Flag of Victory,'* North thought of its composer, Kim Soon-nam, another defector from the south, and a participant in the Taegu Uprising in 1946, another case of workers rising up against the American Military Government, and being put down for it.

It was good he had escaped. Otherwise he would have been executed alongside the thousands of others by Rhee's dogs before the KPA came, and Korea would have lost a patriotic composer.

But his wife and child had remained. Had they fled Taegu when the war had been waging in it? Or had they been killed?

How many of those from the south had came here to save their lives, confident that North would free their families for them? That they could go home soon?

Hyun Han-jin and Oh Tae-min seemed to glare at him, their eyes saying, *'You should have gone to Ganghwa when we begged. You should have Liberated us when you were supposed to.'*

They combined with the rich smell of tofu jjigae to hollow out North's insides, the singing fading to a buzz in his skull.

"Thank you," he said when they were done, swallowing the saliva flooding his mouth so his words wouldn't sound wet. "I'm sure our soldiers are pleased to have such talented people looking after them."

"We all need to do what we can," the woman with the hairnet said cheerfully. "We'll make sure you and our comrades can keep fighting on."

"And we'll do whatever we can to help, too," Hyun Han-jin chimed in, his friend still hiding behind him in embarrassment at having to sing. "We're really grateful for everything you and everyone else here have done for us."

'Not enough,' his brown eyes said. *'You didn't do enough.'*

North felt his shoulders twitch, wanting to hunch, and fought the urge to back away. “I am grateful to have such patriotic men and women be apart of our struggle. I’ll make sure you all get to go home soon, to a free Pyongyang and Ganghwa.”

‘Liar,’ they said.

North declined another offer of jjigae, trying to leave without looking like he was fleeing, his shoulder blades itching as their eyes followed, burning into him.

As the day wore on, he could feel himself winding tighter and tighter. Now none of the people he spoke to seemed excited to see him. Their mouths twisted into smiles and their faces lit up. But their eyes remained cold and judging, piercing into him as they sang and handed him paper words they didn’t mean. Every thin child and exhausted mother in small shacks, every old man in the refuges for elders, every crippled soldier and southern refugee seemed to watch him with judgement, even as they wished him well.

‘You said we would be Reunified by Liberation Day, you said the talks would succeed, you said we could go home, you said we would ***win.’***

‘You said we wouldn’t get hurt again!’ his brother cried, hand to the blood on his temple.

“Korea-“

“*What?!”* he snarled at SH.

She blinked back at him, unfazed as she held the sack of letters he’d given her to pass off to a soldier to bring to Jonsung complex. "I think I should come with you to the Mangyongdae School.”

“No need,” North clipped, turning away.

She followed him down the riverbank. “You’re not the best with children on a good day, and today-“

“I am fine with children!” North barked, spinning to her, then sucked in a breath, turning back. “There is nothing wrong with

today. Go finish preparations for the performance. If you screw up, I'll put you up against the wall."

"We don't threaten execution for mistakes!" SH reminded him.

North ignored her, skin prickling as he headed for Mangyong Hill.

He'd saved the orphanages for last, now that the sun was starting to set, hoping they would have worn themselves out during the day. He knew he couldn't tolerate dozens of children at full energy right now. He had managed to make it through the others.

Now he had to withstand Mangyongdae.

North went around the village at the base of the hill. He knew it was unlikely, but the idea that he could run into any of those people that had been there thirty-two years ago, that had looked at him the way they had...

He couldn't bear to see if that look had changed.

Like the other orphanages, delaying his visit hadn't accomplished much. As North entered the underground classroom in the school complex, any lethargy the children had been feeling instantly dissipated, and they threw themselves at him like a small tsunami, the younger ones speaking over each other in squeaky voices, clamouring to ask questions and wish him happy birthday, only just remembering to flutter the red pennants they'd been given as their teachers tried in vain to rein them in.

The older children hung back. North tried not to look at them.

The Mangyongdae School For Bereaved Family of Revolutionaries was a high school, one for the children of those killed fighting against Japan, to teach them how to grow up into revolutionaries just like their parents. And now it included the children whose parents had been killed fighting against America, or had a living parent in active duty, but no other relatives to take them in.

But with just how many children had been orphaned, the younger siblings of those old enough to attend secondary school had been

sent here, too. For now.

"Leave Comrade Korea alone," one schoolmistress chided, swooping in to snatch up a girl whose hand had been trying to reach into North's belt pouch. "Sorry for their manners."

"It's fine," North said, glad he'd removed the bullets from his pistol before entering the first orphanage.

It was good for them to see their Countryhuman before they left.

The other Socialist nations- CCCP, Romania, East Germany, amongst others- had volunteered to take in their orphans and keep them safe until the war was over. Already they were preparing to send some over to orphanages in Europe or eastern Russia, and a few to China, despite his nation-building still being ongoing.

North despised having to send his children away, like so many had had to flee during the Occupation. But he knew it was for the best. Their education was at risk when classes were always being interrupted by air raid alarms, and they were living underground. They could learn under a sky that wasn't filled with death, and bring what they learned back to their country to rebuild once the war was over.

*'And when will **that** be?'* the high school children seemed to ask. *'When will I see my brother or sister again? When I'm old enough to be a war veteran, and they no longer speak Korean?'*

The younger children didn't know enough to blame him. Their eyes were wide, filled with innocent enthusiasm to see their Countryhuman, unaware that their parents were dead because of him.

But the older ones knew.

"The children practiced hard to prepare a couple performances for you," the schoolmistress said, the girl still squirming in her arms. "We'd be honored if you stayed for it. But I understand if you don't have the time."

North didn't want to. He wanted to escape the eyes gazing at him

accusingly, and the ones that should be.

But he agreed. Songs and letters were the only gifts he would accept today.

He was led towards the school's theatre, two children latching onto his hands to eagerly pull him towards it. North couldn't quite hide his flinch as the boy's small hand gripped his own, reflexively gripping it tighter, trying to prevent his hold from growing slack. He almost couldn't make his fingers loosen when he saw him wince.

Yes. Better to get them away from the planes and their bombs. They could relearn Korean, so long as they were alive.

The younger children put on a song and dance that was more impressive for how hard they had clearly practiced, and how passionate they were than any skill. North sat in the front row, surrounded by the high schoolers, trying not to meet their furtive glances or open stares.

It was harder when they took to the stage, looking directly at him as they sang to him. Unlike the children, they would be able to tell if he didn't meet their eyes. So he was forced to gaze back as they sang to him about smashing the enemy, about freeing their country and victory, the lyrics blending into all the others he had heard today, constructing a charge. He wasn't sitting on a schoolchild's pew with a girl in a red ascot clinging to his side- he was sitting in a defendant's chair at a people's court.

And they had found him guilty.

He clapped for them when they were done, told them they had done well and were doing well, to make sure they worked hard to grow up into fine revolutionaries. He reminded them what their parents had died for, and told the younger ones that no matter where they went, they would always be Korean.

They smiled and laughed and handed him notes written in pencil and coloured chalk or wax, congratulating him on Foundation Day and his birthday, and North fled the second he had the chance, bursting out of the stifling underground, walking as swiftly as

possible so he could get far enough away to start running.

"Comrade Korea!"

A sudden surge of panic rushed through North, the distinct feeling he was being hunted. He itched with the desire to run, but made himself stand firm. He couldn't face the audience tonight if he couldn't face a single child.

He turned to see a lanky boy jogging through the trees towards him. He was one of the high schoolers, maybe fifteen or sixteen, with brown hair shaved close and big, wire-rimmed glasses perched loosely on his flat nose. He had been sitting a few people over from North on the pew, one of those casting him frequent short glances, looking between him and a clipboard.

"Is something wrong?" North asked, and the tension in his voice could easily be blamed on thinking something was.

The boy halted a few feet away, bringing his hands up to his chest, a thick paper held in them. North could read names on the back, spaced haphazardly, all in different handwriting, and make out the shadow of something in the other side.

"I, uh, *we* made you a present." The boy ran a hand across his head with a rasping sound. "Well, I made it. But everyone else signed it. And the idea was collaborative. Sort of."

He flipped around the paper, holding it out for inspection.

It was a watercolour sketch of North, standing before a green and gold cornfield. Paektusan rose into the blue sky in the background, mottled in emerald, brown, and white. There was a flagpole in his hand, the flag of the DPRK fluttering atop it. The Countryhuman was looking up at it, his expression intense.

"I would have given it to you sooner," the boy said, feet shifting. "But I've never seen you so close in person before. I needed to finish the expression."

He was lying. North could see light scuff marks under the crimson and navy watercolours, and the fresh pencil lines of his angular eye

and serious lips where a smile had been erased.

"Why?"

The boy blinked at his suddenly aggressive tone. "Why…?"

North knew he should just shut his mouth and accept the painting, but he couldn't. "Why are you giving this to me?"

"Because it's Foundation Day?" He sounded a bit puzzled. "It's your birthday. And I know the Worker's Party said you didn't want any presents, but we figured there wasn't much of a difference between a letter and a drawing. And…" He fidgeted. "I've actually been working on this for awhile."

"It isn't my birthday." North knew being combative with a high schooler was exactly the sort of thing that made SH say he wasn't good with children. But he couldn't take it anymore. "This is the day our state was founded, not the day I was born."

"But… you're the one that founded our state," the boy pointed out, looking around at the hillside like he thought he might be being tested.

"No," North corrected. "Our *people* founded our state. Premier Kim Il-sung, the deputies of our People's Assembly and the Supreme People's Assembly, our comrades in the Worker's Party and all the masses."

And the only reason they had done it on this day was because Rhee had already declared the Republic of Korea two months earlier. A Korean state shouldn't have been proclaimed until there was only one Korea.

"I was only one person in all that," North growled. "This day isn't about me- it's about our state and the people in it. The workers, the peasants, the army."

"But you *are* the state," the boy said, starting to sound uncertain, unsure of what was going on. "And we already have days for all of them. We've got May Day, Army Foundation Day, Party Foundation Day," he listed on his fingers. "If this isn't your birthday, when are

we supposed to celebrate it?"

"Why do you *need* to celebrate it?" North retorted. "Why do you all insist on getting me things? What's your name?"

"Uh, Mun Guk?"

"Mun Guk." North drew himself up, glaring at him. "Why did you make this for me?"

Mun Guk looked down at the painting. "I just made it for myself originally. But then I thought you might like it. Mmm." He thought for a second. "My mom always tried to get meat for my birthday, 'cuz it was something special. I don't know about everyone else, but I think that's why I wanted to give it to you. Everyone should have a day they get special things."

"I'm your country," North insisted, prickling. "You give me things every day. Every time you go to work or pick up a gun or go to class to learn how to protect and build or nation, you are giving me something. There is *nothing* more special than that."

Forgetting that fact would lead to taking those actions for granted, like so many other countries did. It wasn't something they deserved- it was something they *earned.*

Mun Guk pushed his ill-fitting glasses up. "But that's not really the same, is it? I mean, if my mom… If she could still make me meals, and we had enough meat to have it every day, I'd really appreciate it. But she'd probably want to do something else for my birthday then. I might not care, but she would."

North wanted to pace in place, but made his feet stay rooted. "There isn't any reason to feel like you need to do things for me. I just said you all do enough."

"But I don't really feel that way." Mun Guk fiddled with the corner of the paper. "I mean, I'm not old enough to fight yet, and I can't work in a factory, or make posters. I'm just a student."

"You are the future of our country."

“But you’re out there fighting every day,” the boy said. “I mean, you’re our Countryhuman, so you’re kind of *all* those things, right? Party member, soldier, office worker. It’s like how we clean the classroom at the end of the day. Mrs. Min and the other teachers work hard to teach us and take care of us, but we can’t do much for them. So we give back how we can.”

He said it in the tone of a student quoting his class representative.

That was… better than if he had simply said it was because North was their Countryhuman. He *did* work hard, he knew that. It wasn’t enough, but he did try. It was better than his people simply wanting to give him things because that was what Joseon had expected, and Japan, for the ‘virtue’ of what he was instead of the virtue of what he did.

But it was still wrong thinking.

“It is my duty as your Countryhuman to work for you,” North told the boy firmly. “You owe me *nothing* for that.”

Especially when he had failed in that twice.

‘Thrice.’

Mun Guk shrugged. “Maybe not. It’s not like we owe Mrs. Min. But it feels nice to do things for her. And…”

The boy shifted foot to foot, glancing around the woods as he fidgeted, then sighed.

“Please don’t tell my dad I told you this. He might beat me when he gets back. But…” His eyes slid away as his voice lowered shamefully. “He said in his last letter you were disappointed we haven’t managed to free the south for you yet, and that I should do something to cheer you up, if I could. That’s… probably another reason everyone wants to give you stuff.”

North barely heard his last words, unable to fully disguise his gape of dismay and disbelief as his heart stopped.

His people thought *he* was disappointed in *them?*

“Why does he think that?” North demanded.

Mun Guk shrugged uncomfortably, but he already knew. His lack of personal announcements, avoiding his soldiers and anyone else he could, his perfunctory broadcast on Liberation Day. His absence from the frontline didn’t help. Even though he hadn’t been able to fight for risk of jeopardizing the talks, he hadn’t even visited for August Fifteenth. He had squirrelled himself away in a broadcasting booth, then crept back to Jonsung complex, hiding behind paperwork, leaving his provinces and Premier to speak to their people.

Of course they thought he blamed them. He was their Countryhuman. They always heard about the efforts he was making for Korea, and even with how often he and the Party repeated that no one was above criticism, it still wasn’t first nature to find fault with your country. Of course the military commanders that had made the decision to pause after Seoul blamed themselves, even though he had been the one to allow it. Of course when he hid himself away and refused to speak to anyone, they thought it was because of *their* faults, not his.

Kim Yong-hwan had been wrong when she said he never acted like this before. He had. Every failed offensive in Korea or Manchuria, every comrade sacrificed and village reached too late had made him want to curl up somewhere dark where accusing eyes couldn’t find him.

But it had been routine to split the units after a loss, to disperse and regroup. And his unit was used to him disappearing into the woods or mountains, remaining nearby, but unseen, unheard, until he had finished criticizing himself, and emerged with steely determination once he was ready to face them with a new plan.

He couldn't do that now. He was a politician. His absence never went unnoticed. And his silence could be more damning than words ever were.

He still found it difficult to remember that it was a pencil in his dominant hand, not a gun. That his suit was more important than his uniform.

And now his people were blaming themselves because of it.

"When you write your father next, tell him I'm not disappointed in our People's Army," North managed to force out past his locked jaw. "Or *any* of you. I know our soldiers are giving it their all, and so long as they continue to do that, and make their best even better, I could *never* be disappointed in them."

He would tell them himself tomorrow at the front, and have it broadcast over the radio and sent as a general order. They couldn't think their country was disappointed in them, not when they had given so much for him.

Mun Guk nodded, unaware of the turmoil raging inside him. "Does… that mean you don't want the painting?"

"I want it," North said immediately, snatching it from him, examining it with a new eye. "You have skill."

Mun Guk dipped his head a little shyly. "I'd like to be an artist and a soldier someday."

"Have you ever seen Paektusan before?" The mountain looked almost like the real thing.

"No. But I had dad send me a few sketches. Him and mom were in the KPRA."

North lowered the painting. "You should send more art to the front. You and the other schoolchildren. Our soldiers need to remember what they're fighting for."

'The future.'

Mun Guk's eyes lit up. "So you really like it?"

"Yes," North said, ashamed his questioning had made the boy think otherwise, but unable to apologize when any explanation was too…

"Haha! Yes!" Mun Guk suddenly leaped in the air, fist-pumping. "I mean, uh, thank you for your praise Comrade Korea."

He reversed course by rocketing himself into a deep bow.

North bit down on telling him not to. He'd been antagonistic enough.

"You earned it." He nodded towards the underground shelter. "Now get back to school and keep working hard."

"Yes, comrade!" Mun Guk saluted sharply, then tore off back into the forest.

North took a deep breath, looking at the painting again, his white watercolour eye focused intently on their flag.

What had Mun Guk erased his smile for? Had he been replacing it with the solemn expression of a general whose gaze had been turned inwards, contemplating his own faults? Or a pointed accusation as he stared at their flag the same way he had stared up at that stage?

North had to remember that he wasn't just the General anymore. He was the State as well. His people would find meaning in what he did and didn't do, even if it was the wrong one.

They couldn't afford to doubt themselves. Not the soldiers at the front or the patients in the hospital, not the peasants working the fields to make sure they were fed or the workers driving themselves to produce more of what was needed to keep Korea going. None of the Korean people could.

North turned, heading towards Mangyongdae village with renewed purpose, one last stop before his speech.

'North, can we just celebrate our birthday next year? There's three hundred and sixty-four other days we can try and escape on. Please?'

'…Fine.'

North needed his people to believe in themselves unerringly, so that even if his feet ever faltered on their path, theirs wouldn't.

He hadn't faltered since 1918, and he was still working to make

up for that.

He never could again.

North is a few bad conversations from snapping on a good day. His birthday is not a good day.

The Taegu Uprising started because 1) of the general hatred of the trusteeship and Americans putting the people that had supported Japan back in charge, and 2) the US Military Government liberalized the markets and allowed people to buy and sell rice freely. Then because of the glory of the free market, because Korea was going through a food shortage, rice rose to astronomical prices, starving people. The US realized they'd screwed up a few months later and started to collect rice again, like Japan had done. But the people making money off expensive rice didn't want to do that, and the people who had no rice didn't want to do that, so they weren't able to collect much, and a couple hundred people starved to death. The Americans said if they didn't have rice, they should eat fruit or vegetables, showing that they had no idea of one of the most basic facts of any East Asian country, let alone Korea- rice is life. Then a cholera outbreak made the US restrict access to the Taegu area, but they didn't supply the necessary materials for a quarantine (like medical supplies) properly. So people were sick and starving worse because food couldn't get in. The September general strike spread there, and in October, protestors rallied against the police and government, demanding rice. The police fired on them, killing two, and the demonstrations grew to thousands. They attempted to take over the police, but the officers killed hundreds of them. The protests turned violent, with the houses of officials and police officers being stormed. The provincial politicians all resigned, and the other government employees joined the strike, demanding an end to the American occupation. Doctors and nurses joined in, refusing to treat wounded police. The US sent in tanks and declared martial law, causing even more violence, until eventually the uprising was put down, and workers were forced back to work. The protests and resistance to the police spread all around Gyeongsang province, seeing officers killed,

stations burned, and government offices sacked. But still, far more civilians were killed. The police cheered when they put down the people they were supposed to protect.

Also I can't find the original source for this claim, so don't believe it wholeheartedly, but I found a secondary Korean source saying a police chief had been directly split in half with an axe. Which is funny if true. Get him.

An Unbreakable Promise

The Moranbong Underground Theatre was heavy with anticipation. North could feel it crackling from behind the curtain, the hall echoing with a storm of murmurs and shifting bodies, the sound of hundreds of people waiting to see their Countryhuman.

The smell of sweat lingered amongst the set dressing and racks of brightly-hued clothes that filled the backstage, though the singers and dancers had finally retired after their all-day performances. They would be sitting in the front row now, the entertainers becoming the audience.

North took a deep breath, smoothing his pockets down over the white breast of his uniform. He looked in the full-body mirror, making sure his gold buttons and epaulets were spotless. He'd foregone both the olive flat cap and peaked general's hat he could have worn. His people needed to see his face.

But not all of it. He lifted the item Kangwon had given him this morning from the dressing table, tying the strings behind his head and adjusting it, the action familiar now.

His reflection gazed steadily back at him, that shameful wound concealed once more by the red star of his flag, the eyepatch no longer frayed and stained, but an unsullied white and crimson.

North tucked the old patch into his pocket. It *wasn't* sullied. The blood on it came from he and China's people, and had been shed for him. He would keep it as a reminder of that, and more.

The curtain rustled, and he looked up to see SH descending from the stage, her long crimson skirt swaying. The white silk of her jeogori glistened in the dim light, the sleeves capped in red, like they'd been dipped in blood.

"It's all set up," she said, tugging lightly on her goreum ribbon.

“It’s a full-house.”

North had seen on the way in.

“Good,” he said, though his chest tightened. “Are the correspondents ready?”

SH nodded. “Hwang says there’s three of them. One of them is bound to pick up good audio. And the cameras are ready, too.”

North wanted his words to be heard across the Peninsula. But had hesitated when Hwang suggested filming his speech for their future documentaries, thinking about the effect if there were permanent recordings of his other speeches, how it would make his people feel to look back at them, to see how sure he was-

‘This will be the last Liberation Day that we spend Divided.

‘We must Liberate them by this one.’

‘Soon we will push them from the south, as well.’

-and know that he had been wrong. How would they ever be able to believe that confidence again?

But he hadn’t been wrong every time. And he wouldn’t be this time.

‘We will return and whether it is now or later, ***we will win.’***

Even if it wasn’t the decisive military victory he had wanted. They would. And all of his people needed to hear that.

“Then await your cue.”

SH dipped her head, and he moved by her, ascending the stairs to the stage and approaching the curtain barrier between him and the audience.

He stopped before it, barely able to see through the gap between the fabric panels to the people filling the theatre. Men and women in black suits and threadbare shirts, choson-ot ranging from

colourful silks to plain white and black, olive uniforms and pressed workshirts. Those from all walks of life, but almost all Korean. There were no Soviet advisors or foreign press, and only a few Chinese correspondents.

This was for Korea's people.

North couldn't see their eyes past the glare of the stage lights, but his chest tightened further as he anticipated them turning to him.

In his head, he could hear South's voice from all those years ago, only three years after formation.

'Please?'

That had been the beginning, the precursor to 1918, the only time he had ever betrayed his people, before he even truly knew how much of a betrayal it was.

*'So **let** them.'*

Giving up on only one day was still giving up. And North couldn't do that. Not again.

He swept aside the curtain, emerging onto the stage. The stage light focused on his form, and the whispered conversations cut off like they'd been guillotined.

North surveyed the crowd, hundreds of people packed onto wooden benches and overflowing to line the walls, not with ticketed seating, but first-come-first-serve, aside from the performers and his provinces, who filled the balcony with his Premier and Kim Tu-bong, two of the few politicians here. His sharp eye picked out the cameramen- one in an opposite gallery, one in the middle aisle, and one crouched off to the side of the room.

They all stared back at him expectantly from the darkness beyond the stage.

There was a different quality to the silence than there usually was. Not solely anticipation, but something more anxious.

North knew why, and he cursed himself again for being a coward.

He straightened, drawing in a subtle breath as he prepared to fix it.

“Comrades.”

His voice filled the hall like the impact of a drum, as confident and assured as ever. The anticipation sharpened.

“Soldiers, peasants, workers, members of all political parties, students, men and women guerrillas, southern refugees.” North was able to pick out several of each group in the crowd, making sure to lock eyes with them, that they knew he saw them.

“Five years ago, you united to vote for our people’s committee members in the first elections in Korean history. Four years ago, our Provisional People’s Committee and People’s Assembly were established, the first Korean government to be led by those it serves. Three years ago, our entire nation came together to deny the puppet government rigged up in the south, electing five hundred and seventy-two deputies to the Supreme People’s Assembly, from north *and* south in the first all-Korea vote. And three years ago, the men and women that you chose to represent you crafted our Constitution and elected Kim Il-sung as our Premier, the first man ever *chosen* to be Korea’s head of state.”

Heads raised to the balcony, looking for him, though most remained facing North, anxious to find out what the history lesson was leading to. The Countryhuman put his arms in a military brace.

“Three years ago today, by the will of all Korea, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was founded. For the first time in our five thousand year-long history, Korea was in the hands of the people that *built* it.”

Already he could see shoulders shaking on some of the older audience members, the ones that had been alive for the Korean Empire, and had always known that Japan wasn’t the beginning of their suffering. The foreigner had inherited the locks, but the chains had already been there.

"It should have ended there," North continued, moving with steady steps past the forms concealed by white sheets that were set around the sides of the stage. "Korea should have been finally independent, finally able to chart our own course with the hands of our people firmly on the reins. We should have been free to build our nation into something greater than it has ever been."

His voice grew darker, though no less audible as he let his fists clench. "But it *didn't* end there. Our voices were ignored. Our demands that Korea's future should be decided by Koreans were silenced. Using the bloody mechanism of the United Nations, the Imperialists kept our country Divided, and propped up Rhee's puppet government in the south, aiding it in its slaughter of hundreds of thousands of our patriots who fought against their decrees. The same people that fought against Japan so ardently for all those years, cut down by their own countrymen. The same ones that sold out our nation to collaborate with the Japanese, still in power, still dyeing their hands red with the blood of the people."

The crowd rumbled in dissatisfaction.

"And it isn't a phenomenon that happened solely in the south." North's lip twitched with the urge to curl. "Not only did the reactionary puppets lay waste to our villages at the 38th Parallel, killing livestock, torching factories, spiriting away our women and killing our men. But when the Imperialists finally showed their grand ambition to conquer all of Korea, they committed those same heinous acts across our entire nation, from Busan to Chongjin. I am confident in saying that in this room, every single person lost someone to the reactionaries and their masters, or knows someone that did."

He spotted the lowered eyes and clenched teeth, and knew he was right.

"In the forty-seven days that our capital was occupied by the enemy, over fifteen thousand innocent men, women, and children were slaughtered, tortured and thrown into pits. Hung by their necks, beaten in the streets, and buried alive, forced to endure some of the worst humiliations in the world before being thrown aside like trash, like *nothing."*

North didn't bother keeping his voice cold. His people were angry, and so was he.

"But it would be foolish to hold the reactionaries solely at blame," he told them. "They are weak, cowardly. When we took their power and privilege, they kept their heads down and acted like patriots until the moment that the puppet army arrived. Only then were they confident enough to show their teeth, and bury them in their neighbours' necks.

"And the puppet army is the same. They started this war, but when our People's Army went south, they fell before them like stalks of wheat. And in every engagement, they have done the same, no matter what their masters do to stop them. Two weeks ago, after just being put back on the line, their 36th Regiment was repulsed, breaking and running, unable to seize their target without foreign aid."

It had been seized. But a speech wasn't the place to say that.

"If it hadn't been for one country, we would have routed them *entirely* last year," North declared, anger surging in his chest. "By now, Korea would be free and Liberated. We would have the future I described to you.

"But we don't. Because of one nation. The same nation that was bombing Korea before war was even officially declared. The same nation that taught the reactionaries the savage methods they use to kill our comrades, used first on their own oppressed. The same nation that used the United Nations, the very thing that is supposed to uphold international law, to *break* it, to embargo and starve our country, to poison our people and destroy our homes."

North's volume rose as he listed that country's crimes. Behind him, he could hear the curtain ripple as SH walked onto the stage. But every eye remained fixed on him.

"The same nation that stole our provinces and holds the South of Korea hostage even now. The same country that Divided us!"

"America!" a woman called in a high-pitched wavering voice, and

the cry was caught, hundreds of people screaming out the name of the country destroying theirs.

"AMERICA!" North confirmed in a shout, stepping towards the nearest veiled object, drawing the crowd his way. "The same country that did *this!"*

SH reached up from beside him, tearing the sheet away with a flourish to the gasps and cries of the audience.

North didn't look. He'd already seen the canvas.

A painting of a small rural house, with the table set for lunch, bowls of rice, kimchi, and soup next to a cup of tea with steam coming off it. Another lay cracked on the floor, the liquid inside meeting the blood soaking the edge of the canvas and sprayed across the counter. Two men stood with their boots in it, tall, fair-skinned and sharp, one blond and one brunet. The brown-haired man held a baby by the leg, his thick fingers squeezing the chubby limb hard as it wailed in silent, red-faced pain. A woman with long black hair reached desperately for him from the corner, her expression even more anguished. The men's faces were frozen in cruel half-smirks, and it was clear what was about to happen, and clear that the mother in her cheery pink apron wouldn't be able to stop it.

North took the second as SH walked to the next hidden canvas to look up towards the balcony, finding Hae with her face buried in the Premier's shoulder.

"Don't look away," he said to her and the others that instinctively closed their eyes. "Don't look away from *any* of it."

SH tore the next sheet away, revealing a row of men hanging at the ends of ropes, their faces purple and eyes bulging. Not any of those North had seen, but others.

"This is what they are doing to us," North said as SH revealed scene after scene of carnage. "And you *know* that. While no American soldier has set foot in Pyongyang for nine months, and none *ever* will again, they are still doing this to our brothers and

sister in the south, to those in their POW camps."

SH revealed a painting of a teary child in a dark tunnel, a woman curled around him, blood seeping from her slack mouth, and a foreign shadow looming in the tunnel mouth behind her with gun in hand, and another of a burning mass that a closer look revealed to be bodies in a pile. The silhouette of a man reached from it, his head tilted back to the sky, his mouth open in a scream as he burned. Dark shadows loomed around him, and an empty gasoline canister lay forgotten on the ground.

"We cannot afford to look away. Even when they can't set foot in the north, they still murder us by the thousands with their sicknesses and their bombs."

SH revealed the second-to-last painting on the far side of the stage- a person sitting upright in a chair, completely naked, though it was impossible to tell what sex they were. They were too burned. Only one bloodshot eye remained, staring out with an unfathomable amount of agony.

SH's voice was soft but clear. "The man who gave us permission to paint this passed during the sketching process."

There was a horrified realization in the eyes of a performer in front, and North nodded in grim confirmation.

"None of these paintings are fiction," he told them. "Every single one of these was painted by a artist interviewing someone who either witnessed it or spoke to survivors." He nodded to the woman covering her child. "The massacre at Nogun-ri, where American soldiers smoked cigarettes while they fired on innocent women and children for two days straight. The boy shared his story with one of our People's Army as he was escorted back to his village. He is still in the south. Haksong County, North Hamgyong province."

SH swept her red-tipped sleeve at the burning man for him.

"Twenty-eight people were dragged into the mountains and lit on fire." He turned back to the first painting. "Sincheon County. A quarter of the entire population was killed off. Sixty-eight percent

of Ryongdang-ri, eighty-seven percent of Mangung-ri, every single man in Ryangjang-ri. Pregnant women were cut open by bayonets, hundreds of civilians were locked in an air raid shelter and set on fire, peasants were dragged through the streets by wires."

For once the eyes were off him, now unable to look away from the scenes of horror. He could see Hae at the edge of the balcony, her big white eyes focused on the painting of the woman.

"And *all* of this was done by America and his puppets."

North stepped aside, putting out a hand, and SH carried a final canvas to the center of the stage, the one she had made, working determinedly alongside other artists in the Party ever since the end of August to get it done in time. Her knuckles clenched in the fabric this time before she ripped it away.

America leered out at the audience. Surrounded by darkness, he seemed to loom over the viewer, a gun clutched in one of his blood-soaked hands, droplets of scarlet falling to the forest floor. His mouth was twisted in an unnatural smile, but the single blank eye that peered through the shattered lens of his aviators was predatory. He seemed to look out at the other paintings of the horrific things his soldiers had done with unaffected emptiness.

North had already heard SH's account of her escape from the POW camp. But he grit his teeth at the reminder of what, exactly, she had been grappling with alone in the woods.

He made himself speak, facing the crowd again. "Every single action taken by the American soldiers and their puppets can find its blame at *his* feet. He and his leadership are the ones that seek to dominate our country. *They* are the ones that use the United Nations to wage war against us. *They* are the ones that send their soldiers to massacre our people and burn our land, and *they* are the only reason Korea wasn't Liberated by last Liberation Day."

He shouldn't have allowed the break last June. He shouldn't have hesitated last January.

But America shouldn't even be here.

"He is the one that Divided Korea!" North flung a hand at the painting of the country that had stolen his brother.

SH reached out, very deliberately knocking the canvas over to hide the vicious striped face before disappearing behind the curtain, leaving the spotlight on her Countryhuman again.

"But this is *our* country." North looked out at the audience, who were still staring at the paintings with rage and sickened fear.

He knew it was a risk to show them something like this on such an important day. Just what exactly America and his puppets were capable of.

But he had faith in his people.

"Do you know why we keep fighting in the face of this horror?" he asked them, stepping out farther than the scenes again. "Do you know why we keep fighting when we know that this could happen to any one of us, or those we love?"

A few gazes were torn back to his.

"Because we have been through this before." North strafed them again, meeting the understanding of women with deep wrinkles and greying hair, and men with old battle scars. "Japan has done this very thing to us. Before the Americans ever got here, the Japanese were burning our villages, raping our women, and starving our people. They sought to colonize us. And through trickery and the cowardice of the monarchy, they *succeeded.*

"Every single person here knows what it was like under Japanese Occupation. They owned every aspect of our lives. They controlled our police force, our markets, our government, and *us.* They tried to take *everything* from us. They made us bleed for over *three decades.*

"But we still fought." North raised his head, looking directly at his General. "Supreme Commander Kim Il-sung and I, and thousands of our brave men and women took up arms against the Japanese and their collaborators. And every one of us has seen something that makes it hard to sleep at night."

An endless onslaught. Corpses mutilated beyond recognition, babies that were nothing more than bundles of skin and bone, men with all their limbs severed, nothing more than stumps. That woman with her body bloodied and hollow, words carved from her twisted neck down to her empty womb.

'OBEY.'

"But we kept *fighting."* He lowered his head back to them. "We kept fighting knowing that that same thing could happen to us. We kept fighting no matter how many family members were imprisoned or killed, no matter how many of our people were cut down in cold blood for simply demanding an end to a unjust Occupation. And we will *keep* fighting now, no matter what America does to try and destroy us."

His voice grew louder, his pulse racing. "Because for a revolutionary, the blood shed by our enemy doesn't quench our fire- it only *fuels* it. We do not cower when our kin are killed- we take revenge. We do not lay down our arms when the gun turns on us. We *fight,* and if we die, we die with our weapons in hand, knowing that we gave our lives for a better world."

He stepped forward, his fists clenched. "America wants to destroy us. He wants to bring us to our knees and do exactly what Japan did- to steal our culture, our resources, and our freedom. But he isn't strong enough to do that. His army fell before ours on the way to the Raktong, and without his control of the sea, he wouldn't have been able to stop us from reaching Busan. And even with that control, even with all his planes and bombs and superior technology and violence, he still couldn't stand against us and our Chinese comrades. He isn't strong enough to break our line or recapture our capital.

"So he thinks to wear us down. He thinks that all he needs to do is burn our country to the ground, to raze our factories and our fields, to murder enough of us that we fear to fight on, that we tuck our tails between our legs and give in to his demands. He thinks that we are desperate enough to come crawling to him for a ceasefire.

“He is wrong.”

The word hit like a hammer, making a few people flinch forward, not back, excitement gleaming in their eyes.

“We are *not* desperate,” North said, beginning to pace the edge of the stage, still facing the crowd. “We have told them time and time again that if it comes to a protracted war, Korea is ready to fight it. And we are ready to *win.”*

Victory wasn’t about superior firepower or uninterrupted supply lines. It wasn’t about the number of allies or aerial control. It was about one side making enough sacrifices that they could no longer keep fighting. Under the punishing aerial and naval blitzes North and China’s armies had lost far more than the Americans and their United Nations ‘allies.’

Two hundred thousand. The PVA had crossed that number now. And North knew his own casualty reports well.

When you added in civilians, he thought the number might be in the millions.

But ‘enough’ sacrifices didn’t mean ‘the most.’ It only had to be as much as one side could bear. Like at Chorweon, the 63rd Army reduced to scraps, not inflicting half as much damage on the American division, but still coming out victorious.

And North could bear far more sacrifices than the Yankees ever could. And so could his people. They were used to being the overpowered force, the one that fought with handmade grenades and scrounged firearms while their enemy came with all the technology that stripping resources from other countries could afford. They were used to dozens giving their lives for a single objective.

They were used to the struggle. And North knew that China’s were, too.

The Americans weren’t used to struggling. They weren’t used to losing, or giving ground, or fighting *for* something. Maybe they had

been once. But not anymore.

"We fought Japan for *thirty-six years!"* he shouted. "Our soldiers grew up with *nothing.* Nothing but the belief that if they kept fighting, then one day they would *win!* And we *did.* We stood against Japan, never faltering, and we drove him and his followers from our country!

A woman in a middle row's mouth opened in a silent gasp, like she wanted to scream with triumph, but couldn't break the building tension in the theatre.

"For *thirty-six years,* Korea struggled against Japan with no state of our own, no government, no ration distribution, no standing army. Two years is *nothing."* North wheeled, the tips of his boots projecting off the edge of the stage. "Three years would be nothing. Neither would five, or ten, or twenty. Even if America's war wasn't unpopular with the rest of the world, even if he had unlimited money, weapons, and manpower, enough to keep this war going for a hundred years, we would *fight.*

"Ten, thirty-six, a hundred, a *thousand!"* North listed in a rising volume, until he was almost screaming. "Korea would keep fighting! We would fight until every single blade of grass was burned to ash, until the last person standing! Because so long as even one Korean is alive, *Korea* is alive!"

Every single person in the crowd leaned towards him, eyes catching the lights above, enraptured.

"WE WILL KEEP FIGHTING FOR AS LONG AS WE HAVE TO. WE WILL KEEP FIGHTING UNTIL WE WIN. *UNTIL KOREA IS REUNIFIED AND FREE!"*

No one could hold back now. Before North's words had even finished echoing, his people were crying out, leaping from their seats with shouts of determination and fists thrown in the air in joyous elation.

North panted lightly as he gazed out at them, finding no trace of the earlier anxiety, no hint of fear or despair.

This was what he should have done on Liberation Day. Instead he had let them stew in uncertainty and guilt because he had been afraid of what they thought of him.

But he wasn't what mattered.

"But this fight won't last that long!" he called when the roar had quieted slightly, and the hush immediately fell again, no one sitting back down, but gazing up expectantly. "It won't last for thirty-six years. It won't even last for ten. And do you know why? Do you know why the Americans will give up before then? Why Rhee's soldiers crumble and break no matter what training they are put through?"

"Why!?" a man in the back shouted.

"Because they aren't fighting *for* something," North answered fiercely. "They fight because they are told to, because their rich and powerful tell them it is right to die for conquest and capital. And if they *do* fight for something, they fight for hate.

"They *hate* us," he told them. "The reactionaries hate us because they've been told we wish to take their freedom away. And the people that told them that hate us because we *do* want to take *their* freedom away. Not their freedom to live, but their freedom to exploit others. To receive the spoils of land that they've never worked in their lives, to feast on food bought with money made off of the workers and peasants, while the people that deserve that money, that worked hard for it, *starve.* And the Yankees hate us because we aren't *them.* Because we are 'coloured,' and because we refuse to let them treat us the way they treat Africa and Latin America, and the rest of Asia. Because we won't bow.

"But *we* fight for love." North placed a hand over his heart, leaning out over the crowd. "We hate the enemy for what they've done to us, but that isn't why we fight. We fight because we *know* what it's like to have nothing. Because we know what it is to be slaves in our own nation. We fight so that no one else will ever have to experience that again. We fight so that every child will grow up with enough to eat, and never have to hear the word 'war.' So that one day every single person will be able to live a happy, prosperous

life, without fear of bombs, bullets, or swords.

"This woman, Ra Hye-in-dongji." He gestured to the canvas behind him, the one painted off of Hae's experience. "When her son was murdered, she didn't give in to despair and throw her life away. She *fought.* She eliminated the Yankee that did it so that he could never harm another woman's child again, and when she died, she gave her life so a comrade could get away.

"That is why we fight! For *love.* For love of our country, for our neighbours, for our children and children we will never meet. For their freedom and ours. And that is why we will *keep* fighting, no matter what is done to us!"

He inhaled steadily. "That is why *I* fight. Because for the first time in our history, the Korean people have a Korea that belongs to *them.* Not to any king or emperor. *You."*

Korea met the gaze of every person that he could, finding tears glistening in the eyes of miners and farmers and office workers. Of women in silks and women in cotton. Of men rough with age and fresh with vigour. People from every single facet of life, but all Korean. All his.

"And I will keep fighting for you, no matter what," Korea vowed. "No matter what is done to me."

He held a hand up under the stage light, bright white light illuminating the clean but severe burns mottling his palm and wrist.

"I promise that Korea will *never* stop fighting for his people."

It was one promise he knew could never be broken.

He swallowed. "I'm very proud of every single person that has carried us so far, through the Japanese Occupation, through the trusteeship, through the founding of our state and the building of our nation, and through this war. Of every single person that has fought in whatever way they can. It is because of all of you that I know America will *never* get what he wants. I *know* we will be Reunified and Liberated."

Heart pounding in his chest like a drum, Korea thrust his fist into the air, blood dripping from his burnt palm as he shouted, *“Long live our People’s Army! Long live our Worker’s Party and every other party fighting for freedom! Long live the peasants, workers, and intellectuals! Long live our people’s committees and Supreme People’s Assembly! Long live General Kim Il-sung!”*

He sucked in a deep breath, no longer caring about making it subtle as he screamed with every ounce of conviction in him, ***“LONG LIVE THE KOREAN PEOPLE!”***

The scream came back louder, and with no less conviction, from the throat of every man and woman, soldier and civilian.

“LONG LIVE KOREA!”

Korea's blood sang as the call was echoed over and over, “*MANSE! MANSE!”* from hundreds of throats, not a single one hesitant or afraid.

He knew his people wouldn’t give up. They wouldn’t have even if he had kept silent. But now they knew *he* wouldn’t give up either.

If there were three hundred and sixty-five days in a year, then every single one of them should be spent fighting for freedom. And if you already had it, then they should be spent fighting to *keep* it.

Korea didn’t bow. Korea didn’t grovel or beg for peace. Peace was not given- it was *won.*

And Korea didn’t give up. Not when he had people depending on him.

“MANSE!” he roared, elation thrumming through every inch of his body, driving away the prickling under his skin and almost drowning out the ache inside of him.

“MANSE!”

—

“MANSE!” China gave in to the urge to scream alongside the crowd, cupping his hands around his mouth, but still going unheard in the fervent roar of imagined victory.

North obviously didn’t hear him, just as he hadn’t seen him lurking against the wall beside the stage, even though he was on his seeing side. The Chinese Countryhuman was too concealed by the shadows and people between them, including the cameraman.

China tore his eyes away from his friend to scan the crowd, faces wizened and young, thin and thinner, lined with hardship, but all emitting the same light as they gazed up at their country with tremulous smiles and tears streaming down their cheeks, still chanting that same refrain of ‘long live’ with utter whole-hearted devotion.

It was familiar enough to send a pang through his erratically-racing heart, even as he was drawn back to North, examining his expression for any sign of arrogance as he stood above a sea of people that would do anything for him.

His friend perched on the edge of the stage, his chest heaving as he gazed out at his audience, face glowing like his snowy uniform. His mouth was open, not quite in a smile, but fangs visible, and there was a wild light in his eye.

Not the spark of power, of someone that knew he had complete control, but the same glow his people were emitting. As hard as China searched, he couldn’t see any hint of ego or smugness at the position he was in.

Instead he looked as devoted as any man on his knees before an altar.

China uttered a breathy laugh, and Liaoxi, who had looked over when he shouted, paled above her mask.

“China,” she said tightly. *“No.”*

He turned to her, smiling widely, making no effort to disguise how fast he was breathing or to slow his heartrate. “Forgetting

Zhilong-gege's name? And no what, meimei?”

“I recognize that look in your eye.”

“Zealousy,” Liaotung said dryly, her hands tucked in the pockets of her wide-legged civilian pants.

China’s smile widened further. “What’s wrong, Little Sisters? Afraid I’ll once again bleed myself dry?”

Liaoxi stared up at him, unsmiling under her mask.

“I won’t give anything I can’t afford to give,” he placated, already looking back at North.

His friend looked like he might cant directly off the stage and into the sea of people that had flooded up to its edge, crowding to be closer to him. But instead he reached down, holding out his hand to a young man in student’s attire. He didn’t hesitate to take it, the first to be hoisted onto the stage, though others followed almost immediately.

Not in an unorganized rush, trampling each other in their haste. The crowd thrummed with excitement and the kind of energy that made China’s blood hot and his feet want to paddle, but stayed organized, climbing up to join their country without pushing or shoving, moving to embrace him.

China had expected to like North once he met him, and hoped that he would. Yet it was a bit *un*expected, exactly how *much* he liked his new friend. He couldn't say he was displeased- he didn't dislike surprises.

But it did put him off when he hadn’t been able to predict something.

'I suppose this one's pleasant enough at least.'

“Well, what do you think?” he said, watching a middle-aged man help an elderly woman up next to him, assisted by a woman dressed in a simple choson-ot.

“About what?” Liaotung asked warily.

As North gave himself over to his people, disappearing into them, China looked back over to his ‘little sisters.’ The three stood alone now as those near them were drawn to the stage like moths to the sun.

“It’s obvious there’s not going to be a ceasefire anytime soon,” he said, his words harsh but tone mellow. “It might not be thirty-six or a thousand years, but I don’t think our Korean comrades are going to get the peace they want expediently. But we could.”

“You wouldn’t call the army back.” Liaotung crossed her arms. “Not now.”

“They might not go back,” China admitted. “But *we* could. We could wish our comrades a happy Foundation Day, then return to our country. It’s where we should be, after all.

“So what do you think?” He tipped his head, smiling. “Is our little adventure over?”

He made no effort to disguise what he wanted. He had already let them know. But he searched their faces just as intently as North’s.

This time his provinces didn’t look between each other before answering.

“No,” Liaoxi said confidently. “It isn’t over until we defeat our foe.”

Liaotung didn’t answer as quickly, but she still nodded. “We don’t go home until our soldiers do.”

China’s lips stretched more. “Are you sure? Even though we’re missing out on our own nation-building?

He had things to do. He should be there to observe his people’s efforts, and give a nudge when needed. To support the redistribution of land and passing of laws and peaceful settlement of their country. He should be secretly communicating with Tibet and learning sign language, finding out what art Xinjiang wanted to pursue and making sure she was happy as his ‘little sister,' and

taming Qinghai. He should take his victory in the United Nations' trial and stop risking his country.

His Chairman had reminded him of all that, though he never could've forgotten. And he had cried into his shoulder, mourning his son. China should be there to comfort him, to help him shoulder his grief.

He ached for home. For the narrow streets of Beijing and the dry deserts of Xinjiang, for the lush rainforests of the south and cold mountains of the north. For the steamed buns the woman by the water always gave him for free, and the way she always chewed him out when she found money in her pocket after he'd already left, for Jin's fried flour rolls and Shaanxi's ribbon-dancing, and for the music. China loved all music, but nothing spoke to him the way the erhu or guzheng did, especially when they were being played by people who never could have hoped to learn even four years ago.

And more than any of that, he ached for his people. For spirited political arguments over the table and entertaining street children in exchange for information, for celebrating holidays with them like this, dancing and singing in a free China at last.

He could go home tonight. He could hand North his present, promise him he had a comrade in him, and go *home.* And next month he could throw himself into his people like his friend was. He could let them bury their faces in his chest and hold his hand and dance with him until the sun came up and know that for the first time, China belonged to *them.*

He could never get this past year back. He could never get any of the years he might spend here back. His people might think they had him in Hebei.

But he knew they didn't.

His fingers brushed the waxy edge of the paper in his sleeve, and the rough jade stone, brushing over the smooth edge where part had been carved away.

"So what do you think, meimei?" he softly repeated. "Do you

want to go home?”

There was no hesitation from either of them.

“No,” Liaotung said firmly. “We need to avenge our comrades. I can’t go home and politick when I know our people are here giving their lives.”

“And I can’t accept the peace of our freedom when I know for theirs our comrades still strive,” Liaoxi agreed, and if her eyes searched the balcony for someone, well, who could blame her? “Even if you order us to go, we won’t do so.”

China searched their serious eyes, looking for some sign that they were just saying what he wanted to hear.

He didn’t find it.

Face splitting out in a grin, he burst out in a giddy laugh, reaching out and pulling them closer before they could escape, holding them tight as Liaotung struggled and Liaoxi accepted her fate.

China, still grinning, looked up from between them, catching a glimpse of North through the knot of people clinging to him. An old woman held his face in trembling hands, both her eyes and his wide and rapturous, brimming with the reason they all fought.

He could go home.

But where was the fun in that?

Mao Zedong: You promise you're coming right back after Korea's Foundation Day?

China: Yes. =‿=

Mao Zedong, knowing full well he's not going to be seeing him again anytime soon: *long-suffering sigh*

All the paintings mentioned are inspired by real reports . Though Ra Hye-in and her story are fictional, there were accounts of babies being torn from arms and thrown on the

ground in Sincheon. And when you get drenched in napalm, your body forms a black crust. Your skin is literally too crispy to move, or it will crack. An American whose unit got hit by friendly fire said his unit's skins crisped and peeled back like 'fried potato chips.' It wasn't one man or woman, but many. They would get stuck standing, sitting, or lying down, unable to move. And there wasn't any recovering.
This isn't for shock effect- it actually happened. This is what America did. And I wish all American soldiers would suffer what they put billions of others through.

Warmth

For the first time in… awhile, North's steps were light as he led his provinces back to the GAZ's hiding spot in the middle of the night. And sitting behind the wheel as they teased and chattered amongst each other didn't make him want to itch out of his skin.

It tingled instead, overstimulated from too much touching, but better than feeling like he was going to explode. The mounting pressure inside of him had been temporarily replaced by something that warmed instead of burned. He was able to drive at a steady pace through the countryside, not even begrudging too badly that his Premier had refused to let him set foot in Jonsung complex to do paperwork, telling him to get some rest instead.

North knew tomorrow would bring the prickling back, and the edges of the ache would no longer be dulled. He would have to look over budgets, examine the new damage done to Pyongyang, review casualty reports from the front, and hear more of the lies their enemy was spreading about them. By the end of it, he would be a knot of tension and fury again.

But with less guilt.

He knew he was be right. Some of his people blamed him. They had to.

But even more didn't. And once they all heard his broadcast on the radio tonight and tomorrow, they would know that he hadn't been wrong because he was overconfident or naïve- he had been wrong because he truly believed they could do it. And he knew they could have, if he hadn't hesitated.

But he had. And he knew they still could. And they would know *he* knew that. He wasn't disappointed in them, and when he looked at them, it wasn't with accusation.

It was with love.

“Koreaaaa.”

Eyelids dipping, North hummed, “Mm?”

“Say *‘Ahhhh.’”* SH reached from the back, nudging something against the corner of his mouth.

He actually opened it, before his teeth clacked shut as he shook himself, twisting to glare at her.

“Don’t patronize me.”

“Almost got you that time,” his province sighed, slumping back with an apple slice in hand. She handed it to Hae, where the fruit vanished into her mouth.

“Make sure you brush your teeth when we get back,” North ordered. He had brushed his before the speech.

“Applesh are healthy,” Hae mumbled around it.

“You still need to brush your teeth. And don’t talk with food in your mouth.”

“Guy with one eye?” South Pyongan called from the truck bed. “How about we keep it on the road? I’m way too tired to crash, and it’d probably just put you in a pissy mood again.”

She braced herself this time as North took them off-road for Jangsan in a sharp turn.

“Learn how to drive!” his province shouted cheekily.

North made sure to take every turn across the open terrain (including the ones he didn’t need to make) incredibly wide.

As they entered the trees around the mountain, the hairs on his arms started to rise, dispelling some of his lightness.

Something was wrong. His eye scanned the forest, squinting into the darkness under the trees.

There had been an ash branch hanging over the path this morning. North had driven around it, reminding himself to cut it tomorrow. It was gone now.

He tensed, debating stopping the truck. But anyone on the mountain would have already heard them coming, and if a branch was broken, whoever had come this way was likely in a truck. There were soldiers constantly patrolling the nearby road. Surely they would have spotted an enemy vehicle. Still…

"Remain on guard," he said lowly, and the provinces ceased their chatter, readying their weapons.

As they neared the clearing, North could see a dark shape though the trees, sitting crouched before the bunker where the GAZ usually went. A vehicle, like he'd guessed. And not one of theirs.

"British," North Hamgyong grunted quietly from the back. "Looks like a- Oh, *fuck* me."

"Shh!" North sharply hushed, but had already realized why his province had said that before Chagang even announced, "It's China's Jeep."

North abruptly hit the brakes, sending South Pyongan into the back of the cab on accident this time. As she grumbled to herself, he blinked, dumbstruck, as the doors on the Willys MB Jeep opened, and Liaoxi and Liaotung climbed out, yawning.

China slid out from the driver's side a second later, arching his back in a stretch.

"Oh good, you're finally back," he called, as if just noticing the GAZ idling there. "I was beginning to worry I'd have to make my dear Little Sisters sleep on the cold hard ground so I could have the bench."

Liaoxi and Liaotung side-eyed him.

"You should really have an extra set of keys made for us," their country said casually.

“Suffer,” North Hamgyong quietly grumbled.

China gave that same irritating smile as always through the windshield at North. “Well, are you going to park, or just sit there wasting gas while you stare at me?”

SH quickly leaned forward to whisper in North’s ‘ear,’ “Korea, *please* don’t run him over.”

North silently maneuvered the large Soviet-made truck into the clearing, trapping the small Jeep in, and jumped out, ordering North Hamgyong and South Pyongan to disguise it with the tarp. China had apparently brought his own, as Liaoxi and Liaotung set about doing the same to their vehicle.

The Korean didn't say a word as he passed China, unlocking the padlocks on the bunker door. He had to call Chagang twice to get him to help, and he moved like he was in a dream when he finally listened.

North would allow it tonight. He still felt light-headed.

“When did you get back?” he clipped to China, not looking at him.

“Around an hour ago,” the other country said breezily. “My Comrade Peng told me you were giving a speech tonight. I wish I’d made it in time.”

North was glad he hadn’t. It was embarrassing enough to remember there had been Chinese war correspondents watching.

He bit his tongue on the word that sat there, swallowing it as he heaved open the steel door, beckoning his provinces in, except for North Pyongan, who volunteered to keep first watch.

North watched Liaoxi look towards him, then turn for the bunker as South Pyongan loudly declared she would stay with him.

He would allow that tonight, too. Better her than the foreigner.

His provinces wished him a last happy birthday as they went to bed, Hae finally getting her hug in. As North went for his room, SH

wrapped his arm in a quick embrace from behind.

“Happy birthday, Korea,” she whispered.

“Tch.”

She chuckled, releasing him as she whisked down the hall.

North pushed open his door, immediately spotting the painting. It sat against the far wall, leaning against his bag.

A small bellflower growing out of blood-soaked, blackened soil. It radiated a subtle glow from its boldly-drawn white petals, as did the large crimson 'RESIST!' written below it.

The rough draft of one of SH's newest posters, without the *‘Made in USA’* boot hovering above.

North huffed fondly as he set his sack of letters and lantern down, deciding to scold her for getting him something tomorrow. She deserved a little leniency after he’d made her and her fellow artists scramble to make those paintings.

He turned to shut the door, then jolted, leaping across the room, almost directly into the other wall.

“No welcome back?” China said, smiling at him from just inside his room. “I would’ve expected at least the threat of having my head blown off.”

He shut the door, and North tensed, the small room suddenly feeling smaller, making his lungs tight. He couldn’t breathe until the other Countryhuman had moved away from the exit, leaving a clear path to it. North sidled slightly forward, enough that he wouldn’t have to pass China to escape.

“How did the trial go?” he asked stiffly.

“You didn’t read the Soviet transcript? Or my own aide’s?”

North had. His teeth grit.

“What happened to Song Kum-jeong?”

China shook his head ruefully. “I don’t know anything more than what happened. Guilt at seeing me, maybe?”

North scrutinized him, looking for some hint of a lie. But there was a look in his leaf-shaped eyes that made him think he truly regretted the woman’s death, even if it had been… convenient.

Perhaps America had tortured her into giving a confession. Just because it hadn’t been visible didn’t mean it didn’t happen. He doubted the American would have let anyone examine her. She could have snapped after what she’d been through, making her hurl herself down the church stairs.

Or maybe it really had been guilt as she realized she couldn’t sell out a comrade and put her country at risk of losing their biggest ally.

North would choose to believe it was that one.

“It’s probably for the best,” China said quietly. “I doubt she would have wanted to live in a world without her son.”

North wanted to protest. He didn’t. Even if he couldn’t comprehend it, with Ra Hye-in on his mind, he knew SH’s words were true.

The woman hadn't given into despair. She hadn’t let the Yankees cut her down in her neighbour’s house so she could die with her husband and child. She had kept going so she could avenge her son.

But she *had* wanted to die.

“Anyway,” China carried on into the silence. “I’ll tell you all the details tomorrow.”

“Before you leave.”

The Chinese country arched a brow. “Was that a question or a statement?”

North didn't answer. Despite the verb suffix he'd used, it was both.

"Either way, I won't be leaving tomorrow."

The Korean crossed his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to give you your birthday present," China said, which didn't answer his question. He rummaged through the bag at his side, pulling out something wrapped in red cloth. "It's past midnight now, but I think it still counts."

North eyed the package warily. "This isn't my birthday."

"Really?" China asked. "But I heard your provinces say it was. I suppose I was misinformed. Oh well. I still have your present here."

"Open it."

China sighed. "Knowing you, you'll feel better if it's in your hands."

"You don't know me," North retorted.

He cautiously took the fabric bundle and immediately realized China was right. The object inside was clearly a knife.

He unwrapped it, revealing a curved blade as long as his forearm. It was a husa knife, like China's, but with a hilt made out of silver and wrought in the shape of a tiger instead of a dragon, its pointed tail curling under it, and the blade emerging from its snarling jaws.

'What is it with people and giving me tigers?'

Then again, he *had* gone by that title. But while Gangwon knew that, China shouldn't. And when he thought about the history of the Korean tiger…

"Traditionally, the tiger is used to represent our upper-class," he said, testing him.

"Tradition bores me," China said flippantly. With a sly, knowing

smile, he added, “And that isn’t what it meant to the Japanese or your revolutionaries, is it?”

Ssi-bal.

“How do you know about that?” North demanded, receiving only another smile in answer.

Whatever. There had been bounty posters in Manchuria, too, and the name had been known by Chinese soldiers. He supposed it wasn’t too unbelievable.

Squinting critically, he turned the blade in his hands. Set in one of the silver eye sockets of the hilt was a small green stone, jade or something like it. But...

“It’s missing an eye,” he pointed out, pleased to discover a flaw.

China leaned over, examining the empty space where another jade orb should be.

“Aiya,” he said regretfully. “You’re right. Well, I suppose the road between Yunnan and Pyongyang *is* a long one. And you strike me as the type to prefer function over ornament, anyhow.”

North certainly never would have requisitioned a weapon that looked like *this,* despite how well-made he’d always thought China’s looked.

He held it on a fingertip, testing the balance, then tried to bend the blade. It was steel, with a durable spine and good flexibility, not brittle or weak. Pressing a finger to the pointed tip only needed the slightest pressure to draw blood (China *‘tsk’*ing as he did so), and the edge was equally capable of slicing his thumbpad open.

“It’s well-crafted,” he admitted, rubbing the blood from his digits before holding it out. “But I can’t accept this.”

China tipped his head. “Why not?”

North grit his teeth. *‘As if you have to ask.’*

“I can’t afford it.”

“You don’t have to afford it.”

“This is a husa knife,” North pointed out.

“En, the same as mine.” China slid the golden hilt from his long uniform sleeve for a second. “If a little less shiny.”

“Your Achang people make these using traditional forging techniques. They’re all handcrafted and unique.”

China looked a little smug. “I’ll make sure to tell them word of their craft has even spread to Korea.”

North only knew from Koreans that had operated in Yunnan in China’s factions during the Occupation. Oh Myong-nam always developed a wistful look in his eye when he spoke of the Achang’s peoples work. And how much their blades cost.

“These are expensive,” North said bluntly, still holding the blade out. “And I am at war. I can’t waste money on frivolous things.”

“I would argue that a new blade isn’t very frivolous when at war, especially when yours is starting to dull.”

North looked down at the knife on his hip. It *was* starting to wear, each sharpening session taking longer to coax a cutting edge from it. “I can get a new one from a supply sergeant.”

He’d been meaning to. He just couldn’t make himself do it when he could still get use from it.

China smiled. “And will that be before or after it lets you down on the battlefield and gets you stabbed?”

“I can’t even *go* to the battlefield right now,” North muttered resentfully.

If the break in the talks lasted any longer, that would change.

The Chinese country still made no move to take the knife back.

“You could just take this one. It wouldn’t drain your supplies. And mine have already been used on it.”

“Which is why I need to pay for it,” North stressed. “Which I can’t *do.”*

He was starting to become convinced that China was doing this just to lord his financial situation over him.

China hummed. “How very capitalistic of you to want to add a transactional quality where one doesn’t need to be.”

Irritated, North demanded, “How is it ‘capitalistic’ of me to want your people to get paid for what they made? That’s *literally* what Socialism is about."

One of China’s eyebrows rose slowly. “…They *did* get paid. I paid my friends in the Achang villages to make me a blade, so I could gift it to you. I hate that I have to ask this, but you *are* aware of the concept of a birthday present, yes?”

“I know what a birthday present is!” North snapped. He had to put up with enough of them, didn’t he?

“Then I don’t see what the problem is.” China tucked his hands inside his sleeves. “It’s already paid for, it didn’t take from your resources, and it’s not something that will just take up space.”

But it didn’t make *sense.* North people’s and provinces’ presents did, whether they felt like they should still pay tribute, just enjoyed being irritating, or… because of what Mun Guk had said. And CCCP only brought him things as bribes to convince him to join the Soviet Union. Even if he didn't like any of their motivations, they were at least understandable.

He held back his question again. He didn’t want to know what China’s answer would be.

“If anything, giving you this is a little selfish,” China continued as North glared at him. “I’d prefer knowing that the person who has my back in combat has a knife that could at least pierce paper.”

North's tension eased slightly at the sensible words. He'd always had to nag North Gyeongsang to keep his dagger sharp during their early years, worried about it failing him in combat. His argument had been that he was so uncoordinated, he'd end up tripping and impaling himself if it was sharp.

He had never forgotten to sharpen it again after his dull blade slipped off a piece of a wooden stake he was carving and almost taken his thumb off, though. North had almost beaten him when he found out it hadn't been completely severed like he'd been shouting it was.

Something panged in his chest.

Of course it would make China nervous to know the person covering him on the battlefield wasn't properly equipped. And North *did* need a new knife after over a year of engagements. And he knew he wouldn't be able to force himself to get one until it did let him down on the field. Though he *wouldn't* get stabbed.

North reluctantly drew the silver knife back to his side. "Fine. But if you expect something in exchange for this at some point, you aren't getting it."

China gave a harrowing sigh. "Even if I attempted to call in a favour for it in the future, you could just say no. You don't believe in debts after all, right?"

He smiled at him, making North *'tch.'*

The Korean slid gave the blade a last once-over, then slid it into the plain bamboo sheath it shared the cloth with.

"Another gift for you." China pulled something from his breast pocket. "Though it's more of a souvenir, and not from me."

North stared at the picture of a familiar Chinese man standing in front of a small wooden house, like those he'd seen in Chinese villages. There was a scar on his forehead, but his face was lit with a broad grin. His arm was around a woman smiling just as wide as him. She might have been solely described as comely, if it weren't

for the thick ropes of scars running down her arms and across her neck, exposed by her light blouse. Her colouring couldn't be known for certain in the black-and-white photograph, but North knew she had hair like the night sky and eyes like the clear waters in the mountains that reflect the moon.

"Comrade Yao Song received a medical discharge," China told him. "His center of balance didn't come back after that head injury. But I think he's doing well enough."

North unrolled the small scrap of paper that came with the photo, seeing that information there, along with an announcement that Yao Song and Li Meihua were getting married on their National Day next month, a wish for a happy Foundation Day for the Korean, as well as a near victory, and a few lines of prose. The same poem he'd recited in the trenches.

North couldn't make himself reread the words before he slid the photograph and paper into his own pocket. He remembered them too well already.

'This time I hope to be the hand in a foreign land.'

It should have been Meng Yuyu that took this photo.

"When are you leaving?"

"In a few seconds," China replied. "Unless you want to let me sleep over. I think your large green province is thinking about killing me in my sleep."

"I meant when are you leaving for your country?"

China smiled. "I'm not."

North opened his mouth, then closed it, looking away. "You should."

"Probably," the other Countryhuman agreed. "But I still owe your people. And I'd hate to leave you with no one to annoy you."

Maybe it was because North still felt too light from earlier, but he

couldn't work up the energy to shout at him. His hand tightened on the knife sheath.

"We… aren't going to be able to Liberate my country militarily." His chest clenched as he admitted it out loud so frankly. No shouting, no emotions running high. Just that cold, terrible fact.

"Not for awhile, at least," China acknowledged.

"And there isn't going to be a ceasefire anytime soon. They'll never accept our proposals, and they'll never propose anything we can accept."

"It's looking that way."

North met his eyes. "It's going to be a long war."

Smiling, China said, "Then it's a good thing you'll have good company."

The Korean country looked away, crossing his arms over his chest, gripping the knife tighter.

What was he supposed to say to that?

Words rose in his throat, but he choked them back. He wasn't grateful that China was risking his own people's safety for his.

But for some reason, he also wasn't trying to scare him away again.

—

With her teeth brushed and her pajamas on, Hae skipped merrily down the hall to Korea's room, not hesitatin' even a second before pushing open the big heavy door.

She caught a glimpse of Korea standing there all awkward-like before all of a sudden he was on the other side of the room.

"How many times have I told you to knock?!" he hissed, shoulders up like a cat's hackles. She'd always thought he looked

real cute when he did that, but knew that probably wasn't what he was goin' for.

"Oops, sorry," Hae chirped, even though she didn't know why he looked so embarrassed. He wasn't changing this time or anythin'. He was just standing there with Comrade Mao Zhilong, and not even too close, either. He'd been keeping the same distance Hae did from North Hamgyong when he came home from workin' on cars all sweaty and gross.

Hae also got all sweaty and gross working in the fields. But soil smelled good- engine grease didn't.

"Don't leave and knock now," Korea grumbled, makin' her stop doing exactly that. "What do you want?"

Hae eyed Mao Zhilong, standin' there all innocent.

"Hello, Little Tiger," he said, smiling at her. "I see you wore that blush you found tonight. You look lovelier than ever."

Hae knew he'd been the one to put it in her hand. But if she told him that, then she'd have to admit she'd accepted something from him. And even if Korea said it wasn't a bribe and she could keep it, she didn't want to do that.

But the compliment still made her happy. Both her cheeks were all burnt up now, but she'd overcome it by putting the pink blush on her bandages. Pyo said it looked like she was bleedin' pink, but she thought it looked real cute.

"Thank ya!" she chirped, then narrowed her eyes. "But you're not sleepin' with Korea tonight. Ah am."

"*Why* would he be sleeping with me?" Korea demanded aggressively. "And who said *you* were sleeping with me?"

"Oh, sorry." Hae looked at her Countryhuman, widening her eyes and battin' her lashes. "Korea can ah please sleep with you tonight?"

He glanced at Mao Zhilong. "No. You get out of here."

He was talking to him, not her.

'Hehe.'

"Very well," Mao Zhilong sighed, trudging for the door. "My hopes for a sleepover go unfulfilled for another day. Sleep well, Little Tiger. And happy birthday, comrade."

Korea looked away from his smile, and Hae happily shut the door behind the foreign guy.

"Korea," she said, turnin' to him, hands behind her back as she looked up from under her lashes. "Can ah *pleeeeease* sleep with you tonight?"

"We are at war," he said sternly. "A soldier shouldn't be asking to share a room with their commanding officer."

Hae pouted. "But we all used to sleep together durin' the Occupation."

"We slept beside each other because we had no choice," Korea corrected. "Now we do."

The province's lower lip pushed out as she moved her shoulders side to side, lookin' up at him hopefully.

He gave a big ol' sigh. "Fine. But let me get changed first."

Hae beamed, darting into the hall to wait, grinning wider when the lock didn't clang behind her.

Victory! She'd had an entire list of reasons he should let her cuddle with him tonight- it was his birthday, she was in a lot'a pain, she'd been workin' real hard on the harvest lately. But she'd had hope she wouldn't need them.

Korea always got a li'l loopy after letting their people love on him. SH said he was 'blissed out,' which was one of those things Hae didn't repeat 'cuz she thought it might get her cousin in trouble and might make Korea try to be less loopy, like she'd been worried talking to China might do.

But nope! He was still calm enough to let her back in when he was in his pajamas (undershirt and pants that looked the exact same).

Hae waved at the end of the hall where Mao Zhilong was lurkin' first. She really didn't dislike him. He'd given her candy and blush after all. She just had to be extra careful not to let herself get bribed.

She bounced into Korea's room, watching him arrange the bulgin' sack of letters with his bag.

"Can ah read the letters from everyone?" Hae asked.

"We'll go through them tomorrow night," Korea said. "With the postal service interrupted, the ones from North Hamgyong and Chagang won't get here for a few more days. We'll finish as many of these as possible and start fixing any complaints before then."

Hae nodded happily as Korea finished squishin' his stuff into the corner. Her smile fell as she saw SH's painting sitting with it.

It wasn't that she didn't like it. She liked it a lot more than the other ones she'd been painting lately. There was less blood.

She just…

Hae shook herself. Korea was lettin' her sleep with him! So she should be happy.

Even if she had to tell him something she knew would make her *un*happy, she should be cheerful until then.

"I don't see why you want to sleep in here," Korea was mutterin' as he looked at his bedroll. "You didn't even want to go into the bunker in the first place. And this is worse."

His room really was tiny. If two'a Hae laid down on the concrete floor, she could almost reach wall-to-wall.

"It doesn't bother me if ah'm with you, Korea," she said sincerely.

“Go to sleep,” he mumbled, laying down on the floor. Right on it.

Hae pouted. “Korea, ah don’t want to take your bed. We can share.”

She didn’t mind stealin’ all the blankets ‘cuz Korea didn’t like them anyhow. And because she did it on accident. Usually. But she’d feel bad if he got back problems because of her.

“No,” he denied her. “Lay down so I can turn off the light. And if I wake up with you off of the bedroll and clinging to me, I will suffocate you.”

Hae beamed. But he wouldn’t forbid her from sleepin’ in his room again.

She vibrated in place, then threw herself at him, unable to help herself. Korea *‘oof’*ed as she buried her face in his chest.

“What are you doing?” he growled, trying to pry her off. “What’s wrong with you?”

Hae wanted to tell him she was just glad he was happy again- Okay, maybe not happy. She knew Korea wouldn’t be happy until the war was over and the Southern One was back (for some reason).

But she was glad he was acting more like himself, instead of all tense and distant. Hwang called him ‘avoidant’ when he got like that. Hae didn’t like that word one bit. The only other time she’d really seen Korea like that was after Seodaemun, beatin’ himself up over things he couldn't change.

But now he was back to talking to folks and cheerin’ everyone up, which meant he was back to normal amounts of tense. He *wasn't* distant. Korea was just like that.

Hae knew celebratin’ with their people would fix him up. It always did. Which was why she didn’t get why he didn’t on Liberation Day. SH said not to ask, though, so she wouldn’t.

She knew he’d get mad if she told him that was why she was so happy, though, so she just nuzzled him harder, until she got a whiff

of his Korea-smell through the burnt meat smell.

She inhaled real deep until Korea actually put effort into gettin' her off him.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop sniffing me?" he demanded. "Knock on doors before you enter and don't sniff me."

"Okay!" Hae said, even though she knew both things would probably happen again.

Korea knew, too, 'cuz he huffed grumpily before reaching to turn off the lamp. Hae dove for the bedroll before he could, snugglin' in just as the room went dark.

'Click!' and then it was the two of them in the dark. The really small, tiny dark. Even smaller than Korea's storage room. Even smaller than-

'Nope!' Hae shut her eyes, tryin' to let the good dark scare away the bad thoughts.

It wasn't as easy as it used to be.

Soft weepin' in the streets and that small 'pop' from the grenade. The choking smell of gasoline and the wet *'shnk'* sound that nail made as she pulled it out of Kim Moon-sik's skull, the feeling reverberating up her arm and into her head, hammering itself even deeper to her.

Hae took a deep breath, like Kang said to do, letting the new air in her lungs wash away all the stale stuff, makin' her feel a li'l less heavy.

"Korea," she said quietly when she was ready. "Ah want ta go back to Sincheon."

He was quiet for a moment while Hae's heart played drums in her chest.

"Why?" he asked eventually, in the way he did when he was lookin' for an answer in particular.

"'Cuz… Ah think ah should." She fidgeted with her fingers. "Ah'm their province, so ah should be there for 'em."

Like Korea. The theatre had felt real dark before he came out, even with all the dancing and singin'. People had been scared and worried.

But that had all gone away once Korea gave his speech, and let them touch him. Everyone that left the theatre had either been cryin' good tears or as loopy as Korea as they wandered home. No one was thinking about all the awful stuff they'd seen in the paintings or the real things that happened to them. And they weren't thinking about 'Merica or the Southern One, either. Just about winnin'. Korea fixed them the same way they fixed him.

Hae knew she couldn't do the exact same thing as him. But he did always send her when he wanted someone cheered up. She could try and do that in Sincheon.

"Hwang said he'd go for me," she said. "But…"

She hadn't seen that painting of Ra Hye-in before tonight, even though she was the one that gave the instructions to the painter, telling him what she'd been told by everyone in Sincheon and Hye-in herself. She hadn't wanted to.

But Ra Hye-in hadn't looked away. She hadn't killed herself or put her head down and hid until the reactionaries were gone. She'd *fought,* and took out that guy herself. And she hadn't ran when she got the chance. She'd helped Hae, even though the province didn't want her to.

And Korea hadn't hid today, even though she knew he wanted to. Korea didn't hide. He faced things because him and Ra Hye-in were both brave. And Hwang was brave for leaving Hae in Sincheon and helpin' Sok-young and making that broadcast an' going all the way to Chongjin by himself, and offerin' to go back for her.

Hae had to be brave, too.

"Ah can't look away."

“No,” Korea said after a moment. “You can’t.”

Hae squeezed her eyes shut tighter. “Will you come with me? Please?”

“Yes. I need to.”

She relaxed a li’l. “And… can ya tell me ah’m doin’ the right thing, Korea?”

“You know you are,” he replied. “You don’t need me to tell you.”

“It’d make me feel better.”

He sighed. “You’re doing the right thing, South Hwanghae. Our people need to see you.”

“Mhm.” His words gave her the courage to open her eyes just a bit. The pitch dark seemed a li’l warmer.

But it was still dark.

Hae inched sideways, until half of her was off the bedroll and pressed against Korea’s side. He tensed, but she could tell he was still feeling loose because he didn’t push her away or noth- anythin’.

He was warm and solid, and even though he breathed so light she couldn’t hear it, she could feel his heartbeat through where they were pressed together, like she’d been able to the day he put her on his back and carried her up out of the hole.

“Thank you for comin’ to get me, Korea,” she whispered. “Happy birthday.”

He didn’t answer the words she said next, ‘cuz he never did. All he said was, “Still not my birthday,” all grumbly.

Hae was okay with that. Korea didn’t need to answer, because he was letting her sleep by his side and not lettin’ her face Sincheon alone. He was warm and brightened up the dark for her, just like the sun. And even if the sun was a li’l distant sometimes, it always came back.

Hae snuggled happily into her Countryhuman, wrappin' her arms around herself.

Even if going to Sincheon brought all the dark thoughts back and made her dreams bad again, she could face it, as long as she had her Sun to burn them away after.

My babiessss <3

CCCP: And for you, son, a hat, since you never wear one in winter and I wish for you to be warm.

North: I Won't Play Your Sick Games, Old Man.

CCCP does want him to join him, but he doesn't try to bribe him. He just sees it as a foregone conclusion. His gifts are given with good intent, but North is always thinking, 'Another bribe... Will his despicable tactics never cease?' The only reason he accepts food from him is because the provinces unionized so they could finally eat food that wasn't cooked like they were still at active war.

White Masks

1913

"Now let's see how pretty you sing when we're alone."

South felt the prick of something cold through his shirt, and froze in his struggling, his back pressed to the guard's chest as he dragged him out the door. Did that mean what he thought it did?

'No no no nononononono-'

They hadn't even been trying to escape this time, he'd just been singing for North and they'd tried to run when the door had opened, they wouldn't have if the guards had just left them alone and-

His eyes went to his brother, who was on the floor, still clutching his wrist.

'Help!'

Something in North's expression broke, his eyes widening as anger flooded him and his bloody lips peeled back from his teeth, going from furious to enraged.

Suddenly South was on the floor as his brother barrelled into the man, driving his head into the doorframe with a *'crack!'*

South went scrambling back as North, instead of shoving the guard out of the shack, dragged him in.

'No! Get him out!' he wanted to shout, but instead he blurted, "North! He has a knife!"

His brother seemed to know because as the two went tumbling to the floor, rolling around, he was reaching a small white hand for it. The man struck out, but North caught his wrist, teeth bared as he

tried to stop the knife from cutting his throat.

South wanted to move, to try and help his brother, but he couldn't, frozen in place. He hid his face, unable to watch.

'Please God, help him, don't let him die, please don't let him-'

There was a pained yelp, a clatter, a cry from his brother that was almost exultive, and South quickly looked up to see him diving for the blade as it skittered across the floor. His injured hand gripped it tight, and his eyes lit up before the guard grabbed his ankle, yanking him back.

North's jaw smashed into the floor, making South wince, but he didn't seem to care, letting the man pull him back, twisting to lash out with the little blade.

He must have hit because the man shouted, jerking back, and South caught a glimpse of red on his face before his brother was on him, driving him back, straddling him as he stabbed down with the knife over and over.

The guard's shouts of anger turned to pained cries, like the sounds South and North had made earlier as he beat them. South wanted to cover his head, but he still couldn't move, watching droplets of blood spatter the floor.

He recognized that look in his brother's eyes, vicious and determined, the same one he'd had as he had smashed that Japanese that tried to drag South down from the tree into the stones outside.

Then suddenly there was blood, more than the droplets, spraying out across the room, across North. South pressed himself further into the corner, praying it wouldn't hit him, too, as the man's screaming turned to choking gurgles, convulsing under his brother.

Instead of apologizing or falling back as he realized what he'd done, North gripped him tight with his knees, plunging the knife into his neck again, before with one last burst of strength, the guard jerked sideways, and he went tumbling across the floor.

The man stopped twitching, going as still as South and the guards in the doorway. North was the only one still moving, forcing himself onto his knees, still gripping tightly to the knife.

His eyes went straight to South. Blood dripped down from his chin.

South feared he might throw himself at the other two men, but instead he started to spit and retch. The saliva that came from his lips was just as red as the blood.

He must want water. But South couldn't even make himself look at the bucket in the corner, let alone move to it. His eyes were locked on his brother, and the man he had killed.

"Stop fucking *looking* at me!" North suddenly screamed, not at him. There was a wild, unsteady light in his eyes as he glared up at the remaining guards.

One stepped forward, lifting his baton, and South's heart sank.

But the other one stopped his friend, curling his lip at South and his brother. "Bad day for you, chosenjin- Japan-sama's already in the country."

Now South's heart froze like the rest of him as a whimper left his lips.

'No please, not again, please no-'

Usually they got at least a few days between the beating from the guards and the beating from Japan, at least a little chance to recover.

North launched himself at them, slamming into the closed door instead. But it didn't stop him. He banged and hammered on it with his fists, probably hurting his wrist even more, but it didn't even show on his face. His eyes were still alight with that vicious look and South thought he might claw the doors to splinters if he had to.

And then what? He spilled outside and the guards beat him again. And then he'd be even more beat up by the time Japan was down

with them.

"North," South croaked, and his brother immediately stopped, turning to him, chest heaving.

"Are you okay?" North demanded, striding towards him.

South liked the way he always asked, even though he knew the answer. But this time as he asked the words, all he could see was the red staining his teeth, lining his gums.

His brother reached for him, like always. He was still holding the knife. Blood dripped from his hands. It was caked under his nails and ground into the lines on his palms.

South couldn't help it. He flinched.

North stopped, confusion flickering in his eyes. He looked down at his hands, like he hadn't even realized he was covered in someone's life. He clenched his fists like he was imagining killing another Jap, before tucking the knife away and wiping his hands on his pants.

The blood only smeared around, leaving bloody handprints on the thin fabric.

"Sorry," his brother said, and something in his voice made South finally unfreeze, shame flooding him.

"No, I'm sorry." He steeled himself, making himself take his brother's bloodstained hands, even though it left his own wet and warm. "It's not like I have to worry about you getting my shirt dirty."

He smiled, hoping the joke was good enough to convince his brother that was the real reason. He tried to pretend it was.

"At least once Japan's done punishing us, you might get some new clothes again," he added. "Like- Like last time."

His words fell flat as he remembered his brother being tossed back into the shack after having been forced to listen to him snarl

and cry out as he was beat by four men outside. The little spot of blood on his sleeve that wasn't his.

Their clothes could be soaked in their own blood, torn to shreds and grimy with dirt. But the second his brother had gotten Japanese blood on him, he was allowed new ones.

North got up, and South eyed him, fearful that he'd go for the door again. But instead he went to the water bucket, bringing it back.

"You should drink," he said, his voice raspier than usual as he broke the ice.

South thought of the red lining his teeth. "Don't you-"

"I'm fine. They might do something to make sure we can't get any more snow."

That was true. And North didn't get thirsty the same way South did.

And he didn't seem to mind the taste of blood.

"Thanks." South drank the last sip of meltwater, feeling more ashamed than before. "And thanks for... stopping him."

He kept his eyes on the floorboards, trying not to look at the corpse in their prison.

His brother nodded, sitting next to him, exhaling steadily. South bet he'd gotten his ribs broken again.

He didn't want to get any more blood on him, but he wanted to be close to his other half. So he leaned into him, feeling the drying blood on his brother's side soak into his shirt. He tried not to shudder as North rubbed a bloody hand over his back, the liquid clinging unpleasantly to the fabric, heavy and chill in the freezing air.

He did his best not to look at the body, at the little cut that scored down his cheek from North's first blow, and the blood congealing

on their floor, seeping down into the cracks. Or at the man's eyes, glazed over.

But he was looking at South, almost accusingly, like he was blaming him for not stopping his brother.

'What was I supposed to do?' he cried out in his head. Out of all the times they'd wrestled, South had never even won once.

'Something,' the man seemed to say. *'Something to save me.'*

'You deserved it. You hurt us. You were going to hurt me more.'

'Something to stop your brother from becoming a murderer.'

South squeezed his eyes shut, pressing closer to his brother.

'He already was.'

The last two times had been different. The first time had been so quick. South had felt that hand on his ankle, then suddenly it was gone, and he'd looked down to catch just a glimpse as North smashed the man's head into the cobbles that final time. Then he'd had to keep climbing, like his brother told him to.

And he hadn't even seen the second one. They'd been cut off from the gates by five whole men, and when it was clear they couldn't get out any other way, North had driven him back towards the shack to make a stand in the doorway.

South could still remember the heavyset man trying to force his way in to him, how his dark eyes had suddenly widened as North got back up to drag him back, even though he was far tinier. There had been that commotion around the corner of the door that South couldn't see, then that awful *'crack.'*

But this time, there was no way to get around it, no way to pretend maybe it was only a concussion or something else, that Japan was just lying or being dramatic when he said they were being beaten for killing 'Japan's followers.'

North had killed someone. Three people. South knew they

deserved it, especially this guy, but still... Wasn't killing bad, no matter what?

His brother's eyes were focused on the corpse, his face blank. What was he thinking?

'Probably that it felt good.'

Oh, they were *so* going to be haunted now.

"North," South whispered. "When Japan comes, are you going to try and use that knife on him?"

"Yes," he said, not looking away from the man he'd killed.

"Can you... please not?"

"What?" Now his other half tore his gaze from the corpse.

"If you attack Japan, it's just going to make him more... angry." That wasn't really the word for it. The Countryhuman didn't really *get* angry. He just got more violent. "And he's already going to be mad enough."

"I can't just sit back and *let* him beat us," North growled. There was still red on his teeth.

"You're already injured, and we haven't had enough food and water in awhile." Their last meager portion of grain sat heavy in South's stomach. "It won't work."

"The longer we stay in here, the weaker we'll get," North retorted. "Attacking Japan has never worked before because he's bigger than us, and stronger. But *this-"*

His hand went to the knife in his belt, touching it almost reverently.

"Is an equalizer." His eyes gleamed with excitement. "It gives us a *chance."*

A chance for what? If North killed Japan... South couldn't say it

would be a bad thing, but the punishment after would be. If the beating for killing a random guy was painful, then the one for killing the Countryhuman himself that the Japanese outside spoke with so much reverence about, would be excruciating.

They might even be executed.

But South knew his brother had set his mind on it, so he only lowered his eyes. "Alright. But please try not to get knocked out again. It really scared me that last time."

His brother's hand clenched on the blade, his gaze returning to the dead man. "If it works, then neither of us will ever be knocked out again. And I'll never let you be scared ever again."

A life without fear. That sounded nice. South couldn't even imagine it.

"Hey." He sat up. His brother's hand grasped for him again before returning to his lap. "Smile."

"What is there to smile about?" North asked irritably.

"We're together," South said, lips turning up despite himself. "And you've got blood on your teeth. I want to get it off."

It took a little bit of cajoling (and sticking his fingers in his brother's mouth), but eventually South got him to show off his teeth. He sat up on his knees so he could reach them with the hem of his shirt, rubbing at one of North's fangs with it.

"Your shirt tastes awful," his brother grumbled around it.

"That's the taste of a year's worth of sweat, brother," South said cheerily, trying not to think about what was coming soon.

It could have been more years' worth. But North had given him the new clothes he'd gotten last time. His own shirt probably tasted like... Well, three years of blood, sweat, tears, and other fluids was worse than one.

North made a face as he swiped the fabric over his gumline,

trying to get every last trace of Japanese blood off. "And now you'll have saliva on it."

Honestly, South probably already did. He'd thrown up a few times from being kicked so hard in the stomach, and he was kind of a... moist crier.

"Well, hopefully Japan will get us both new shirts now, too." He gestured to his matching bloodstained clothes with his free hand before using it to cup his brother's chin. "Now stop talking, you're making this hard."

North nipped at his finger with his non-pointy teeth, making South giggle, despite knowing that in a few more hours, maybe even minutes, they'd be cleaning more blood from each other.

He tried not to think about the looming threat of Japan or the body in the corner or the blood on his brother's hands. None of it mattered. When it was over, they'd still have each other. South knew his brother had killed those people to protect him.

And he knew that the blood on North's teeth would never be *his*.

—

1951

North was almost thankful to hear that Kaesong had been strafed by an enemy plane again. It allowed him to launch immediately into work, breaking out of the awkward state he'd been in since waking up and having to face China after the... embarrassment of last night.

He took the initiative immediately, demanding an investigation that very day while the sun was still out, sending the letter personally so that the matter would be taken more seriously. The United Nations sent investigators, and they were able to take a good look at the machine gun slugs peppering the dust and the sides and roofs of houses. And still-

North slammed out of the Signals Headquarters, fuming.

"No such luck?" China asked as he stormed past him, away from the camouflaged building.

"What do you think?" the Korean snapped back.

"I think they probably said the results were inconclusive, and they have no way of proving whether it was one of our planes or theirs." China kept pace with him as they returned to the city proper. "Though I suspect they're leaning towards 'ours.'"

"It was a damn B-26," North growled. "My civilians *heard* it strafe their houses."

Any lightness he had been feeling last night was long gone, replaced by that prickling fury again, as he'd known would happen. Already he couldn't remember what relief felt like.

"Ah, but you forget," China said lightly. "Communists are tricksy and can't be trusted."

"That description fits *one* of us," North muttered, side-eyeing him.

"Aiya, I'm not twenty-four hours back and you're already being cruel to me," the other country sighed. "Remind me why I came back at all?"

"I don't know," the Korean grumbled. He rubbed a hand down his face, then shook his head. "Tell me about the trial."

"We could discuss it over rations later," China suggested.

North wasn't eating his today. He needed them for something else.

"I'm leaving for Tosan soon," he said instead.

Raising a brow, China said, "That's near the front. Not planning on running off on your own to fight again, are you?"

North glared at him. "I have an issue to resolve."

"What kind of issue?"

One of the ones from his letters. North had woken up earlier than usual to scour them for complaints, and was pleased to find that the people that hadn't handed them to him directly were more willing to give him something other than praise and well-wishes. He had already sent his Provincehumans off to their provinces to resolve those they could.

He was *less* pleased by what some of the complaints were about. Some soldiers in the KPA responsible for recruitment had been beating civilians to coerce them into joining. With how many new recruits there were, and how desperately the front and coastal divisions needed them, they weren't getting proper ideological training, leading them to commit anti-people acts, thinking they were doing the right thing, or just revelling in the power a uniform gave them. It was more common in small localities like Tosan, with less Party and Civil Affairs oversight.

It couldn't be allowed to stand. The reactionaries were the ones that needed to wield violence to conscript soldiers. How many stories of that had they encountered on the way south? And how many of their men had been stolen away when they retreated from the north?

The People's Army had to be for the people. The fish couldn't live without its stream. While they needed more manpower, it would be easy to get, so long as the recruiters impressed upon their targets the wicked goals of the enemy, the destruction they'd already visited upon them, and that the KPA was fighting for *them.* None of which beating them in the street contributed to.

Despite how irritated he was, North was gladdened that someone had written to him, knowing he would help. It meant that they knew the criminals were aberrant elements, and not operating with permission. He was looking forward to finally having a problem he could solve.

And to showing those idiots that there was always a more decorated uniform.

He had no desire to inform China of his internal affairs. Or have him tail him to the front to visit his soldiers after.

"It's none of your business," he clipped.

The other Countryhuman pushed out his lower lip in a way that North felt was purposefully mirroring Hae. "Does that mean you're leaving me behind so soon?"

"Yes. So hurry up and tell me about the trial."

China sighed, but followed him to the bank of the Taedong below the brown slope of Moran Hill, where no passerby would overhear. North had to deal with him getting comfortable for a whole minute, folding his legs under him like an old man about to tell a story.

"Do you have any wine?" he asked, smacking his lips.

North sent him a death glare.

"Fine," China sighed. "Youth these days."

As he launched into his account of the United Nations trial, North listened carefully, refusing to sit down.

The vote had been supposed to be a closed session, with the contents shared only between the delegates and their leaders. But both Wu Xinquan and Yakov Malik had sent their transcripts of the meeting to North and his Premier, since Korea was involved. He listened now for any differences in their accounts and that of the Countryhuman before him, especially when it came to the parts involving Song Kum-jeong.

But through China's far more grandiose way of speaking, and his peppering in of self-flattery, North found there were none. It all matched. No one had seen anyone approach her, no one had seen her move. Before her outburst she had been quiet and meek. The only detail China added was that she looked at him with shame.

"How did you hear about her death, by the way?" China asked when he was done. "I had to send Comrade Wu to find out what befell her, and he didn't until after he wrote you."

"Yakov Malik told me in his letter," North grunted. "He did the same thing."

Thankfully. Otherwise, the United Nations might have buried her entirely.

"I see. And did the Soviets say anything else to you about it?"

"No." CCCP had only said in his note that he was 'remorseful' America's actions had led to the death of another of North's people.

"Hm," China hummed thoughtfully. "I can't think of anyone else that would want to help me out. Perhaps Yugoslavia. But I don't see how he would've. I didn't take my eyes off her for more than a few seconds."

No matter how North looked at it, it didn't seem like China had anything to do with her death. *If* he was telling the truth.

Would he kill one of North's people to save his own country? North... would, if their positions were reversed. Nothing was more important than his people and country.

Still, he knew he would despise the other Countryhuman if he did the same. And he knew he would.

"Regardless, I'm at least partially to blame." China's voice drew North's attention back, softer. "She wouldn't have been there if I hadn't revealed myself to her."

He looked North in the eyes, unsmiling. "I'm sorry, Chaoxian. I would have brought her home for you if I could've."

North looked away, out at the low grey-green river water as it flowed slowly by at their feet, running his thumb over the silver tiger hilt at his waist.

"You aren't to blame," he muttered after a moment. "America is. I should be able to have whoever I want in my own damn country."

Not that he *did* want China here.

"That trial shouldn't have taken place at all."

And Song Kum-jeong should have been safe in Seoul with her son,

the flag of the DPRK flying over the City Hall. The war should have been over.

North grit his teeth, refusing to let the thought rotate obsessively in his mind again.

The war wasn't over because of America. It had started because of America.

And Song Kum-jeong was dead because of America.

"En," China said quietly, smiling again as he gazed across the river.

North didn't like the atmosphere that had settled over them. His voice sounded too loud as he asked, "And they didn't try to hold you there for interrogation after it was done?"

China shook his head, accepting his subject change. "My aides gave short statements while I had a little conversation with America."

North's eye widened, but China continued as if he didn't notice.

"But they didn't seem so eager to conduct any follow-up calls or question me. I think the United Nations was more than willing to pass the whole thing off as solely a suicide."

"Did you say you had a private conversation with America?" North cut in.

"I didn't tell you?" China thought for a moment. "Ah. I suppose I didn't."

"What did he say? What happened?"

"Not much," the Chinese Countryhuman said flippantly, as if he hadn't had a personal conversation with the country that was bombing North's and killing their people by the hundreds of thousands. "We mostly just traded barbs."

"Did he say anything important?" North demanded.

"Mmmm." China tilted his head. "I got the feeling he doesn't often say anything important. You've met him before, haven't you?"

Only when he had Divided Korea six years and one day ago. North had (grudgingly) invited America and Douglas MacArthur to his first Foundation Day as a gesture of goodwill, but both of them had turned it down without reply. Even when his representatives had gone, he'd never been invited to any of the United Nations discussions during the trusteeship. He had been told that inviting one Korea over the other would show bias in their decision-making. And America had said that South didn't want to attend.

North knew he was lying. His brother wouldn't have passed up the chance to see him. Even after their... less than pleasant parting and their silence at Division.

*'**Life** is a game. And I just won another round.'*

North's teeth ground together, feeling that same hot rage as he'd felt back then boiling in his veins. The way America had smirked at him, knowing there was nothing he could do to stop what was about to happen, even though North *knew* he could have taken him, even in the body of a child. He'd taken on Japan, after all. The only thing stopping him from keeping his brother were politics.

'Stick with me, kid, and you're gonna do great things.'

No. America hadn't said much of anything important.

"I did consider killing him," China said conversationally. "But I decided the cost might not be worth the satisfaction. I'm sure you know what I mean."

North slid a glance at him. The other country was still sitting cross-legged, and his smile was neutral.

Did he...?

No. No one should know about Japan but his Premier, his provinces, and South. Even if America had had it Commanded out of the southern provinces or heard it from Japan himself, he wouldn't have told China.

"Killing him wouldn't solve anything," North said decisively. "It would only get an atom bomb dropped on my country."

"And likely mine and our Soviet comrade's," China agreed. "So I kept it to civil conversation, more or less. I doubt you'd find it interesting. He didn't even slander your country very much- most of his insults were slung at me. Though he did call you my 'little commie pal,' which I enjoyed."

He smiled up at him. North grimaced, making the Chinese country nod. "Just more nonsense, really."

'Nonsense.' Like the letter North had refused to read in Gyeongmudae.

"Is that everything then?"

China dipped his head. "Everything important. I'm sure you made the same observations I did- Yugoslavia's dislike of CCCP hasn't made him completely unprincipled, it might be worth it to establish deeper ties with India, the rest of the United Nations is less-than-enthusiastic about the chance of a war with me, and there's a bit of a schism between Britain and America."

"I wouldn't count on that for anything," North dismissed. "Any friction between them is probably personal. They're both allied empires- they'll never truly split when it comes to politics. If America decides to go to war with you, the United Kingdom will join."

"Mm, family matters, most likely," China agreed. "Tricky, aren't they?"

North glowered.

"That's why I don't have any," the other country said. "But it could be fun to poke our antagonist over them. And don't worry about a war against me- the world has decided China is innocent."

He fluttered his long lashes in a way that was probably supposed to match that.

"And if America fabricates more proof?" North demanded. "What then?"

"Then I disprove that, too. At the cost of going to London again." China made a face. "But regardless, my country will be fine."

North couldn't whole-heartedly believe that. He knew America wouldn't give up on war with China.

'Life is a game. And I just won another round.'

Countries like that, *people* like that, didn't take losing well. And if Song Kum-jeong hadn't given into her conscience...

"Just be careful."

China smiled. "Is that an order?"

"Yes," North replied gruffly.

"Then I suppose I have to be." China stretched as he stood, unfolding his long legs.

"I'm leaving now." North spun on a heel, halting as China called after him.

"One more thing," he said, seriously enough that the Korean looked back. He wasn't smiling, making him face him fully. "If America told you a joke, would you find it funny? This is a serious question."

Doubting that, North replied, "No."

"Even if you had a sense of humour?"

The Korean glared. *"No."*

He *did* have a sense of humour, but even if it matched America's exactly, he would never find it in words coming from the country that was destroying his and massacring his people.

China nodded decisively. "Neither would I. Not with sincerity,

anyhow."

"Is there a point to this?"

"My impression of America is that he's the type of person to change his attitude on a whim," China answered. "I think he's the sort to sabotage his own long-term plans if he sees something he wants more in the moment. That could work out well for us, or very, *very* poorly."

If he set his sights on something or someone else, he might move on from China- and so from Korea- or at least stop screwing around when it came to the talks. Or...

North felt a chill run down his spine.

China nodded gravely. "We're his goal right now. I would say the 'restraint' he's shown so far is because he doesn't want to irradiate his future resource hubs. But the prize he truly wants is CCCP. If he decides this plan has hit too many snags-"

"He might decide to abandon it," North said grimly.

"And I doubt he would want to go out on a loss. I got the feeling he doesn't take those gracefully." The Chinese country tilted his head. "Of course, few people do. But there's a difference between disdaining losing because of what it means for your goals and the people depending on them, and simply being upset that someone ruined your fun. I suspect America is the latter."

China lowered his voice for his next words, his eyes narrowed.

"And countries like that are dangerous."

—

South paced back and forth in the parlour, waiting for the sound of the front door flying open.

Every step make his skin chafe painfully against the soft white cotton of his jeogori and loose-fitting pants, even though they were

the clothes that hurt the least to wear.

But he couldn't stop. When he sat still, all he could feel was anxious energy building up under his skin, building and building, making him feel like-

'BANG.'

South jumped, even though he'd been waiting for the sound, and he knew America wasn't mad. Not yet.

***'I'm** the one who should be mad.'*

The other country's footsteps sauntered down the hall, heavy on the wooden floorboards. He hadn't taken off his shoes again.

"Hey, kid," he said as he rounded the corner into the parlour. "You wanted to talk to me?"

South spun to him, mouth opening and closing uselessly.

"Nice fish impression," America noted. "Carp?"

"Did your soldiers bomb Kaesong?"

America's smile fell. He stared at him over the back of the couch. South's heartbeat beat in his temples.

"No," he said eventually. "The Reds did, trying to pin it on my guys."

South's jaw clenched hard before he added, "My Doughboys did shoot up the place by accident a coupla days ago, though."

Sick relief, despair, and something else swept through South at the same time, making his stomach churn.

"Why?" he demanded.

America shrugged. "Don't know, kid. Might've been a mistake."

"No, why didn't you *tell* me?" South had given him plenty of time. It'd happened on the 10th, and came out the next day, which was

when he'd been told, too. He'd given America all of the 11th and most of the 12th, but he hadn't came until he asked him to.

"I was waiting to see if we had all the facts, Southie. I don't want to go around spreading misinformation- I'm not a commie."

"But your press told people North's army and the Chinese were lying the day after it happened," South protested.

America paused, looking at him calculatingly. "And who told you all this, by the by?"

"Someone from the UN." South swallowed. "I met him in the city yesterday and he told me I should know."

America bobbed his striped head. "Okay, okay. Just making sure you weren't talkin' to anyone you weren't supposed to."

He laughed, like it was a joke.

South didn't laugh. "I should've heard it from *you."*

America's smile fell. "Maybe curb the tone a bit, kid. Why don't we sit down and have a drink?"

"No." South stepped back as he came around the couch. "I don't *want* a drink. I want the truth. You promised you'd always be honest with me."

"I *am* being honest with you, South," America replied, not stopping his advance. "If I wanted to lie, why wouldn't I have done it when you just asked?"

"Because you knew I already know." South's chests felt right as he backpedalled around the coffee table, putting it between them. "If you're being honest, tell me why your pilot shot up Kaesong."

"I said I don't know, kid." America sounded irritated now. "How am I supposed to be honest if you won't believe the truth when you hear it?"

"Because it's *not* the truth!"

South knew he should shut his stupid mouth, but he couldn't. They'd been so close. The talks were going well, North's people were making confessions, his brother had tugged back on their connection. It was going to be over, it was going to be *over* and now-

"Why didn't you *tell* me?" South's breath came fast as he kept moving away, circling around the couch now. "Shooting up the Reds' Jeep, the attack on Kaesong, the offensive-"

"I *did* tell you South," his ally said firmly. "I told you an offensive started the day it did."

"You told me Rhee's soldiers were the only ones doing it," South accused.

"Yeah, because I have to work under something called 'con-fi-dent-i-a-li-ty,' kid," America said, sounding out the word like he was slow. "I broke it for you before when I told you the chinks joined the war, but I'd rather not go around blabbing when I don't have to."

"You still should have *told* me!"

"You don't *care,* South!" America suddenly snapped. "Every single time I try to talk military with you, I can see your squinty little eyes glaze over. Don't act like you're suddenly interested now, and don't act like I'm trying to pull the wool over your eyes when you would *know* my guys were in on the offensive if you paid any damn attention to your army. You can't call 'em 'Rhee's soldiers,' then act surprised when you don't have a single Goddamn clue what they get up to."

South flinched as his ally quickened his pace, storming after him. He stumbled as he ran around the table, knocking his shin painfully.

"In fact, it might not've even *been* the Reds that launched an attack on Kaesong," he growled. "It might've been *your* fucking loose cannons trying to sabotage the peace talks that *I've* been working my ass off for."

"How am I supposed to believe that?" South cried. "How am I supposed to believe any of the other stuff when I know you lied this time?"

America chased him. "I didn't *lie,* South! It was a *miscommunication.* Wires got crossed with the investigators and my Air Forces, and the press got trigger-happy. It was a *mistake.* Are you the only one allowed to make mistakes?"

"No," South denied, shaking as he ended up behind the couch again. He knew the other man wouldn't do anything to him, but he wished he'd stop moving, just let the furniture stay between them so he could breathe and think.

"Really?" America challenged. "Because you've made a shit-ton of them. Letting the provinces fall into enemy hands when you ran away to Busan, forgetting to Command them to catch the doll when she escaped, sneaking out to meet North. And hey, I know I promised not to bring it up, but if you're going to act like *this-"* He flung a hand at him. "-when *I* make a mistake, then I kind of have to. I'm sure you know what I'm thinking about, Southie."

"And how am I supposed to believe that?!" South cried, almost tripping on the carpet. "If you let me think it was Rhee's army that started the offensive and North's that shot up Kaesong, how am I supposed to believe Kim Chong-won wasn't in Busan?! How am I supposed to believe you really didn't-!"

"South."

South cut his words off at America's warning tone, scrambling back around the couch. He bumped it as he did, excruciating pain shooting through his burned side as he gripped onto the furniture to steady himself.

"How am I supposed to believe you?!" he cried, voice breaking. "I *want* to. I really *really* want to, but it's all too- too convenient!"

"'Convenient?'" America demanded furiously from across the table. "Do you want to tell me how it's *'convenient'* that the truce talks that *I* set up keep getting interrupted, South?"

South opened his mouth, then sank his teeth into the side of his cheek, the gross taste of copper filling his mouth.

It was convenient that only three days after China had been found innocent, America had launched a new offensive. It was convenient that a band of soldiers had attacked Kaesong on the same day, even if they were Sou- *Rhee's.* North might have been lying about Taejon, and he might have thought he wasn't. But he *was* right that America controlled the army. It was convenient someone might have bombed the neutral zone and it was convenient that the Americans definitely *had.*

"Come on, South," the foreign country challenged. "Tell me why you think it's convenient."

South didn't answer. America's voice lowered, and so did his head, looking at the Korean over the tops of those bottomless aviators.

"Is it because you think I'm planning to leave Korea to go to war with Red China?"

South froze, his insides going cold.

America took a step forward, and he turned and ran, throwing himself at the open door. He hadn't even made it to the hall when a heavy force slammed into him, arms wrapping around his waist.

South yelped, struggling wildly as all the times Japan or their guards had picked him up and thrown him around flooded his mind, slamming him to the ground, punching him, bending his arms back and-

"South, hey calm down." America's voice was suddenly calm and soothing in his 'ear.' "I'm not gonna hurt ya, kid. Just making sure you don't run into the streets like a loon."

The Korean's breath came shallow and hot, trapped between the wall and the other country's broad chest. His burn throbbed where America's forearm was pressed against it.

"I'm gonna let you go now, okay?" His voice rumbled through

South's back. "No running kid, you're all good."

His weight moved away, and South slid bonelessly to his knees, gasping in unsteady breaths as his forehead *'thwack'*ed against the plaster, remaining there.

All his limbs felt like meat jelly, his insides hot with fear that he knew he shouldn't be feeling.

"Y'know," America said, sitting next to him with a grunt and leaning back against the wall. "It kind of hurts a guy's feelings when you act like he's going to piledriver you over nothing."

"I'm- I'm-" South couldn't get the words out, his lungs still straining for air no matter how much he pulled in. "I c-can't breathe. I can't-"

America sighed, then his hand thumped South forcefully on the back several times, until the Korean started to cough. The convulsions seemed to restart his lungs, and as he leaned his fevered brow against the cool wall this time, they worked like they were supposed to, clearing away the little black particles that had been floating in his vision.

"You're a bit dramatic sometimes, you know that, right Southie?" America said. "You don't need to take off like a coon at high noon just because I ask you a simple question."

It *wasn't* a simple question. South knew the implications of what America had been asking. If he said 'yes,' it was the same thing as admitting he thought he might betray him.

'We are the lesser prize in his game.'

'Korea is NOTHING.'

South stayed silent, squeezing his eyes shut.

"I'm not snapping my cap," America continued. "In fact, knowing you're afraid of that clears a few things up. Let me guess- the purple broad told you that?"

Alarm shooting through him, South sat up. "How'd you know that?"

"She actually told me awhile ago," the other man said flippantly, slinging an arm over his bent knee. "All smug, y'know? 'He'll never trust you now, your evil ambitions will be crushed, blah blah blah.'"

"W-When was that?" South asked cautiously, thinking of bandages poking out of a violet sleeve.

"Awhile ago," America dismissed. "I didn't see a point in bringing it up to you. Figured you had too much sense to listen to her, 'specially after I warned you to be on guard for any of them trying to put a wedge between us." He sighed. "There's nothing I hate more when a dame who thinks she's always right actually is."

"I..." *'Do trust you,'* South wanted to say. The words wouldn't come.

"South." America turned to him. "I *told* you I don't want to go to war with Red China. Hell, I didn't even want to go to war against North. Do you think I *like* being here? The electricity flickers, you don't have any good channels, it smells like dust and poverty, and I sort of have things to do back home. You know just last week, I signed a mutual defense pact with Australia and New Zealand? I woulda liked to be in 'Cisco to get a few drinks with 'em, but I had to go there after for the Treaty with the Jap. And I *clearly* can't leave you alone for that long, or you'll let every Tom Dick and Harry convince I'm the Devil or some shit. Did you even know that I had a mega flood back in July? Kansas is growin' gills, and here I was in Korea, drinking the night away with *you."*

South flushed in shame. "I'm... sorry. I didn't-"

"No, you *didn't,"* America agreed, clutching his shoulder with a firm grip as he pulled him closer. "South, I'm giving my all for this war. For *you.* Because you needed my help. Why would I send my guys to go fight chinks in China when I've got my hands full here, if I didn't have to? You already know I won't leave you. Unless *you* were the one lying when you told me that."

"No," South muttered, averting his eyes to a whorl in the

floorboards. "I know you won't leave me."

America nodded firmly. "You *know* I want peace. You *know* I won't leave you. You *know* I wasn't lying about Kim Chong-won because literally everyone in Busan confirmed I was telling the truth. So who are you going to believe- the bitch who's tried to take your head off more than once, snuck around behind your back, and you *know* lied to you about that little hick being the only Hwanghae, or me? The guy who's been squatting in your country for over a year just to make sure you don't get kidnapped by commies or cry yourself to sleep at night?"

South thought of the look in South Chungcheong's eyes as she barged into the parlour in Gyeongmudae. He'd been bleary from drink at first, but her words had sobered him up.

She'd been so serious, so intense, as she told him what America was supposedly planning and demanded that he Command her to find out the truth.

But she'd still been cold and haughty. Just like when she told him Hwanghae had been merged. And just like when she'd said those words about S- Rhee's army selling Korean women, and America's buying them.

*'And regardless of whether or not I am telling the truth, do you not think some of the masses would **think** I was?'*

She'd admitted she would lie to people just to turn them on America and Rhee. She *had* lied to him. He *knew* she couldn't be trusted. It was why he'd told himself to let it go.

But after all this...

"I just..." South hung his head in his head, squeezing his temples under his palms, feeling his unsteady pulse beat against them. "We were so *close."*

"I know," America soothed, his grip turning soft as he rubbed his shoulder. "Which is why North and Red China sabotaged the talks. They've been making a fuss over stupid shit from the start. Now

that they know I'm on to them, they switched to the big guns, something to make me and my guys look bad instead of them."

He shifted onto his knees, pulling South's hands away from his face.

"But *they're* the ones that broke away," America said, gazing down at him. "Look, kid, I don't know what that UN dolt told you, but my Doughboys weren't responsible for the bombing. And sure, they did shoot up the Reds' Jeep. After *they* were too dumb to mark it properly. And an offensive was launched. But we're at war- the armistice isn't signed yet. I don't see the commie setting down their arms. If we don't keep *strik*ing-" America punctuated the word with a squeeze. "They'll get overconfident and beat us to the punch. You don't want to lose more turf, do you?"

"No," South muttered, running a fingertip over the swirl in the smooth wood.

America nodded. "Exactly. And yeah, one of my guys shot up Kaesong. By *accident.* And how can you blame me or my guys for thinking it was the Reds? It sounds exactly like something they'd do. Heck, they *did* do it with that bombing. We told 'em it was a mistake and said we were real sorry. We shouldn't have to kowtow, too. An American doesn't get down on his knees for anyone but the good Lord.

"Think about it, South- if they really wanted peace, why wouldn't they just grin and bear it?" He arched an eyebrow. "What would you do if the commies bombed Kaesong by 'accident' and admitted to it?"

South hesitated, then murmured, "Sign anyway."

It was just an accident, and it didn't sound like anyone had got hurt. And even if it wasn't an accident, the sooner the war was over, the sooner *nothing* would be getting shot at.

"Righto." America flashed a smile, then went serious again. "But you know we can't just do that, South. Because we *know* it wouldn't be an accident for them."

His lips twisted as he seemed to think about something. South traced his finger along the whorl, over and over again.

"Come with me," America said after a moment, hauling him up by the arm. "I got something to show ya."

South followed, his eyes on the ground as they walked past his guards. He heard one of them snicker as they saw his red-rimmed eyes.

The sun outside was too hot and bright. It beat down on him, bringing out the cooking smell again.

South wanted nothing more than for it to set so he could lie on the cool dust and grass again. But he hadn't been able to bring himself to lay in his yard since last month. He didn't want to overhear anything else he didn't want to. He didn't want to investigate- he just wanted to be told the truth.

As they walked down the road, he could hear the sound of the market drifting from a few streets over. The sound of people chattering and cart wheels on hard-packed dirt.

The sounds were cut off as America's door closed behind them. South took off his shoes, following him into his office.

He glanced around, looking for... He didn't know.

There was a shiny new black phone on the desk, and a scattering of papers and writing utensils- pens, pencils and their piles of shavings, and a long, white quill.

America swept them all aside, into a drawer that he slammed shut before lifting something from under the desk.

South's blood went cold as he lowered his gaze from the large grey box.

"Don't worry, kid, I'm not gonna whip out any more orders you forget giving," America assured as he pulled a reel out of a case, setting it up. "And double don't worry- that little conversation is nice and safe under lock and key."

In America's hands.

"Now," he said, his finger resting on the 'on' switch on the other side of the machine. "I've got a radio broadcast for you."

Raising his head, South asked, "A broadcast?"

He wasn't allowed to have a radio in his house. He was only allowed near one back when he was calling for the provinces. Otherwise North and his men might try telling him lies over the airwaves.

South felt a prickle of shame. He'd protested that a little, wanting to listen to music. But maybe America was right- he really *was* swayed too easily.

"Yep. Got this baby a few days ago." America patted the wire recorder and its reel. "It's from North's birthday bash."

South's eyes widened, excitement rushing through him, even as dread did, too. If America wanted him to hear it...

"I was sort of going back and forth on showing this to you," America confessed. "I know you were a little nervous about the ceasefire, and I didn't want to crush any hope you might have. But you're right- if you should know something, then I should tell you.

"Now, a *small* warning," the other country said, pinching his fingers together. "But I'm pretty sure this is a recording of a broadcast of a recording made in a cave or something. So it's just a tiiiny bit fuzzy. So keep any questions or comments for the end. Ready? Okay onetwothreego."

South sucked in a breath as the switch was flipped, and the wire started to be pulled from spool to spool.

"Every single person here knows what it was like under Japanese Occupation."

Despite himself, South's heart leapt as he heard his brother's voice come from the recorder. Grainy, crackling, but *him,* settling into his 'ears' the way only North's could, even as he grimly announced the

ways that Japan had used to rule them.

*"They tried to take **everything** from us. They made us bleed for over **three decades.**"*

South felt a flash of bitterness. What did North know? He'd been free for two of those decades. He'd only had to deal with Japan for nine years. South had done it for twenty-seven.

Japan *hadn't* taken everything from them. He'd never taken his brother.

'North did that.'

"But we still fought," North carried on, oblivious to his brother's feelings. *"Supreme Commander Kim Il-sung and I, and thousands of our brave men and women took up arms against the Japanese and their collaborators."*

Talking about his 'General' again, the man that had stolen him away from South, along with CCCP.

"And every one of us has seen something that makes it hard to sleep at night."

'Not as hard as it is for me.' Alone in that dark room, alone in the brighter room after, alone in Chongqing. North had the provinces. South had had no one to press their back to his and tell him it would be okay. He still didn't.

*"But we kept **fighting.** We kept fighting knowing that that same thing could happen to us. We kept fighting no matter how many family members were imprisoned or killed, no matter how many of our people were cut down in cold blood for simply demanding an end to a unjust Occupation."*

South could taste something sour on his tongue. He hadn't needed North to fight- he'd needed him to stay. And he bet everyone else's imprisoned family members had, too. Maybe they wouldn't have *been* imprisoned if their troublesome relatives hadn't fought.

But the bitterness was nothing compared to the feeling that ran

through his blood and bones as his brother continued.

*"And we will **keep** fighting now, no matter what America does to try and destroy us. Because for a revolutionary, the blood shed by our enemy doesn't quench our fire- it only **fuels** it. We do not cower when our kin are killed- we take revenge. We do not lay down our arms when the gun turns on us. We **fight,** and if we die, we die with our weapons in hand."*

The audio recorder crackled.

"He thinks to wear us down," North accused, and he could only still be talking about America. *"He thinks that all he needs to do is burn our country to the ground, to raze our factories and our fields, to murder enough of us that we fear to fight on, that we tuck our tails between our legs and give in to his demands. He thinks that we are desperate enough to come crawling to him for a ceasefire."*

Ice trickled though South's legs as his brother said, *"He is wrong. We are **not** desperate. We have told them time and time again that if it comes to a protracted war, Korea is ready to fight it. And we are ready to **win.**"*

What was he talking about? They *were* desperate! Bombs were still falling all over the Peninsula, still scorching South as they hit the frontline. And even in Busan, which should've been safe, people were starving. He knew the market was mostly empty, people not allowed to enter the cities freely and peasants too scared to work the fields, even with the planes targeting North. And all the food that was harvested was going to the army. The chatter he'd heard earlier had been people trying to find a stand where cabbage for kimchi didn't cost a year's wage. Refugees were living in shanty towns on the city's edge, if they had houses at all, military checkpoints lined every road, orphans ran wild, and people were attacking each other in the streets for even the hope of a meal. They'd never *been* so desperate.

And he knew it had to be worse in the north, where the Communists ruled and the bombs fell every day. If North had been charred by the Raktong, now he must be...

But still his brother's rough voice announced with the confidence he'd always had as he talked South into another escape scheme, *"For **thirty-six years,** Korea struggled against Japan with no state of our own, no government, no ration distribution, no standing army. Two years is **nothing.** Three years would be nothing. Neither would five, or ten, or twenty."*

South's heart sank as the number grew larger.

*"Even if America's war wasn't unpopular with the rest of the world, even if he had unlimited money, weapons, and manpower, enough to keep this war going for a hundred years, we would fight. Ten, thirty-six, a hundred, a **thousand!**"*

North was screaming now, in a way even South had never heard in their shack. Unrestrained in a way that made his fingers bruise his own skin.

*"Korea would keep fighting! We would fight until every single blade of grass was burned to ash, until the last person standing! Because so long as even one Korean is alive, **Korea** is alive!*

*"WE WILL KEEP FIGHTING FOR AS LONG AS WE HAVE TO. WE WILL KEEP FIGHTING UNTIL WE WIN. **UNTIL KOREA IS REUNIFIED AND FREE!**"*

A cheer rose up to meet his words, making South startle back from the recorder. The background had been so quiet, he hadn't realized his brother was speaking to an audience.

But they were there, screaming like him, a wild, feral roar that made him think of North's cry all those years ago as he seized that guard's knife.

His brother's words had been terrifying. He was telling every single person in that room, every single person in *Korea,* that he would keep fighting even if it cost them all. And that *they* had to keep fighting, too. No normal person could hear that and think it was a good thing.

And yet the audience wasn't screaming in fury or fear. They

sounded... joyous. Exultive.

The crowds in Seoul and Pyongyang hadn't cheered that way for South. Even though the news he'd brought them had been good. He couldn't imagine what they would do to him if he went out into Busan and said what North just had.

But he knew they wouldn't cheer.

America flipped the 'off' switch, and the reels stopped spinning. South stared numbly at the recorder.

"That's all?" His voice rasped like his brother's.

"That's all." America leaned back against the desk. "Does that sound like someone that wants peace to you, Southie?"

"...No."

But then again, North had never wanted peace. He'd never wanted to stop fighting. To stop getting their food and water restricted and taken away. To stop antagonizing their guards and picking fights and trying to escape even when they knew it wouldn't work. To just *behave*.

And the one time he had had ended on March First.

His brother was violent. South had known that ever since he'd seen the look in his eyes as he stabbed that Jap to death, uncaring of the blood soaking his hands. He might've known it even before then, in that second year, when he'd killed his first man and said it felt good.

"No," America confirmed. "It sounds like someone that's deluded himself into thinking he can win. That he can stand against the most powerful country in the world for a thousand years."

He gave a harsh bark of laughter, wiping a mock tear from under his aviators before sobering.

"But let me tell you something, Southie- he can't even last the winter."

South knew he was right. His eyes did tend to glaze over when America started talking in military jargon, just like back when North was telling him about the fight against Japan.

But he'd paid enough attention to know his brother's supply lines were screwed, and his factories and stuff were destroyed. America had bragged just a few days ago that his pilots had blown up almost nine hundred vehicles in one day.

The south was doing bad enough, from what he knew. If the war continued into winter everyone up north was going to starve. And North would *let* them, just because he hated America too much to give up. Just like he'd always gotten South beaten with him just so be could get Japanese blood on his hands again.

"I know I told you a ceasefire would work out for us, Southie," America continued apologetically. "I was really gunning for one. But after hearing this..." He shook his head. "Honestly, maybe it's a good thing the Reds broke away."

"It's not," South rasped. "It means the war might not end before winter."

He didn't want people to starve just because of his brother's delusion that he could still win.

"And that's a crying shame." The American shook his head. "But think about it- you heard North. And you heard those folks in the audience. What do you think'a them?"

"They're crazy," South said numbly.

They had to be, to be told them and everyone they loved might all die fighting, and then to cheer like it was something to be happy about.

"Right on the money." America snapped his fingers. "Must've been hundreds of people in that room, and none of them bothered to say, 'Hey, I'm not dying for commie conquest,' or even, 'I don't want to die for nothing.' Or, 'why don't we not say we can win a thousand year war against the guy with nuclear bombs?'"

America grinned, and South stifled a shiver, digging his fingers into his arms.

"I'd say the Reds have probably killed off all the normal people by now," the American said, tapping his finger on the wire recorder. "Everyone left is, well, left. And they're all as deranged and bloodthirsty as Northie."

Bloodthirsty. South thought of the red lining North's fangs, and his stomach roiled. That was a good word for it.

"Which means things might not turn out so good for you if we work out an armistice," America continued.

South's grip on his arms tightened. "Why not?"

"Well, if I won, you'd be Reunified right away," the other country explained. "But an armistice isn't the end of a war. It's just the end of the brawling. We'll still have to work out POW swaps, set up a DMZ, work out terms and conditions, and don't even get me started on the elections. Especially since I've got to keep an eagle-eye on them for ya to make sure the commies don't trick you." America waved a hand. "We're looking at a few months before you can Reunify, maybe longer. Plenty of time for North to decide he wants to get even with you for everything you've done."

Mouth dry, South said, "But I haven't done anything."

*'Maybe **do** something then. End the war.'*

'That isn't up to me.' And wasn't he already doing something by confronting America like this? Even if he'd been wrong to do it, he'd tried.

"I know that, kid. You've only done things for the good of the nation. But do you think *North* would see it that way? And what do you think he'd do if he didn't?"

South's insides twisted in knots. "North wouldn't hurt me."

"Are you sure?" America raised a brow. "Even if he knew about Jeju? Or Seoul? Or the prisoners?"

The Korean opened his mouth, then found his words. "He doesn't know."

"He could find out."

America's words were bright, casual. But they made every single one of South's veins freeze over. The other country's inky black aviators stared into his soul.

South knew his brother would never hurt him. Yes, he'd left him to Japan, and it could have killed him. But *he* wouldn't. He'd always helped South to the water bucket after another of his outbursts had gotten them hurt, and he brought him water when he was sick. He took his beatings for him when he could. And even if that was just what he should have done, since it was *his* fault they were getting punished in the first place, South was still thankful that he had.

But at the same time, he could still see that man's blood in North's teeth, caked under his nails, and feel what he had as he reached for him, bloody knife in hand.

"You're right," South managed, and his voice didn't sound too shaky. "North... definitely wouldn't get that I had to do that stuff."

He saw the rage that burned in his single eye as blood poured from the other. Not for himself- for *them*.

"And I... don't think he'd take it well."

"Nope," America said cheerfully. "Even though I'm sure as sugar he's done way worse for his commie masters."

South knew he had. His brother had killed enough when he was malnourished and small. And he'd told him about all the battles he'd fought in the army, all the lives he'd taken once he'd finally got something even better than a knife- a gun.

And South knew it was good North had killed all those Japanese soldiers. They'd deserved it. But still, a chill ran down his spine as he thought of his brother with all those guns and all that power.

And a recording of South.

"So who are you gonna trust, South?" America asked, cocking his head at him.

He shouldn't have even had to ask. South should have known. Putting everything else aside- how there was no good reason why the American country would want to go to war with China, how he was missing things in his own country to be here with South, how he *knew* South Chungcheong was a liar...

North had left. America had stayed.

He knew the other country had a violent streak. He liked watching pigs get slaughtered at the market, he got excited talking about enemy casualty reports, and he wanted to watch bombs falling on the north on his birthday.

But South couldn't see him coldly wrenching a child's hip right out of the socket, or stabbing a man over and over with wild fury in his eyes. He hadn't even hurt him today, even after South had been so so afraid of him finding out what South Chungcheong had told him.

He might be a little bloodthirsty. But he wasn't Japan. And he wasn't North.

And he wasn't leaving.

"...You," South murmured, looking down at his socks. "I trust you."

America clapped him on the shoulder. "Good kid. But I want you to listen when I say this-"

He crouched slightly, his voice going cold as he locked eyes with South from behind his dark shades. "I don't want any more episodes like this, alright? I know you've got a few screws loose up here-" He rapped South on the head. "But you don't have to go making that *my* problem. Not when I do so much for you."

South nodded guiltily. He couldn't imagine how he'd feel if he flew across the ocean to spend a year in a foreign country, and the guy he'd done it for had started screaming that he couldn't trust him.

'Again.'

"I'm sorry," he said shamefully. "I wasn't thinking. I'm just... I just... It's a lot," he finished lamely.

America nodded sagely. "I know, kid. Which is why I'm not mad. Just letting you know this is your last straw." He thought for a second. "Or mine. One of us is outta straws."

South dipped his head again.

He'd try not to freak out like this again. America was right- he shouldn't have to deal with his... episodes. Not after he'd spent a whole year trying to win the war for him.

"Good kid." The American knuckled him playfully. "But that doesn't mean I don't want you speakin' your mind- I just don't want you screaming it. If anyone ever tries to sell you some snake oil again, you come from to America, and he'll clear things up. Don't let it fester next time."

"I won't," South promised. "I was just..."

'Scared.'

His friend nodded sympathetically. "I get it, kid. But you've got to stop thinking everyone wants to leave you just 'cuz your bro did."

South couldn't hide his flinch.

"And you need to stop letting people make you doubt yourself. You know me. Who even was that UN guy?"

"I don't know," South admitted. "I think his name was... English. Maybe?"

He wasn't good with names, let alone foreign ones.

America nodded. "A Brit, actually. What?" he said to South's look. "You didn't actually think I didn't hear about him, did you?"

South guessed it made sense he would have. It was Smith and

Wesson that let the man talk to him when he chased them down in the street, after all. Of course America had heard.

"I had to spend these past two days tracking him down," his friend continued. "That's why I was a bit sparse. It freaked me out a little, especially since he left the country as soon he spoke to ya."

"He wasn't a Soviet spy or anything, was he?" South asked in alarm. "I made sure he showed his ID card to my guards, and they said it looked real."

"It was real," America soothed him. "But just because someone says they're with the UN, doesn't me a you can trust 'em with your wallet. Why do you think he told you that crap, Southie?"

"He said the UN 'wanted to make sure South Korea was getting accurate news.'"

America shook his head. "He wasn't working for the UN. He was here for Britain. And between you and me-" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "The old man's going senile."

South's eyes widened. He hadn't known that could happen to Countryhumans.

His friend nodded grimly. "Sometimes he even forgets he's not the empire that rules the world anymore. Which means he's not the sharpest on the uptake when it comes to spies in his government. And I'd almost guarantee that guy was one of them."

"But..." South looked away, but America read his mind.

"He *was* telling you the truth," America admitted. "The truth that I would've told you yesterday if I didn't have to hunt him down. But South."

He put his hand on his shoulder again, holding tight. "You know as well as I do that Communists are crafty. Even in the once-in-a-blue-moon they tell the truth, it's only ever for an angle. And they almost got you this time."

South hung his head, ashamed. "Sorry. I'll be more careful who I

talk to."

He knew North's spies could be hiding anywhere in Busan, and CCCP's spies could be hiding anywhere in the world. And he knew it was what America wanted to hear.

"That'd be the smart thing, kid," his friend said. "I'll make your guards know not to let any nosy-nellies corner you in the street again, no matter how insistent they are. And you won't have to deal with this much longer. If the Reds won't give into a ceasefire now, they will once winter's done."

He showed his teeth in a smile. "I'm sure of it."

South nodded. "Do you think... I should start calling for Gangwon again?" he asked as America put his recorder away. "I mean, if North does have him, I'd... kind of feel bad leaving him there until spring."

He didn't know Gangwon was with his brother willingly, if he was. Yes he'd been with North's army when they invaded, but South remembered him as nervous and shy. He could've been bullied into it.

And if he was like Kangwon... Maybe he'd actually like South.

America straightened suddenly, pondering. Then he grinned, wide and white.

"Y'know, kid, that's a great idea," he said, slapping the top of the desk. "I bet he might even have some insider information for us."

South's heart skipped a beat as his tentative hopefulness died, and he immediately wished he hadn't suggested it.

"We might even be able to prove it was the Norks and their chink friends that staged that bombing before," America continued.

South made himself relax. Right. That was probably all his friend wanted. There was nothing else Gangwon might be able to tell him.

'You hope.'

He shook his head. No. He *knew.* He knew because America had proven over and over again that South could trust him. No matter how many tantrums he threw or mistakes he'd made, the American was still here.

North had *never* wanted peace. From throwing himself at their guards to running off into the wilderness to fight, to starting this war. His brother was violent and bloodthirsty, and the Communists had only made that worse.

*'Blood doesn't quench our fire- it only **fuels** it.'*

He'd said it himself, hadn't he? They were all bloodthirsty. North, the provinces, the commies. They were all too full of hate for America, for Rhee, for South, to realize that they could just stop fighting. That they didn't have to die.

South... knew his brother would never want to hurt him. But what if he let the others do it? Or what if he snapped? What if he heard about Jeju and Seoul and the commie prisoners getting executed and he just...

'Crazy.' He'd looked crazy as he murdered their Jap guard. And crazy people did things they didn't want to do.

'You know that all too well, don't you?'

*'Shut **up.**'*

If North found out about that stuff, he might hurt South, even if he didn't want to. And South knew if they worked out a ceasefire that... was too good for the commies, he *would* find out.

One more winter. One more winter and North would give up. Or everyone else would at least. And once his brother was alone, he'd realize how crazy it was to want to fight America down to the last person.

And then South could talk to him. He'd explain everything and North would understand. He'd understand he was his brother and he loved him and he'd only done everything for them, to get him back. Then they could be Reunified. No more fighting, no more war

or violence.

Only peace.

'Please brother- see sense before then.'

He knew by now it was a vain hope.

After all, blood had only ever fuelled North's fire.

Another merciful chapter title explanation- white masks in bian lian opera symbolize deceit and treachery. Also t he North POV of the flashback was in No Right in book one, if you want to compare them.

You know- 'Why is the blood on my lips only acceptable when it's mine? Why is it only okay for our clothes to be blood-soaked when it's our own they're drenched in? Why is it okay for there to be blood on my hands so long as it's not yours?' and such.

The New York Times article saying the investigation of the strafing was inconclusive has the vibe of 'Like God, shut upppp. Those bullets could have came from anywhere. Why does it have to be one of *our* planes? Yes, some civilian said he heard the plane shoot his house, but some other chick who was asleep at the time said it could have been a mouse, sooooo.' And the one admitting the US is responsible for the bombing is paywalled. I am uncovering depths of American history-shrouding likely only seen before by American librarians.

I'm going to watch Nanjing Photo Studio once it becomes 'available' (I will never pay for media in my life). I thought about watching it in cinema, but then I considered that I cried watching the Barbie movie and that maybe a full breakdown plus the possibility of right-wing protestors being there were not a good combination for me. This is called emotional regulation and making sure my family's only daughter doesn't go to prison.

Making Your Own Bravery

They reached Sincheon in the early morning, just a li'l after Hae would've got up to pick plants for harvest season if she'd stayed back in Pyongyang. They tried to stay off the roads on the way, just in case the surveillance planes were looking for more trucks to bomb, and because they had big craters in them.

There wasn't any glow in the sky. Just the sun creepin' on over the horizon. The cool fall air smelled like-

Burning flesh.

-woodsmoke and damp soil. Tails of smoke rose over the town, too thin and light to be houses. Or people.

As their truck rolled to a stop on the outskirts, Hae peeked out the windshield at the rows of houses and scattered huts. Some of them were missin' roofs and walls from the bombings, but some of them were nothin' but crumbled black boards and mats of straw, rotted from sitting out for so long.

Korea's keys jingled as he slid from the driver seat of the Jeep (he said he brought China's truck because he didn't want the GAZ to get bombed), and Hwang jumped out from next to Hae. SH twisted around from the front, squeezin' her hand before she left, too.

Hae peered out the open door, lookin' at the ground. It was just dirt, a li'l dusty now that rainy season was over.

But her feet didn't want to step on it. She could still see patches of burnt black and red shining wetly in the weak light.

"South Hwanghae," Korea said impatiently.

SH hushed him, then smiled at Hae. "Take your time, Hae."

She'd come back from her province because she said Korea an' Hwang weren't sensitive enough to take care of Hae. But Hae knew

Korea was right, and she shouldn't be wasting time. A general had to take care of people, not the other way 'round.

Her boots thumped onto the ground, makin' her flinch. A shiver ran through her, sending her insides pricklin' and all the hair on her body standing up. For a moment, she almost thought she could hear the distant screams and soft weeping again.

But there was nothing. Just birds chirpin' as the sun rose.

Hae wasn't used to feeling this way. She didn't like it one bit.

She reached for SH's arm, but Korea knocked her hand down.

"No weakness," he reminded her over her cousin's scoldin'. "No flinching, no crying."

"No lookin' away," Hae finished, wishing she sounded braver.

Korea nodded seriously. "The people here have been through enough. They don't need to feel like they should be comforting you. They need someone to look to for reassurance. Act like a general."

Hae bobbed her head, pickin' at her elbow before smackin' her own hand away.

"Comrades!"

They turned to see a tanned, middle-aged man jogging towards them from the Security outpost. Hae lit up.

"Comrade Jae-soon!"

She ran at him, then screeched to a halt a few feet away, shootin' a guilty look back at Korea.

Not very general-like to launch a flyin' hug at a Public Security Corps comrade.

She held out her arm instead, and he shook it real excitedly, making her entire body shake, too.

“It’s so good to see you again,” he gushed. “Comrade Korea told us you made it through everythin’ okay, but the folks in the squad were still real worried, even after I read your letter to them.”

“Ah’m okay!” Hae assured him, happy to see he was still alive. “America didn’t torture me or nothin’. He was just real annoyin.’ How are all our militia comrades?”

“You know we made it to Kuwol Mountain to join up with the guerrilla units there,” Jae-soon said proudly.

“And you didn’t lose anyone?” Hae asked hopefully.

Jae-soon hesitated, then looked past her, salutin’ as Korea came over.

“At ease,” their Countryhuman said. “And tell her.”

“We… lost five women,” Jae-soon admitted, making Hae’s heart sink. “An older woman got sick, one took her own life, and the other three had been… injured by the miguk-nom. They didn’t make it.”

“You didn’t tell me that in your letter,” Hae protested.

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

Well she *was* upset. And she wished he hadn’t told her now. She wished she didn’t have to know.

But she did.

“South Hwanghae is a general in the Korean People’s Army,” Korea said in his General voice. “You do not have to worry about upsetting her.”

Hae blinked away the burnin’ behind her eyes, nodding. “Ah’m real sorry to hear that,” she said, tryin’ to remember how she’d sounded when she was giving orders before. “But you did a really good job keepin’ everyone else alive, comrade.”

Jae-soon closed his eyes, nodding. “We all did our best. It was

knowin' that we were carryin' out a task our province assigned us, and that our country was dependin' on us that kept us goin'."

"That was what kept me goin', too," Hae told him, glancing at Korea.

That and knowin' he was going to come save her.

"Comrade Jung Jae-soon." Hwang scurried over, clasping his forearm. "Good to see you again."

"Comrade Hwang, it's been awhile." The officer bowed to SH. "And it's an honour to have Comrade South Hamgyong visit."

"Comrade SH, please," SH said, standin' next to Hae.

"You told me you investigated the situation thoroughly?" Korea cut in.

Jae-soon dipped his head, more professional now. "I know a few people that would feel better hearin' from Comrade Hae. And by now we all know where the worst of the crimes happened."

He raised his head, staring across the town at somethin' Hae couldn't see, his eyes all distant.

Then he shook himself like Pyo shook off water after swimmin'. "Follow me."

Sincheon Town was busier than Pyongyang, on account'a it not being much of a target.

'Anymore.'

People were heading down the street with baskets of fruits and vegetables on their heads, off to sell them at market, and a few kids in white uniforms were marchin' off to school in lines. They'd used to go alone, but now a few women and Public Security officers walked with them, their eyes flicking around nervously.

Hae could see people out in the fields, surveyin' the rice paddies to figure out when to drain them, and workin' hard to sow rapeseed

in the fallow fields. They had to get as much as possible in every harvest this year, since they'd been interrupted by the enemy last year. If the Yankees didn't sign a ceasefire, they'd need all the rations they could get to make it through the winter.

She wished she could join them and forget about everything except for the feeling of dirt under her fingers and tryin' to keep the ox going in a line so the rows would be straight.

Hae had always liked Sincheon. She liked all their towns and cities and villages. But Haeju and Sariwon were more city than the farmin' town. Sincheon had had enough farmland to be comfy, but enough people that there was always somethin' interesting for Hae to see or someone to chat with.

There weren't so many now. Even though the town was a li'l more busy than Pyongyang, people had still been evacuated to the hills, and the markets were still hidden out on the outskirts. The square was almost empty as they followed Jae-soon through it.

Something on the platform in the center caught Hae's eye. She didn't want to look, remembering what she'd seen the last time she looked up there.

Kicking legs and gross gagging sounds and cruel smiles that turned to alarm as Hae, Jae-soon, Kwang-seok, and the others burst out and attacked. Trying to saw through the hemp rope while it twisted under her knife as the man struggled, no matter how much she told him to stop. She'd been fast enough, but not all of them had.

This time it was only a bunch of papers nailed to a notice board, covered in writing. She knew what they were because Korea had told her about the list the Party was makin', and had passed on to the Women's International Democratic Federation.

Names. Thousands of names, all belonging to the people killed in Sincheon. And she thought that might just be the list for the town.

There were more names on the newsboard to the side of the square, too, these ones coming with pictures and drawings. Most of them were topped by bigger words, callin' out to whoever walked

by- *‘MISSING,’ ‘LOST,’ ‘COME HOME.’*

Hae found herself walking that way, even though she hadn’t told her legs to take her. Maybe if she knew what the missing people looked like, she would recognize them if she ran into them in other parts of their province.

She tensed as a hand touched her shoulder, but it was only Hwang comin’ to stand next to her, his eyes wandering over the board with hers.

Some of the photos were faded, and Hae could barely read the writing for them. But some looked new, like someone was putting one up every day.

Hae knew one of them.

“You still haven’t found Comrade Pong-su?” she asked, looking over her shoulder at Jae-soon.

He was staring at a portrait of a pretty woman with dark, curly hair. Her lips were pressed flat, but her eyes were squinched up like she was trying’ not to laugh.

“No,” he said, and the one word was so sad that it made Hae’s heart ache.

Min Pong-su had been real nice, always inviting her in for dinner after she and Jae-soon had finished wrasslin’ with the landlords during the Agrarian Reform. He’d said she went missing after he rushed off to deal with the reactionaries.

“So many women,” SH murmured from behind them.

Hae looked closer and realized she was right. There were portraits of men, like the ones her and her cousins had to take when they were officially recognized as Korea’s provinces. ‘For postrerity,’ Hwang said.

But most of the ‘missing’ signs were women. Family photos like SH was always trying to get them to take- sittin’ on chairs, holdin’ babies in their arms, with older kids at their feet and men standing

behind them, but folded down so they couldn't be seen- or real small, like they'd fit in a locket. There were sketches, too, some of them so messy that Hae had no idea how she was supposed to recognize the people if she saw them.

Wives, sisters, mommas, grandmommas, daughters. There was a tacked-on note begging for anyone that had met an eight-year old girl named Hyang-hwa to report right away to Oh Hyang-gol at his address. Hae read through what she'd been wearing, and when she was last seen.

October 18th, last year.

Hae tried to imagine a little girl wandering through Sincheon the way she'd arrived to find it, fires flickering across town, the harsh sounds of laughter drowned out by screams, and lumps of burned meat in the streets.

She knew it wasn't very general-ly of her to do, but she couldn't help but hug herself. She hoped someone had found her. Someone nice.

Jae-soon reached past her, tearing one of the notices from the board. A picture of a man with the word *'MURDERER'* slashed across it in red ink.

"Who is that?" Korea asked. He sounded cool, like the names and photos didn't upset him, even though Hae knew they did.

"Yang Chun-yoon," Jae-soon said, tossing the crumpled photo to the ground. "He was with the Taehan Young Men's Association. His widow refuses to believe it. Or that he got what he deserved."

Korea asked for the widow's address, while Hae stared up at the names of the missing and dead.

How many of them had she seen while she was in Sincheon? How many of the names up there were comrades she'd worked with before the war, or were the screams she heard while skulking through the shadows? How many of the photos were people she would have recognized if they weren't so bloody or burnt?

She wondered if that first person she'd ran into was up there, the one that had really made her realize what she was walking into.

"South Hwanghae."

Hae jumped, turnin' to Korea. She hadn't heard him calling, even though she always heard it when he said her name.

He was giving her a look. "We're going."

Jae-soon nodded, his eyes still fixed on the picture of his wife. His fingers brushed her black-and-white cheek before he walked away.

"Korea," SH hissed quietly as they followed. "Be more gentle."

"Don't coddle her," Korea said, just as low. "This isn't about her. It's about *them."* He jerked his head at the names.

SH still didn't look happy, but Hae was glad she had Korea to remind her to keep movin'. If he wasn't here, she would'a just kept staring at the boards all day, trying to find names she recognized and memorize faces she didn't.

She hurried to catch up to Jae-soon so it looked like she was helpin' lead. But as they headed towards the edge of town, her belly started to twist up inside as she realized where they were goin'.

The Sincheon County Worker's Party Committee office.

Their guerrilla unit had made sure to avoid it, 'cuz it was the building the Yankees were using as their headquarters. They'd had enough people to cut communications wires and save a few hundred civilians, but not enough to go up against all the foreigners, reactionary groups, and the Southern One's army.

But they had heard what happened there.

As they rounded the building, Hae's eyes strayed towards the opening of the Party air raid shelter. It gaped like an open mouth, the concrete blocks around the entrance stained black.

A group of people were already behind the building, wearing

helmets and markin' out a spot on the ground with rope, like construction workers. Hae recognized one of them, and ran forward, relieved to get farther away from the shelter.

"Comrade Ji-ha!"

Un Ji-ha brightened as she saw her, and even though Hae stopped and put out her arm like a good general, she got pulled into a hug anyway. And it was rude not to hug back, so she did, tight.

"Comrade Jae-soon told me you were coming today," the woman said, pullin' away too soon. "I was hopin' I'd be here when you came by."

Ji-ha looked a bit different- a scar crossed her brown cheek, and her hair had grown out from its bob, long enough to put in two short braids. Hae wondered if she'd want a hair cut from her. She was skinny, but pretty much everyone was now. Hae had got a li'l pudge back after the camp, but that was just 'cuz her body had a real good 'starvation response,' like Kang said. And-

"You're wearin' a Public Security uniform!"

Ji-ha looked down at the sash around her arm. "I decided to sign on after the army returned. I couldn't stand just going back to workin' my garden. I want to protect our town, and they need people with experience."

"And people we can trust," Jae-soon added grimly. "And she's still a terror with that shovel."

Ji-ha spun the tool around by the handle. It was a li'l rusty, enough that Hae thought it might be the same one she'd used to brain guys last year.

"I've turned it to less violent pursuits now." Her smile died as she looked back at her work crew. "We're digging for more remains."

"From the trench executions?" Hwang asked from behind Hae.

"Mhm." Ji-ha's pretty eyes were dark. "After they filled up the air raid shelter, they took to digging trenches out here for them.

Burnin' or buryin' folks alive. We've already recovered over five hundred bodies, and we're still findin' bone fragments."

Rows and rows of bones in piles on white sheets, each topped by a skull with wide empty eye sockets that stared into the camera, hoping they could find out who they'd been when they were alive. More bones scattered at their feet, the ones that couldn't be sorted into a skeleton.

Hae looked over the field that stretched out to the open farmlands. A lot of the dirt was freshly churned or had that look that meant it'd been dug up before settlin', the grass short and spiky on earth that rose in small waves.

Another shiver ran through her.

"Is Comrade Kwang-seok workin' with you?" She craned her neck as she tried to distract herself.

But Jae-soon and Ji-ha gave each other looks that made her heart sink.

"What?" she asked, even though she didn't want to know.

"Comrade Hae." Jae-soon removed his cap, holding it at his waist. "I'm sorry to tell you, but Comrade Choe Kwang-seok died in a bombing raid in July."

Hae closed her eyes tight, clampin' down on the tears that tried to escape.

She could still see the young officer's face as they stood outside Kim Moon-sik's barn, his expression all sincere.

''The well-being of the Republic is more precious than life itself.' We all stayed here knowing we could die.'

And now he had. Not even in all the carnage the Yankees and reaction'ries brought with 'em, or fightin' with the guerrillas on the mountain. Just from a bomb some deathbird spat out. Like Korea had said- even when the miguk-nom couldn't set foot in Sincheon, they still murdered them by the thousands.

“The Yanks were targetin’ our oxen while they were at pasture,” Jae-soon said, all gentlelike. “He ran out to scatter them.”

“He made it so they only got one,” Ji-ha added softly. “And him.”

“Then he died savin’ our people,” Hae said, and her eyes burned fiercer as she remembered what she’d said to him back then. “He did a good job.”

SH stepped closer to her side while her comrades nodded gravely. “He did.”

“I hope more measures have been taken to avoid a repeat of something like that?”

Hae shot a look over at Hwang, frownin’.

***‘Not** what you’re supposed to say.’*

“And I’m very sorry for your loss,” he quickly added. “Comrade Hae told me much about Comrade Choe Kwang-seok. He will be missed.”

“We wouldn’t let him die in vain,” Ji-ha assured him, holding her shovel close. “The farmers all know to only let the livestock out to graze at night now. And the state farms were already doin’ that.”

“And everyone else is still alive, last I checked,” Jae-soon said, tryin’ to cheer her up. “Even Old Man Beom is still kickin’.”

That made Hae feel a li’l better. But she couldn’t stop thinking about how she would never see Kwang-seok again, and his family would never see him again, and the families of everyone that had ended up shot dead in the trenches would never see *their* families again and-

SH’s shoulder brushed hers, ‘cuz Korea wouldn’t like it if she held her hand right now.

“Well,” her cousin said, bright, but not in a way that made it seem like she didn’t care about what had happened to Kwang-seok. “We have a lot of places to visit today. We should get started while

it's still early."

Ji-ha nodded, drawin' herself up. "Comrade Korea wanted to hear for himself some of what happened here, right?"

Korea dipped his head. "I've read the report made by the Women's International Democratic Federation thoroughly. But it is my duty as your country to investigate directly. I would have come sooner, but I've been committed to the war effort."

"We understand," Jae-soon assured.

Hae looked down at her clasped hands guiltily. Korea probably would'a come to investigate for himself awhile ago, durin' the break in January, if he hadn't been waiting for her to be ready.

She *wasn't* ready. She hadn't been ready for what was happenin' in Sincheon last year, and she wasn't ready to remember it now.

But Korea would be ready, if he was her. So she had to be, too.

"I have someone here now that can tell you what happened here." Ji-ha cupped her hands around her mouth and called, "San-gon! Come here a minute!"

A young boy helpin' stake the wooden pegs around the dig site looked over, then down at the pegs he was holding, hesitatin'. But an older man took them from him, and he trudged over, a li'l reluctantly, Hae thought, even though he should be excited to see Korea.

"Can ah help you comrades with something?" he asked, still looking over at the site.

Ji-ha put a hand on his shoulder, rubbin' it with her thumb. "Do you think you could tell Comrade Korea what happened to you? It'll only take a minute, and you can get right back to diggin' after, alright?"

San-gon almost looked like he might say no, then glanced at Korea and bit his lip.

“Mama wanted us to keep our heads down when the armies showed up,” he said, real quietlike. “Pops was in the Worker’s Party, my brothers are in the army, and ah’m in the Children’s Union, so we knew they’d probably try an’ mess with us. Ah wanted to fight, but Pops said we needed to wait for the right moment to leave town, and Mama said so long as we stayed quiet, they wouldn't find us. But…” He shrugged helplessly. “Someone sold us out an’ told them. Not even three days in.”

‘Someone like that Ku Chun-guk,’ Hae thought, and her fists clenched, wishin’ she could kill him again.

“They showed up at our door- some youth group thugs- and beat Pops to death.” San-gon looked down at his hands. “Smashed his head in with Grandmama’s ol’ brass kettle. Ah… wanted to stop them, but Mama was holding me too tight.”

Hae looked at Korea, thinkin’ he’d say something. But he stayed quiet, watching the boy expectantly.

“We got lucky,” San-gon said, even though it didn’t sound like he really thought that. “They didn’t do anything too bad to Mama. Just pawed at her a li’l.”

His small fists still clenched like Hae’s as he said it.

“Then they dragged us out here.” He gestured to the turned-over field. “They’d already been burning folks, so we knew what to expect. Mama threw herself at one of the boys an' tried to take his gun, and she told me to run. And… Ah did.” The boy looked down at his straw sandals. “Ah ran all the way to the mountains.”

He flinched like he thought one of ‘em was going to hit him or somethin’. Hae took another peek at Korea, but he was still bein’ silent.

San-gon shut his eyes tight, his face screwin’ up. “But they were there, too. They started rounding people up again.”

“To punish our guerrillas on Mount Kuwol,” Jae-soon supplied, the tendons on his neck flexin’. “They arrested almost the entire village

helpin' supply us, and killed them all at Minchon-ri."

"Ah ran again," San-go said, wringin' his hands. "Into the mountains."

"And we took him in." Ji-ha put her hand on his shoulder. "He was a big help choppin' firewood. He even did a little reconnaissance for us."

"So now ah have to find my Mama." San-gon looked out at the field. "She's out here somewhere."

The work crew had started to dig. Hae usually liked the sound of shovels choppin' at the earth, but today each one of 'em made her flinch. Any second, one could hit something that wasn't dirt.

Korea still wasn't sayin' anything, even though he should've by now. He needed to tell the boy that he didn't need to be afraid anymore and that he shouldn't be ashamed. He needed to make him look less like he wanted to jump on into the hole his comrades were diggin'.

Hae looked up at him again, and this time, Korea flicked his eye to her.

'Oh.' Right.

"You don't know your mama's here," Hae said to San-gon. "She could'a made it away."

He shook his head dejectedly. "Ah know she didn't. Ah… Ah heard the gunshot. And ah didn't even look back."

His brown eyes started to well with tears, and he hid his face in the crook'a his elbow.

SH stepped forward, but Korea sent her a Look, and she stopped, frustrated. Ji-ha didn't speak their quiet talk, but she stayed silent, too, just rubbin' the boy's back, like she knew what Korea wanted from Hae.

Or maybe she'd just said everythin' she could to try an' cheer him

up over the past year.

“You don’t need to feel bad that you ran,” Hae said, tryin’ to sound confident. She wouldn’t like to be told there wasn’t anythin’ she could have done, so instead she said, “The Gen’ral always says that war is like a football match. Sometimes you need to know when to retreat. We had to do that a lot durin' the war against Japan, and we had to do it a few times in this war, too.”

She couldn’t help herself from lookin’ at Korea. His jaw twitched, his expression stormy, and Hae quickly added, “Otherwise we wouldn’t’a been able to stop the Yankees from takin' all our cities. And then we would’ve *all* had to go back to bein’ guerrillas.”

She knew she couldn’t make Korea stop thinking what he was. But she could try. And she didn’t want San-gon thinkin’ the same thing.

“Ah left my Mama to die,” the boy croaked.

“She wouldn’t’a wanted you to die with her,” Hae said, confident about that, at least. “She distracted them so you could get away. That has to happen a lot when you’re at war, too.”

That was what Korea had meant when he’d told them all about having to let their people sacrifice themselves for them sometimes. She didn’t like hearin’ it, and she didn’t like it any of the times it had happened.

But she’d understood, once Korea had told her and her cousins that they’d have to sacrifice themselves for him, if it came down to it. He didn’t need to tell her that, ‘cuz Hae never even would have thought twice- if it was her or Korea, she’d always pick him.

“Your mama was actin’ just like a soldier, sacrificin’ herself so you could live,” Hae told San-gon. “And sacrifice isn’t about the person bein’ sacrificed for, it's about the one doin' the sacrificin’.”

He peeked past his tan arm, lookin’ a li’l confused. Hae glanced at Hwang, wantin’ him to make sense of her words for her, but Korea had beat her to it, so her brother wouldn’t give her anything but a

sideways *'Sorry'* look.

Another try!

"You shouldn't be thinkin' that you left her," Hae told the boy. "You should be thinkin' you did exactly what she wanted. Your mama wanted you to get away and live, and you did."

That was how it always worked for her. Even if something made you upset, big or small, you just had to think about it in a different way and it wouldn't. Hambu didn't actually want to make her sad when he acted like a jerk- that was just how he showed love. Hwang had never meant to be mean to her, he just didn't know any better yet. And whenever one of their soldiers gave their life for her on the battlefield, it wasn't 'cuz she'd been too slow to react or reload. It just meant that they loved their country so much they'd rather die than see one of their provinces even get hurt.

Of course, Hae knew it was harder to do that with big things. And it was real hard after Sincheon. She knew it was going to be even harder after today.

But she kept cheery for San-gon. "You even got to help our guerrillas fight against the reaction'ries and Yankees!" Smilin', she declared, "Ah bet she'd be real proud of you. And so's Korea. And me an' Hwang."

She put her arm around her brother's pencil-waist and pulled him forward, really hopin' he wouldn't correct her with 'Hwang and I.'

But he really was learnin', 'cuz he just said, "Indeed. Sometimes… walking away is the correct option."

He pushed his glasses up, and Hae squeezed him a li'l tighter, beamin' at San-gon.

"Ah just…" His voice broke even smaller. "Ah just miss her s-so *much."*

"It's okay to miss her," Hae said. "But you can't let it weigh you down, and make ya feel guilty for bein' alive."

“But what if my brothers blame me for what happened to her?” he asked, and Hae could tell he was tryin’ real hard not to sniffle. “Ah haven’t told ‘em yet, even when ah wrote them.”

“They won’t blame you,” Hae assured him. “They’re your brothers. But you have to make sure they don’t blame themselves, either.”

San-go blinked, confused. “Why would they blame themselves? They weren’t even here.”

Hae gave him a nod. “Exactly. They might start thinkin’ things like ‘Ah should’a been there to help, if ah hadn’t joined the army, ah would’a been.” She held up a finger like Hwang usually did. “But that’s wrong thinkin’, ‘cuz they signed on to protect *all* our people, and they’ve got to keep doin’ that. Like Korea said in his Foundation Day speech- no matter what could happen to us and our families, we keep fightin’. So no one else will ever end up like your Mama did.”

Or like any of the other thousands of people that had been buried under their boots.

Hae wanted to do something, but she didn’t know if Korea would be okay with it. She put her hand on her sheath and eyed him. He considered, then blinked. Or winked. But Korea had never winked when he had two eyes, so Hae thought he probably wasn’t winking now. It was a ‘yes’, anyhow.

“And like Korea said, too- ‘We do not cower when our kin are killed.’”

Hae went to take her knife from her belt, but found that Korea was already holdin’ his out. The old one, not the shiny silver one he wouldn’t tell her where it came from.

She took his knife and held it out to San-gon, smilin’.

“We take revenge.”

The boy wiped his forearm roughly across his eyes, then hesitantly took the weapon. It wasn’t as sharp as Korea usually kept

his blades, which meant it wasn't good for the battlefield anymore. But it would be good enough if the kid had to knife a few reaction'ries.

"Revenge." He said the word like he was tastin' it.

Hae nodded happily. "You tell your brothers it wasn't your fault or their fault that your mama was murdered. It was the Yankees and-" She darted look at Korea, bitin' her tongue. "And the puppets." Reaching out, she gently bopped him on the forehead with her fist. "And tell yourself that, too."

San-gon stared at the knife a li'l longer. Then his eyes hardened, and he nodded, looking up at her.

"Ah will, Comrade General."

Hae pouted. Not even a maybe-ten-year old would call her noona. And it always felt weird to be called Comrade General when Korea was with her.

"Ah'll find Mama's body," the boy said, his voice sharper than the blade in his clenched fist. "And then ah'll get revenge for her. And for *everyone."*

"Then get out there, comrade!" Hae cheered, and San-gon gave her a salute before running back to the dig site.

"And don't run with knives!" SH called, alarmed.

"He's handled them before," Ji-ha assured her, watching the boy with fondness.

"Is he staying with you?" Korea asked as San-gon tied his new knife to his rope belt and slapped a hardhat on his head.

"Mm. I'll take care of him until his brothers get home." Ji-ha put a hand on her heart. "And my boy, too."

"Name?"

"Oh U-bae. Fourth Corps, 5th Division."

Korea thought, then said, “He hasn’t been in any casualty reports.”

Hae knew he read them every day, even when they weren’t at the front. It made her feel even worse for tryin’ to avoid the Women’s International Democratic Federation’s report for so long.

Ji-ha’s eyes closed in relief. “If you ever see him, do me a favour and tell him to write his poor mother more often.”

Korea promised that he would, while Jae-soon pulled Hae aside.

“That was a real nice thing of you to do, Comrade Hae.”

“Ah just told him the truth,” Hae replied.

She was happy she’d managed to perk San-gon up a bit. But she still felt… itchy. The weevils weren’t gone.

Jae-soon smiled. “It was a truth he wouldn’t hear from none of us.”

“Any,” Hwang corrected, makin’ Hae have to apologize for him.

That hadn’t been so bad. Maybe she could do this.

Hae spun to Korea, waiting. He nodded at her seriously, once.

Hae sucked in a deep breath, then announced, “Ah want to see the air raid shelter.”

Jae-soon and Ji-ha’s faces fell.

“Are you sure-?”

“Ayuh!” Hae chirped before she could change her mind.

She hugged Ji-ha goodbye, not wanting to let go. But then she did, and turned towards the air raid shelter.

She wanted to skip, but it didn’t feel right. So she marched, makin’ her legs move like Korea had given her an order.

But she couldn't keep it up. The closer she got to the gaping hole, the more it looked like a big ol' mouth that wanted to swallow her up, and the harder it got to lift her legs. Those shivers kept runnin' through her, getting stronger.

By the time she stood outside the stairs down to the shelter, the hair on her arms was raised so high it actually *hurt,* pullin' at her pores, makin' her itch inside and out.

"We're goin' to fill it in once the trials are over." Jae-soon's voice came from far away. "Too much talk of honbul."

Soul fires. Hae didn't believe in ghosts. But staring down at the dark hole, her body shiverin' like it was mid-winter, even though the sun had just risen, almost made her start.

"Ghosts aren't real," Korea dismissed, standin' next to her at the top of the stairs. "Go down."

"Korea-"

He cut SH off again. "This is her duty."

"Can you…" Hae made her voice small, even though Jae-soon could probably still hear. "Can you order me?"

Not a Command. She just needed to hear Korea tell her that she had to do this. Then her feet would unstick and take her down into the dark.

"No," he said coldly. "You will go down because you know you need to. Or you will not."

She would. She would she would she *would.* Even though the dark rectangle looked too much like the hole when Japan had first brought her to it. Even though her legs were shaking. Even though it still smelled burnt.

Hae wobbled forward, her feet takin' her down the wide concrete steps. Hwang tried to follow, but Korea held him back.

She stood in front of the entrance. The inside of the steel door

was black with soot. Only the handle was clean where hands had touched so people could come investigate.

It was stupid to feel this way. She'd done way scarier stuff last year, when the people in here had been being murdered. It was stupid and so were her legs for still shaking anyways.

Hae stepped forward, and into the dark.

Right away she could feel the weight above pressing down on her, the curved steel roof, the concrete blocks lining it, the few feet of earth crushing her like a mountain, bearing down, flattening her. It was dark and dank and hard to breathe, like the hole but worse, and she knew this was what the people in the trenches had felt as they were buried alive, tossed into the ground, shovels of dirt raining down on them until they couldn't see the sun or smell fresh air and never would again.

Hae's breath came fast as the dark pressed in on her, clapping shackles around her ankles and wrists again and nipping at her like a rat.

She backpedalled, trying to escape, but bounced off of the chest behind her. She tried to cling to Korea, but he pushed her away with a hand, deeper into the dark.

Her head whirled, confused and hurt. Korea was supposed to pull her out of the dark, into the light, not shove her in. He was supposed to-

'No.' Korea would never hurt her or lock her up in the hole again. *'Never.'*

The certainty of that gave her a moment to catch her breath, to make her lungs work past the chokin' feeling and bits of ash she was breathing in.

She was alright. She'd made it out of the hole. Korea had saved her from it. And she'd made it out of Sincheon.

The people here hadn't. And this wasn't about her. It was about them.

“Ah’m okay,” she said, her voice echoing, and too shaky.

Korea didn’t say anythin’ about it. “Good.” His flashlight clicked on, illuminating the huge underground shelter.

Hae squeezed her eyes shut, afraid she’d see a body, even though she knew it’d been cleaned out months ago. She knew. She’d had to see the pictures on the ride here.

She hesitantly peeked.

The room stretched into the shadows, which Korea’s flashlight beam could barely pierce. The floor had been scraped almost clean, but the walls still had patches of soot clingin’ to ‘em. It had mixed with the dust, creating small black tentacles that waved in the air, making it seem like they were inside some big furry beast.

The air raid shelter was huge, since it was the Party one. It could hold everyone who worked in the County Committee office, and a bunch’a civilians, too.

But it wasn’t supposed to hold nine hundred. And that was the number of people that had been burned to death in it.

The shivers were still wrackin’ her, making her tremble like a leaf no matter how hard she tried to stop. It wasn’t just her thinkin’ of the hole. It was something else, something that sank into her bones and wrapped them in ice.

“The sixth sense,” Hwang murmured from beside her. His voice was shaky, too, which made Hae feel a li’l better. “I’ve never felt it like this before.”

“It *aches,”* Hae whispered, clutchin’ at her chest. “Ah can feel it inside.”

She was sad and upset, but just like the shaking, she could tell this was something more. Not quite hers, but piercin’ her heart anyhow.

“Interesting,” Hwang murmured. “You’re feeling it even stronger than me. I wonder if…”

He trailed off as a shiver hit him, and Hae watched tears start to leak from his eyes as he put a hand over his mouth.

"Keep yourselves together." Korea's voice was steady, but Hae could tell he was feelin' the same thing she was. The fine hairs on his neck were all raised.

SH was the only one that couldn't feel it. She was trembling as she looked around at the sooty shelter, but it wasn't the same. Her jaw was locked and her palms were dripping blood. Hae wanted to take her hand, but she couldn't make herself move. She could only squeeze Hwang's back when he linked his fingers with hers.

Almost a thousand people had burned in here. Tied together in groups and shoved in, locked up, before gasoline was sprayed through the air vent, and bottle grenades followed. Hae hadn't been brave enough to watch the newsreel, but she'd seen the pictures. People standing over bodies that didn't look like humans anymore, trying to find someone that had belonged to them in a mass of blackened flesh and twisted limbs. She hoped that if San-gon's mama had survived that shot, she'd been buried alive, 'cuz if she hadn't, he would never find her, and even having to hope for that made her feel sick.

This had happened *everywhere.* In the militia headquarters, in the Public Security Office, in the powder houses and church. Every single one'a those people was supposed to be alive. They'd been supposed to be happy after Liberation, they'd supposed to be Reunified and be able to eat meat three times a day and work the fields in peace and no one was ever supposed to die again, and even if Hae knew that was impossible, they hadn't been supposed to die like *this,* beat and hurt and thrown into the dark, squished together with hundreds of other people and the choking smell of gasoline to burn.

She could smell it again, the stench of burning flesh as people screamed and Yankee soldiers laughed at their pain, and she would've fallen down if her knees hadn't been locked in place.

"Don't throw up," she heard Korea say sharply, and she realized she was gaggin' as she clutched at her belly.

“Korea, let her leave,” SH said, and there was somethin’ dark in her voice that worried Hae until she realized it wasn’t directed at their Countryhuman.

“She needs to face this without wavering.”

“She *did!”* SH hissed. “She came here back then, and fought. You said you didn’t have any criticisms for her, so what are you punishing her for?”

“I am not punishing her,” Korea growled. “Exactly- she fought here. She *witnessed* things like this. She can’t be afraid of an empty room now.”

“Ah’m not… afraid,” Hae forced out.

She wasn’t. She was hot and prickly an’- and *anguished.* That was the word for it. Grief was pourin’ out of her heart and drowning her, and it only got deeper as the names and faces on the signs flashed through her mind. How many of them had died here? How many missing people would never be found ‘cuz they’d been burned to cinders?

“Ah’m *not* afraid,” she repeated, diggin’ her nails into her palms. “See?”

She straightened up, smilin’ at Korea. It took a couple tries, but she got her lips turned up.

“Ah’m alright,” she said. But she couldn’t keep her smile. “Ah ain’t lookin’ away.”

“Good.” Korea looked off into the shadows of the shelter. *“This* is what hesitating does. This is what trying to avoid bloodshed you know is necessary ends in- oceans of it spilled anyway. Don’t forget that.”

Hae breathed in the burnt air, feelin’ the soot dust coat her throat as another long shiver ran down her spine.

“Ah won’t,” she promised, scabs on her knuckles bursting.

"Korea…" SH said, soft now as she reached for his arm.

He slipped away from her. "We have work to do. Move out."

Hae followed him, castin' one last look back at the shelter. There were no soul fires dancin' in the shadows, no bodies or glass shards or bits of burnt clothing left.

Just the dark.

She shuddered and scurried out of the hole, grateful when Korea closed the door behind them with a final *'clank.'*

She couldn't wait until the trials were over. She hoped every single reaction'ry bastard they had would be found guilty. She hoped Korea would throw *them* in the air raid shelter before they filled it in.

The work they had to do was speak to a bunch'a victims. People who had seen things happen or had them happen to them. They weren't investigatin'- their comrades and the Women's International Democratic Federation had already done that. This was what SH called a 'grief circle.' Korea had done them all the time durin' the Occupation, even though they made him real uncomfortable.

Every time a village got burned or the Japanese and the collaborators did something else awful, Korea would meet up with the survivors and let them tell him their stories. They got to get things off'a their chests that they might not be able to tell regular folks, but they could tell their Countryhuman. Korea made them forget all their sad for a li'l bit, and used his speeches to make sure they'd keep fightin'.

He always said SH was wrong when she said he did it to make them feel better, and told her the reason he did it was to gather information about Japan's crimes. But they already had a bunch of information about Sincheon, so he couldn't really use that excuse now.

Hae had always liked the grief circles, even if Korea tried to keep her away from 'em. She liked watching people's tears change from

bad to good as Korea used his words to make them lighter for the first time in a long time, even if it was just for a bit. And she loved seein' him be just a li'l softer than usual, letting people cry into him if they needed to.

But with every step she took across Sincheon, her insides coiled tighter, like a rope bein' round around a bullwheel.

This wasn't goin' to be Korea's grief circle. It was going to be hers. She was going to have to sit and listen to a bunch of stories like San-gon's, and like what she'd seen during the Yankee occupation. She was going to have to hear about all the horrible awful things everyone had gone through while she tried not to think about the horrible awful things she'd seen, and then she was going to have to comfort them, to make them feel better like Korea did, when all she wanted to do was cry and cry. What had happened to San-gon had almost been too much for her, and Hae knew that even though he'd had to hear his mama die for him, and he was never goin' to be able to forget that…

He *had* gotten off lucky. They both had.

The weevil feelin' hadn't gone away, and the shivers hadn't either. They'd faded, but they were still there, pluckin' at her spine like it was some sort of instrument, even though it was warm now that the sun was up.

It got worse when they got within sight of one of the civilian air raid shelters. It was buried in the ground on the edge of the southern fields, near the river, smaller than the Party shelter, but big enough to hold any peasants it needed to.

She guessed she should have known they'd be doin' it underground, since they weren't supposed to gather in groups over twenty, so the planes couldn't take out too many people at once. And they didn't want bombs interruptin' them.

But…

Hae's feet halted her before they reached the end of the dirt path. Her legs were shaking again.

*'Stupid, **stupid.'*** She smacked her fist against her thigh, even though it hurt the burn there.

Korea was right. She'd been here when all the bad stuff was happening. She shouldn't be afraid now that it was over.

"Comrade Hae?"

She looked up and saw everyone else had stopped, lookin' back at her, SH, Hwang, and Jae-soon with worry, and Korea with impatience.

Jae-soon's thick eyebrows were furrowed. "Are you alright?"

"Um…" Hae looked between them and the air raid shelter.

The door opened, a woman stepping out, holding a cigarette in her shaking hands. Behind her, Hae could see the sliver of dark waiting for her.

"Latrine!" Hae blurted, spinnin' on her heels and tearing off down the road so fast she kicked up dust. "SorryKoreaberightback!"

"Hurry," he called, and he definitely knew she was lying 'cuz he sounded really irritated.

Her heart squeezed, but she didn't stop, salutin' on the run, not taking the part of the intersection that led back to the town, but heading for the river a couple hundred paces away. She didn't cross the bridge, instead darting off the road and through the namul planted between the fields and the bank, careful not to crush any of the plants, until she could throw herself down the bank and tumble to a stop next to the water.

Hae popped up, immediately wrapping her arms around her knees and buryin' her face in them.

She didn't want to make Korea mad. She didn't want to make any'a the hurt people wait any longer, and she didn't want to be actin' like such a baby. But she knew if she walked into that hole right now and had to listen to something even mildly upsetting she would burst into tears. And Korea was right, like always- if she did

that, everyone would start tryin' to pretend to be cheerful so they wouldn't upset her any more. They'd keep their bad bits inside. And that was unfair. She'd made it out alive and she'd only got bayoneted and a li'l beat up. *She* wasn't the one that needed comforting- her people were.

Sometimes she wished she was more like Hwang. It wasn't like he knew how to make people feel better. But he knew words, and he was usually pretty good at not burstin' into tears. Even when he cried, he wasn't a baby about it. Only that one time in the City Hall shelter when he'd finally got to see her again. He had good... composure.

Hae had used to be pretty good at not bursting into tears either. But Sincheon had ruined that.

"Comrade Hae?"

Hae raised her head, makin' sure her eyes hadn't started to betray her. They hadn't so she said, "Ayuh?" to the voice that came from up above.

"You aren't actually usin' the latrine, are you?" Jae-soon called hesitantly.

"No," she admitted. The riverbank wouldn't be the best place to do it if she was. "You can come on down."

He did, stepping carefully, glancin' at the groove in the dirt where it was pretty clear someone had rolled down as he did. The older man- Well, not really. He was forty-one, which meant they were the same age- sat down next to her, slingin' an arm over his knee. Hae fixed her position so she was sittin' criss-cross, which was a li'l more professional.

"Comrade Korea wouldn't let our other comrades follow you," Jae-soon remarked after a moment. "I don't think he wanted me followin', either. I had to pretend not to see him glarin' at me."

"Korea's not bein' mean," Hae rushed to tell him. She knew Korea wouldn't want the Public Security officer knowing she was weak,

but she couldn't stand the idea of Jae-soon thinking their Countryhuman was being cruel to her. "He just… Wants me to be able to face this all by myself. And ah need to."

She looked down at her lap. "But ah'm not brave enough."

Jae-soon snorted in amusement, making her pout at him, hurt.

"Why are you laughin'?"

"I won't pretend I completely understand what you two are up to," her friend said. "But Comrade Hae is definitely the bravest one around here."

"Ah'm not," Hae protested. "Ah'm too scared to go in and listen to all the bad things that happened to everyone. Ah just…" She pulled her knees up to her chest, not carin' if it made her look weak. Jae-soon had already seen her cry so hard she threw up anyhow. "Ah want to forget this all ever happened."

Jae-soon's eyes flickered as he looked down at the muddy river water, maybe seein' it how it had looked last year, when it ran red. "I think we all would."

Hae felt worse now. She *could* forget, if Korea told her she could. But Jae-soon couldn't. Not when his wife was still missing. Neither could Ji-ha or San-gon or Old Man Beom or any of the people that had lost someone in the air raid shelter or any of the other massacres.

Jae-soon looked back up at her. "But you aren't. You came back."

Hae put her chin on her knees, her cheeks burnin' with shame. "Ah only came back 'cuz ah knew Korea would want me to."

"Did he *tell* you to?"

She shook her head. "He was waitin' for me to be ready."

"So you made the decision to come back on your own."

"'Cuz ah knew it was what he would do."

That didn't mean she was brave. If she was brave, she would've been able to follow through no problem. Korea wouldn't'a got up on the stage on his birthday, then scampered away before he could say anything. She'd gone to Sincheon in the first place 'cuz she knew he would. But Korea wouldn't have broke down crying in front of their soldiers. Korea never cried.

"But you did come back," Jae-soon said. "Which means it's something *you* would do, too. Can I tell you somethin'?"

Hae nodded, and he shifted to face her.

"There wasn't a single point during those three days last October when I thought you weren't brave. From the moment you got there to the moment we lost you." Jae-soon stated into her eyes, puttin' his hand over his chest. "You never faltered. When we thought Pyongyang had fallen, you didn't even consider leavin'. You launched right into savin' Sincheon. Even though we had less than seven hands worth of people, and barely any weapons, you didn't hesitate to take charge. And you did it all with a smile on your face."

"Ah din't," Hae said miserably, diggin' the tips of her boots into the loose soil. "Ah started bawlin' after we killed Ku Chun-guk, remember? And ah din't know what to do when the radio said Pyongyang fell."

She'd fallen to the ground and hid her head, wantin' nothing more than to curl up in a ball and hide until Korea came to save her.

"And then you got right back up and led us into battle to save that barnful of women and children. Smilin'." Jae-soon put a rough hand on her shoulder, his own lips curved up. "I can guarantee that if you didn't show up, we would've been workin' with a lot less people. And I think it might've just been me, Comrades Ji-ha, Kwang-seok, Ra Hye-in, and Old Man Beom left after that radio announcement. But because of you and how unwaverin' you were, we all kept fightin'. Not a single person that met you here last year would say you weren't brave."

Hae squeezed her legs, hidin' her face in them.

She'd only been unwaverin' because she wanted to see Korea. She had to pretend to be brave 'cuz if she wasn't, she might never get to see him again, and even if she did, he'd be disappointed in her if she gave up. That was the only reason she was able to act like a general. But now Korea was here, and all she wanted to do was cling to his arm and let him take care of all the hard stuff for her.

"But ah can't-"

Hae stiffened, raising her head as she heard somethin'. A low buzz in the distance.

She leaped up, haulin' Jae-soon up with her as she scrambled up the riverbank so she could see the horizon. There in the sky, comin' up from the south-east.

"PLANE!" Hae hollered, hopin' the peasants could hear her. Luckily, the air raid bells started to clang across the river.

"We've got to get 'em out'a the open!" Hae spun around, taking off through the fields.

She could see the men and women that had been sowin' seeds in the harrow trails rushin' for the shelter, Korea, SH, and Hwang runnin' to meet them. Korea threw an old woman onto his back, wheeling around to get her to safety. But farther out in the field-

"The ox!" Hae cried in distress. She thought the plane might just be a shooter, not a bomber, but she knew they'd still aim for the draught animal to try and ruin their plantin'.

The peasant with the harrow was throwing the yoke off and trying to drag the ox toward town, but he was too far out, and his ox din't understand deathbirds, just that his owner was afraid, so he was diggin' his heels in.

"Ah'm comin' to help!" Hae shouted, dodging through rows of soybeans to reach the fallow fields.

"Comrade Hae!" Jae-soon shouted from behind her.

“Go help everyone else!” she called back, not wantin’ to see another comrade get murdered. “And don’t step on the beans!!”

She broke free from them, still watchin’ her footing as she charged across the freshly-harrowed fields so she wouldn’t trample any seed beds. She could hear the plane comin’ closer and see the peasant man shooting looks at the southern plains.

“Run for shelter!” Hae shouted at him. “Ah’ll get him!”

The man hesitated, lookin’ at his ox, then the plane, then ran, kicking up dust as he sprinted after the others.

Hae wasn’t so good with cats or dogs, but she knew how to work farm animals. She slowed to a trot as she reached the ox, smilin’ wide.

“Howdy!” she greeted, pattin’ it on the side, pretending she didn’t hear the jet comin’. “We’ve got to get goin’, Comrade Ox.”

He snorted, swinging his head, antsy from the farmer’s fear.

“Nothin’ to be afraid of,” Hae said, pickin’ up the dropped switch. “We’ve just got to go to the shelter for a li’l while, then you can get back to work.”

She tapped him on the side with the short leather crop, and he started to plod forward, a bit faster without the plough or harrow he was used to, but still too slow.

“Just a bit faster,” Hae said, hittin’ him harder. She always felt a li’l bad about givin’ draught animals the switch, but she knew it didn’t actually hurt with their hides.

“Hae!” SH shouted real loud from the shelter, makin’ the ox snort again.

Hae hushed him, wavin’ her cousin off with her hand. Having someone help wouldn’t make the ox move faster, just freak him out. She smacked him again, shootin’ a look to where the plane was swooping in over the fields across the river.

Its machine guns sputtered, making her heart squeeze, hoping it wasn't shooting at someone who hadn't made it to cover in time.

"Move faster, Comrade Ox," Hae said, then added, "Pretty please. We're almost there."

Just a few dozen more metres. The plane was over the river now and Hae was *not* looking any more. She hoped Korea wouldn't shoot at the jet and scare the ox.

Maybe he did understand deathbirds, 'cuz as the buzz got closer, the ox started to trot, his bell jinglin' as Hae sped up, skippin' next to him until they reached the edge of the field, and Korea and Jae-soon were rushing forward, covering her while she finally snatched the ox's rope halter and hauled him down the broad steps, the peasant man scurrying to help, shoving at the animal's haunches until they had it inside the shelter, just as bullets started to rattle outside.

Hae leapt for the door, but Korea and Jae-soon were already in, slamming it shut behind them. The muffled buzz outside faded, but didn't disappear.

"It will try and make another pass," Korea said immediately, halfway out the door again. "I'll keep watch."

"Korea, it shot at somethin' across the river," Hae told him. "Someone might be hurt."

"You keep watch then. I'll go check."

Hae nodded enthusiastically, even though she felt guilty for bein' glad she wouldn't have to start the grief circle yet. She slunk out after him, Jae-soon coming with her.

"Be safe, Korea!" she called as he set off for the bridge.

He shot her a glare over his shoulder. "When I am back, you *will* be going in there."

Hae wilted, glumly eyeing the plane as it flew over the north of the city, hopin' Ji-ha and the work crew would be alright. They

probably had to hide in that awful burnt shelter.

She wrapped her arms around herself.

"See?" Jae-soon nudged her in the side. "You *are* brave."

Hae looked up at him, confused. "But ah din't do anythin'."

"You went and saved Pak Do-hun's ox, even though you could've been shot. Didn't even hesitate."

The province shook her head. "That wasn't brave. Ah just wanted to make sure we din't lose another draught animal to the miguk-nom. We need 'em so we can feed people, and the well-bein' of the Republic is more precious than life itself."

"And *you* risked yourself for the well-bein' of the Republic," Jae-soon stressed, keepin' an eye on the plane, while Hae kept one on Korea as he crossed the bridge.

It wasn't a risk. Even if Hae had got shot full of holes, Korea would've ran into the field and saved her. She'd be fine after awhile, she'd just be upset she couldn't save the ox.

"But ah wanted to do that," she said. "Doin' somethin' you want to do isn't brave. Doin' something you *don't* want to is."

Like Korea gettin' up on stage to talk to their people, or going to the frontline to visit all their soldiers, even though he wanted to keep avoiding them.

"You came back here, even though you didn't want to."

Hae looked down, then quickly back up at the plane. "But ah'm… afraid."

Her cheeks burned under the bandages as she admitted it. It was dumb. Korea didn't get afraid, so she shouldn't either.

Jae-soon shook his head. "Bein' brave isn't not bein' afraid." He gazed out at the town, followin' the dot of the jet as it soared towards Mount Kuwol. "You know, I didn't want to come back to

Sincheon either."

Hae blinked. "You din't?"

"No. When I thought about comin' back here to my house, and what I might see when I opened the door, who I might not see…" The man took a shuddering breath. "I was afraid to dig up those trenches, too, and bring the bodies from the air raid shelters. I was afraid that some of them might be my neighbours or my friends or my…"

He closed his eyes, so Hae watched the horizon for him.

"And I was afraid durin' the American occupation, too," he continued, voice thick. "When we were bringin' those women to the mountain, we were vulnerable. The Yanks or the puppets or the reactionaries could've swept down on us at any time. And takin' care of that many people in the middle of winter with barely any supplies was harsh. I… thought about just leavin' sometimes. Just pickin' up and goin'."

Hae's eyes widened. "You wouldn't'a!"

"I might've," he said reluctantly. "But whenever the thought crossed my mind, I'd shoo it away. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I knew *you* wouldn't have. Every time I found myself flaggin' on the march or in the mountains, or hesitatin' about whether or not to come back here, you know what I asked myself?"

He smiled at her. "I asked myself 'What would General Hae have done?' And then I kept fightin', even though I was afraid."

Hae stared up at him, her heart swellin'. "Really?"

He nodded. "I wouldn't lie to you. Even if you don't feel brave right now, I promise you you are."

Jae-soon gazed out at the empty fields of Sincheon, still searchin' for someone that wasn't there anymore. "Facing the things that

make us afraid is the bravest thing we can do."

Hae looked down at her hands, fiddlin' with her fingers.

She guessed… that was true. And she *had* gone on to Sincheon, even if she'd just wanted to run back to Hwang. And even though she wanted to curl up and hide she hadn't. She'd ran off to distract the reactionaries, too, even though her legs wouldn't stop shaking.

And maybe she'd done that 'cuz she wanted to see Korea again and she knew it was what he would do, but… Maybe it *was* what she would do, too. She *had* really wanted to save everyone.

Hae looked out at the river, where Korea was helpin' someone across it, their arm around his shoulders as they limped towards them.

Maybe if she kept being brave because she knew Korea would be, one day she'd just be brave because she was. And then maybe she wouldn't be afraid at all, just like him.

The idea made her excited. If that happened, then Korea would *definitely* be impressed with her! He might even pat her on the head!

"Does that mean you've perked up now?" Jae-soon asked in bemusement as Hae vibrated in place.

"Ayuh!" Hae threw herself at him, snatchin' a hug before Korea could get back. "You're right, Jae-soon- ah *am* real brave, and one day ah'm goin' to be even braver! Ah ain't never goin' to be afraid again! And neither are you!"

"That's…" Jae-soon chuckled as he clapped her on the back. "If you say so. I'm lookin' forward to it, Comrade General."

Hae released the Security officer and immediately took off down the road while he watched in confusion.

"KOREAAAAAAAA!"

Korea looked alarmed as she sprinted in, rapidly closin' the

distance between them. “What?”

“You’ve got to hurry,” she urged, bouncin’ in place in front of him and the peasant he was helpin’. “We need to help the people here then get movin’ across the county! We need to speak to as many comrades as possible.”

“Yes,” her Countryhuman said irritably. “That’s what I’ve- South Hwanghae put that man down!”

“Can’t, plane’s comin’ back,” Hae chirped, hoisting the peasant up in her arms with an effort as the jet returned from surveyin’ Mount Kuwol. “Don’t worry,” she assured the terrified man as he clung to her shoulders. “Ah’ve got you!”

He was taller than her and she wasn’t as strong as Pyo, so she couldn’t run back to safety. But she could still waddle faster than the injured man could limp.

“South Hwanghae!”

“Hurryin’!”

Hae was still filled with shivers and weevils, and- even though she really didn’t want to admit it- fear.

But she could *do* this. She could face Sincheon and everything that had been done to her people ‘cuz Korea needed her to.

And she wanted to.

I think it’s fun when they try to say ‘Well the American and South Korean armies *were* in Sincheon (because they undeniably were), but they didn’t participate in the massacre. It was just right-wing youth groups.’ Yes. I am so sure that the American army- which had already committed several massacres at that point and has a well-documented history (and future) of not seeing foreigners as people and committing horrific rapes and tortures against them, plus British and Australian witnesses in other Northern cities that attest to mass burials and shootings by Americans- and the Southern army, which also had several massacres under their belt by

that point (Jeju, Taejon, Seoul, Busan, etc.) just suddenly decided that they would sit back and refuse to partake this one singular time. Not even adding that hey, actually, sitting back and letting your allies do that (right-wing youth groups that supposedly had noooooo equipment or funding by America or Rhee (we know now that many of them did) and as such should have very little weaponry or training) when you could easily stop them would be pretty much the same as doing it yourself. If I saw a guy raping a woman, I'd bash his brains in. But if I saw a guy watching I'd off him, too. Maybe the crime isn't the same but the punishment should be.

Also you can see in the US communiques to the UN that they *were* targeting ox carts. This is a direct line from the Far East Naval Forces summary for Tuesday September 16th (the day this chapter takes place on): 'In the Yellow Sea, British pilots from the carrier HMS Ocean hit targets from Haeju to Chinnampo. A troops headquarters was destroyed, along with seventeen ox carts, two rail bridges, two road bridges, seventeen sampans, one building, and one large brick shed.' And these ox carts wouldn't have just been left in the open while not being used, especially with all the DPRK's precautions. It doesn't matter if one is being used to plow the field- it *could* be used to carry ammunition to the front. Sick people I hope they're suffering on the street or in Hell now.

Claw Your Way Out

TW: Discussion of sexual assault of women and minors. Not graphic, just the emotional aspect of it.

Hae faced the air raid shelter (Jae-soon had already taken the slightly injured and even more confused peasant inside). It wasn't as dark as it could be since the people in it had lit up a couple lanterns.

But shadows still clung to the walls like the sooty dust in the Party shelter.

'No flinchin'!'

Hae took one more look at Korea, who nodded at her before liftin' his head to the sky, keeping lookout as the plane circled Sincheon again.

She could do this.

The province drew herself up, then skipped into the shelter.

This one could fit maybe fifty people comfortably, but there were only around forty in it, sitting on cushions and wooden chairs that'd been brought in to make the place more comfortable, with a few squatting around a game of pumpkin gonu that was scratched into the dirt floor. There were two hands' worth of the peasants that had been workin' the fields, but the rest were the people Hae was here to meet.

She could tell them apart easy, and not just 'cuz'a their clothes. The peasants were used to being interrupted by the deathbirds, so having to cut and run didn't bother them none. They were just chattin' or taking a nap while they waited to get back to work.

The witnesses were different. They were fidgeting and kept dartin' glances at the door, like they were afraid someone might burst in.

And they were mostly women, like SH had said before.

A few were talking with each other, whispering and shaking their heads. Two women stood off to the side, one of them occasionally murmuring something to her friend. She didn't look like she was listenin', staring warily at the men, both the peasants and the few male witnesses, in between shooting looks at a younger woman standing in the corner, dressed in a nice sky blue blouse and skirt. She didn't pay any attention, looking down at the sling around her chest, which Hae realized had a baby in it.

The woman Hae had seen smoking outside had lit another cigarette, and was fillin' the room with the smell of smoke. She usually liked the smell of tobacco, but here, buried under the earth like this…

'Nope! Not thinkin' about it!'

"Howdy, y'all!" she chirped, trying to drown out the sound as she closed the door behind her.

Everyone bowed to her, one of the women greetin' her as she did. "Comrade South Hwanghae."

"You can just call me Hae." She knew no one would. Everyone always added 'comrade,' even the Gen'ral. She couldn't even get 'em to use 'dongmu' instead of 'dongji.' "And he's just Hwang." She pointed at her brother, who was talkin' to the peasant with the ox, and he pushed his glasses up, waving.

"Alright, Comrade Hae." The smokin' woman sounded steadier than Hae had thought she would, steadier than her hands at least. "When do we start pouring our hearts out?"

"We can collect your testimonies once the enemy plane has departed," Hwang said, really meanin' 'When everyone else gets out of here.'

Hae didn't really like how 'collecting testimonies' sounded. She caught her brother's eye, frownin' slightly.

‘Too clinical again.’

He hung his head.

Hae put her hands on her hips. “While we wait for the miguk-nom to fly off, why don’t we all introduce ourselves?”

Everyone did. She learned that the smokin’ woman was Ro Kwan-rin, the one with the baby was Ko Kuil-hwa, the one that kept lookin’ at her funny was Yang Jeong-nyeo and her friend (who was actually her cousin) was Yang Yang-sin. And the ox’s name was Plodder, which Hae thought was sort of mean. She would have called him Bulgogi.

By the time they were done, Korea had ducked back into the shelter and given the all-clear, so Hae said goodbye to Plodder and all the peasants as they left to return to plantin’.

“Work hard!” she called, really *really* wishin’ she could go with them.

But she didn’t. Jae-soon left to take the injured man to the medic, givin’ her an encouraging smile before he did.

“Comrades,” Korea called, his voice immediately catchin’ everyone’s attention. “I have my own investigation to conduct across Sincheon, so I’m afraid I’ll have to leave you now. But you’re in good hands with Comrades South and North Hwanghae, and South Hamgyong.”

He slid his eye to Hae, lettin' her know it was *her* hands he expected to hold them.

Everyone said bye, and he turned for the door. As he passed Hae, he muttered, too low for anyone to hear, “Don’t handle this how I would.”

She didn’t get a chance to respond before Korea shut the door, sealing them all underground.

Hae took a shaky breath, and she thought Kwan-rin might’ve, too.

The province exhaled slowly, then spun around with a smile on her face. “Alright comrades, make yourselves comfy. We’re not interrogatin’ anyone. We just want to hear for ourselves what the Yankees did.”

“Didn’t the foreign women already come here and ask their questions? Didn’t the government?” Yang Jeong-nyeo asked, wringin’ her hands 'round and 'round. “I thought it was done, I thought it was over.”

“This is voluntary,” SH soothed from where she was standin’ with some of the other women. “If you don’t want to share what happened to you, you don’t have to.”

“I don’t want to,” Jeong-nyeo’s voice was sort of shrill, like Gang’s got when he was real nervous. “I want to go home.”

She twitched towards the door, but her cousin caught the sleeve of her choson-ot. “Jeong-nyeo, stay. This will be good for you.”

“I don’t want to be in here with that *thing!”* Jeong-nyeo hissed, her brown eyes flashing.

Hae followed her glare, puzzled to see she was looking at Kuil-hwa. The young mother drew her baby closer to her chest.

Yang-sin winced, but none of the women or men stood up for Kuil-hwa.

“Don’t force her to stay if she doesn’t want to,” SH said, which was good because Hae didn’t know what to do. She smiled at Jeong-nyeo. “You don’t have to tell anyone anything.”

“But it might make you feel better,” Hae piped up, even though her belly was churnin’. What had been done to the woman to make it so she was still so distressed almost a whole year later?

Jeong-nyeo hesitated, her eyes darting between the men, Kuil-hwa, and then back to SH. Then, ‘cuz SH had a smile that made you feel like everythin’ was going to be okay, she hunched her shoulders and stepped back towards her cousin, who put an arm around her.

“Let’s sit down, okay?” Yang-sin guided her over to a wooden crate, and the man nearby respectfully stepped away. SH followed, putting herself between the nervous woman and the rest of the room.

Hae bobbed her head, pleased, though she glanced at Kuil-hwa, still confused by how Jeong-nyeo had glared at her. The mother smiled at her, a li’l sad, as she settled herself against one of the wall supports.

“Okay!” the province said, taking up a spot in front of the door. “Who wants to go first?”

No one spoke. One of the men looked at the ground. Jeong-nyeo shrank into Yang-sin. Kuil-hwa toyed with the edge of her baby’s sling.

Hae looked to SH for help. But her cousin glanced at the door, then bit her lip apologetically.

She knew Korea would be able to get someone to talk. But she wasn’t good at ordering people around the way he was, and he’d said not to handle it like he would anyway.

An idea popped into her mind. It really wasn’t one Korea would have used, and it made her want to curl up into a ball again. But it might work, if she could manage not to be a cry-baby.

Hae sucked in a breath. “Ah’ll go first then.”

Hwang’s eyes widened and everyone else looked at her, too.

A man in a hood asked, “You really were in Sincheon last year?”

She nodded. “Ayuh. Only for a few days, but ah was workin’ with the militia the whole time. Ah’ll tell y’all all about it.”

Hae launched into her account, startin’ with her and her brother meeting Sok-young on the road. She was careful to keep her tone cheery, even when she started slippin’ into the Military Report voice. If she started mumbling or crying, everyone would feel sorry for her, and start trying to cheer her up. But if she pretended none’a

it bothered her, maybe everyone would feel like their own stories were easier to tell.

Her eyes burned a li'l when she talked about Kwang-seok, but she forced herself to keep smilin', only stopping to praise him.

'No cryin'!'

When she was done, one of the men spat on the floor. Gross. "Those bastards. What happened in the camp?"

"Nothin' important," she said confidently. She didn't want to distract anyone from what they were here for, and she knew Korea wouldn't want their people to know about the Southern One's part in keepin' her locked up. "So, who's next?"

Yang-sin looked at Jeong-nyeo, but her cousin shrank down.

"I'll go." The man in the hood stood up, and pulled it back.

Hae couldn't stop her eyes from widening. Burns covered half his face, not wet and bloody like hers, but dry scars that made his skin look all pruny, like Pyobu's had when he came back from his mission. His short hair only grew on the left side of his scalp- the rest of it was thick pink tissue that ran down his face, swelling his eye shut and twisting the corner of his lips before disappearing into the collar of his workshirt.

"What happened?" Hae asked, makin' sure she didn't sound as alarmed as she felt. For the first time, she *really* appreciated that her burns didn't work like normal ones.

"Reaction'ries lit me on fire." His mangled lips made the words slur together, and Hae could see flashes of too much tooth when he spoke. "My fault I guess- I was in the Worker's Party."

He sounded like he was trying to make a joke, but his expression didn't match it.

"Folks kept comin' to me to see if I knew when the army was comin' back," he slurred. "The Skull and Crossbones Unit caught on. Dragged me and my wife from our house and doused us in gas'line."

His good eye flickered as he looked down. “I was the only one that made it.”

The room went quiet. Hae wanted to say she was sorry, but it didn’t feel like that was enough. And she wasn’t sure if he’d appreciate ‘She gave her life for our country’ when his wife hadn’t died in combat.

Hwang saved her by being insensitive again. “Did you say you *were* in the Worker’s Party?”

Hae squinted at her brother while the man nodded dejectedly. “I resigned after. The masses don’t want someone that looks like *this* vanguardin’ them.” He gestured to his burnt face.

“No one thinks that way, Mr. Kang,” one of the women said gently. “No one but you.”

Hae nodded enthusiastically, seeing a place to help. “Ah think you still look handsome.”

Kang Dong-joon’s lips twisted more, but his eye stayed on the floor. “I’m well-aware I look like a freak. I have one eye and I look like someone tried to make kimchi out of me, but gave up halfway.”

Vigorously shakin’ her head, Hae denied, “Nope! There’s nothin’ wrong with only havin’ one eye. Korea only has one eye.”

Dong-joon blinked, and someone else echoed, “Comrade Korea only has one eye?”

‘Oops.’ Hae could feel disapproval seepin’ through the door at her back, and knew she was going to get beat with a sandal later. Or a military boot since that was all they had right now.

“Ayuh,” she said, quickly movin’ on before they could ask any more about it. She would love to tell them the Southern One had taken Korea’s eye, so they’d be just as peeved at him as her. But Korea didn’t want that. “And *he* doesn’t look like a freak. He’s still real handsome.”

More door disapproval.

“Be that as it may, Comrade Korea isn’t covered in these.” Dong-joon touched his burnt face.

Korea wouldn’t want her talkin’ about his burns, so Hae said instead, “But a lot’a other revolutionaries are. And ah am.” She peeled back one of the bandages on her cheek, wincin’ as the medical tape stuck to her skin. “Ah’m covered in ‘em,” she said cheerily as everyone eyed her burnt-up face with a mix of anger, sadness, and worry.

Hae didn’t want to make anyone feel bad for her, so she pasted the bandage back on, pattin’ it down.

“Mine aren’t goin’ to stick around,” she told him. “But they’re here right now. You don’t think *ah* look like a freak, do ya?”

Maybe she sounded just a li’l more concerned than she should. ‘Cuz actually, what if he said she did? Then her point would be gone and she’d be upset to boot.

But Dong-joon shook his head right away.

“Exactly,” Hae said, relieved. “And if they did stay around, do you think ah’d look like a freak then?”

Again he shook his head. “Comrade Hae’s burns represent the destruction the Yankee army has brought to Korea, and the resilience of our country in withstanding it. They could never look freakish.”

“And your burns represent that, too,” Hae told him. “They came after you ‘cuz you did good for our country. And you were resilient enough to survive it. Any’a our people would be happy to have you vanguardin’ them.”

The other townsfolk nodded, and she beamed at him. “And ah think the scars make you look dashin’.”

The cheek that wasn’t covered in scar tissue turned red, and Dong-joon hid his face.

“I’ll… think about reapplyin’,” he mumbled into his chest. “If

they'll have me after I wavered."

"You didn't waver ideologically," Hwang said, finally sayin' something that was halfway sensitive. "You wavered on yourself. If you explain your circumstances, I'm sure you'll be allowed to return."

Hae nodded. "We'll vouch for ya!"

Dong-joon breathed in slowly, then dipped his head. "Thank you, comrades."

Hae felt silly for ever thinkin' her gap tooth would make people think she looked ugly. Dong-joon's burns were way more noticeable, but even though they were awful 'cuz of how he'd got them, she couldn't see them as ugly no matter how she looked at him.

It made her happy to see that when he sat back down, he didn't put his hood back up.

Success! Thrilled by it, Hae turned back to the rest of the room, grinnin'.

"Who wants to go next?"

It took over an hour to go through everyone in the shelter, each story worse than the last. One of the other men had watched his best friend be dragged off for snickering at an anti-American poster someone had put up, and he couldn't do anything to stop it. He'd found him later, buried in a shallow grave and sawed in half at the waist. A woman's husband had been snatched out of the rice mill and driven into the countryside. He hadn't come back. Another had to watch her fifteen-year old son be shot for trying to stop a reactionary from beating her. Ro Kwan-rin had been buried alive, and the only reason she hadn't died was because she'd been near the top and was able to make a small air hole, which explained why she looked about as happy to be underground as Hae felt.

When she thought of that, of being trapped under the earth, the bodies of her friends and neighbours underneath and on top of her

as she took slow, shallow breaths for hours until the puppets left, buried in a mass grave like a corpse, Hae's lungs drew tight. It was worse than the hole. Worse than *anythin'*.

She hoped that shot had killed San-gon's mama.

Every time someone finished talking, it got harder and harder for Hae to think of ways to cheer them up, or at least make them stop crying. It got harder and harder for her not to.

There were only twenty-seven of them. And while it was a big number when it came to people who were hurtin', it didn't even fill the air raid shelter. But a dozen places like this one had been filled with bodies, hundreds of them. *Thousands.* And even more had suffered. Even the ones that hadn't had anythin' happen to them, like Yang-sin, knew people that had.

Hae listened intently to each story, not just so she'd know what had been done once the enemy had finished with her, but so she could try and comfort the ones tellin' it. The man couldn't have helped his friend- they had promised each other to take care of the other's wife if one of 'em died. The woman had done everything she could to find her husband, from following the truck to interrogating the reactionaries to putting up posters now. Kwan-rin was brave and strong and going through what she had was worth it so they could know just how evil the miguk-nom and their puppets really were.

She tried to work at the knots of pain and unravel them, or at least loosen them. But it was getting too hard to keep smilin' at them when they were finished. Her face felt like it was cracking, and not from the burns that her peeling medical tape kept revealing.

"Ah'm so sorry," she said to the old lady that had just told her in a shaking voice that both her legs had been broken by a boy she'd used to nag for runnin' in the marketplace.

"They was actin' just like the Japs," the grey-haired woman said in a thin voice as she trembled. "All of 'em. 'Twere like the years ran back."

“But they didn’t,” Hae said, walkin’ over to stand next to her chair. “The Japanese are all gone. And soon the reaction’ries and the Yanks will be, too. And they won’t be settin’ foot in Sincheon before then. This is our land and we ain’t goin’ to let *anyone* take it away from us ever again, even if they used to live here.”

She smiled confidently, and the grandmother let out a shaky sigh, noddin’.

“If I might ask,” Hwang cut in. “What was the boy’s name?”

“Shin Kyong-gu, Minister Shin’s boy.” The old woman spat a glob of saliva onto the floor. Grosssss. “We ran him outta town after Liberation for collaboratin’ with the Japs. But they came back.”

Hwang frowned. “I don’t recall seeing his name on the list of those charged so far. Did he escape to the south again?”

Something in the bunker changed. Hae didn’t really know what, but a few of the townsfolk gave each other looks, the old woman’s grandson included. They were using their own silent language, like her an’ her cousins did.

After a weird second, the old woman turned to Hwang, her wrinkly face unreadable.

“Ayuh. They did.”

Hwang clicked his tongue. “Then I assure you once we win this war, we will make every effort to find him and bring him to justice.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Comrade Hwang,” her grandson said before the grandmother hushed him sharply.

“Ah,” Hwang said after a moment. “I see.”

Hae didn’t. How could they not worry about whether or the bastard that had broken an old woman’s legs was still out there or not? If he’d waited five years to come back, he would defiantly do it again and hurt someone else.

But her brother was already sayin' to forget he asked, so she tucked away a reminder to ask later.

Jeong-nyeo and Kuil-hwa were the only two who hadn't shared their experiences yet, so Hae looked between them as she said, "Who's next?"

The older woman looked away, her hands ballin' in the skirts of her choson-ot, and the young mother gazed down at her baby.

"Come on, comrades, don't be shy," Hae said, then saw SH's look and remembered to add, "You don't have to. But if ya think it would make you feel even a *li'l* bit better, then you should."

"I'll go," Kuil-hwa quietly volunteered. She was sittin' on the floor with her legs curled up sideways underneath her. She drew them in closer, cradling the baby in the sling.

Hae caught the way Jeong-nyeo glared at her again. SH had seen it, too, but when she furrowed her eyebrows at her, her cousin just gave her a tiny head shake.

Kuil-hwa's voice was so soft, they almost had to stop breathin' to hear her speak.

"We went to the market," she said, her eyes on her baby. "It was only two weeks since the Americans occupied us, and I knew it still wasn't safe in town. But the consumer's cooperative was shut down almost immediately, the rations still weren't being distributed, and we'd lost our pantries in the bombings. Our parents needed food. So my husband and I figured it would be okay so long as we went together."

"That never stopped them," one of the women muttered bitterly.

"No," Kuil-hwa agreed quietly. "I know that now." She took a shaky breath. "When we got to the market we couldn't afford anything. Everyone was raising prices, trying to make enough to get out of town, and no one was doing anything to stop them."

Hae got why someone would be desperate to get out of Sincheon, and she knew the miguk-nom were worse for refusing to distribute

aid or keep the ration system running. But she still wished she could track down everyone that had been profiteerin' and give them a piece of her mind.

"We went to leave, but then a couple Yankee soldiers started tailing us," Kuil-hwa continued. "They followed us from the market. I don't know what they were saying, but they were jeering and whistling, and one of them was waving American money around."

Hae saw SH's jaw feather like Korea's as her eyes narrowed.

"My husband had enough, and he started yelling back at them, calling them bastards, telling them to go back where they came from." Kuil-hwa's hold on her baby tightened. "I begged him to just be quiet, told him that I didn't mind. But… he wouldn't. He was like that ever since we were kids- he couldn't stand to let someone humiliate me. And they got mad. They dragged us out to the edge of town and made him watch as they…"

She started to shake, and SH quickly went to her side as she curled into a ball around her baby.

"It's okay," she soothed, crouchin' next to her. "It's over. You're safe now."

Kuil-hwa started to cry, soft gaspin' sounds that made Hae's heart hurt.

"Oh *please."*

The words were loud enough in the hush to make Hae jump. They all looked to see who'd spoken.

Jeong-nyeo was standing up, her fists balled at her sides as Yang-sin tried to pull her back onto the crate.

"Jeong-nyeo-"

"No!" she snapped, shaking her off. "I'm sick of sittin' here and pretendin' like she has any right to be here with us, like she has *any* right to play victim."

Hae blinked, shocked. She thought one of the others might jump to Kuil-hwa's defense, but again, no one did. Only SH.

"Comrade Ko Kuil-hwa *is* a victim," she said firmly, something flickerin' across her eyes. "If she's telling the truth- and we are *not* accusing any of our comrades here of being liars- then she is just as much a victim of the Yankees' violence as anyone in here."

"Really?" Jeong-nyeo sneered. "Then ask her why she's keepin' their spawn."

Kuil-hwa flinched, wrappin' her arms around her baby protectively.

Hae didn't get it at first, but Hwang's eyes widened right away. "You're saying…?"

"I'm saying she's awfully eager to raise something that was supposedly forced on her."

All the townsfolk turned their eyes on Kuil-hwa, but now Hae realized it wasn't her they were glarin' at, but the baby. Even SH drew back a li'l, something twistin' her expression. Hae would've expected her to look at a Yankee soldier that way, but not a kid.

"Jun-seong might have been forced on me," Kuil-hwa said under the watching eyes. "But that doesn't matter. He's still mine."

"'Jun.'" Jeong-nyeo snorted hatefully. "I wonder how your husband would've felt knowing you named another man's child like it was his. You can tell everyone he killed himself because he couldn't bear the shame of not being able to protect his wife, but you know what *I* think?"

"Jeong-nyeo," Yang-sin pleaded, trying to grab her cousin. But she shoved her away, stalking towards Kuil-hwa.

"I think he tied that noose because he couldn't stand that his wife is a slut who goes around spreading her legs for the first handsome foreigner she sees."

Hae gaped in dismay, and Kuil-hwa shouted, "That's not true! I

love Yeong-jun! I never would have chosen to be unfaithful to him. *Never."*

"But you're keepin' the son of the man that raped you!" Jeong-nyeo snarled. "You're raisin' the thing that the man that made him kill himself planted in you."

"That isn't Jun-seong's fault!" the mother cried, her voice echoing around the shelter. It made her son wake up, and his li'l pink face scrunched up as he started to cry.

Jeong-nyeo flinched back at the sound, fear contorting her features, like he was a full-grown Yankee soldier and not a two-month old baby.

"If you had suffered the way I had you would *never* want to keep that thing," she said, her voice low and shaky now. "You would've carved out your womb before you let *that* out of it."

"Ms. Yang." Kuil-hwa was quieter, too, as she bounced her baby on her knee. "I know what you went through, but I-"

"No you don't!" Jeong-nyeo exploded again. "If you did you would kill that thing before it grows into a monster like them and does what monsters do!"

"He's just a child," the younger woman pled. "He isn't responsible for how he was made. And I *am* responsible for what he turns into. My son won't be a monster. See?"

She pulled the white fabric of the sling away from his face. He'd stopped crying with her bouncin', and looked more tired again. He made a gurgling noise that Hae thought was pretty cute, and stretched out a tiny fist. He looked like any other baby she'd ever seen- round-faced and a li'l wrinkly, sort of like a dried plum.

But Jeong-nyeo's chest started to heave as she stumbled backwards, almost tripping over her own feet. She glanced frantically around the room, her eyes bulging out'a her head.

Yang-sin reached for her again, tryin' to get an arm around her shoulders. "Jeong-nyeo, it's okay. Just breathe-"

"Don't touch me!" Jeong-nyeo snapped, shoving her away. "Get away from me, just-! I can't be in here with that thing, I can't-"

She didn't finish her sentence, turning and fleeing, ignoring Yang-sin as she called for her, bursting out of the bunker and disappearing up the stairs. Her cousin followed, slamming the door behind her.

Everyone stared after them in stunned silence, Hae especially.

She couldn't understand why the older woman had said something so cruel to Kuil-hwa after they'd gone through what she thought must be the same thing by how Jeong-nyeo had been talking.

And she couldn't understand how *still* no one was tryin' to comfort Kuil-hwa. She was curled up on the floor, practically sinkin' into the wall with her face buried in her son's sling, and everyone was just ignoring her, staring at the dirt walls or floor like they were purposefully tryin' not to even look at her. Hwang was at least tryin' to catch SH's attention with his eyes to get her to say something, but SH was just staring at the door, her face blank. It was a scary look, but not as scary as how she'd looked at Jun-seong.

Hae looked between them all, baffled, givin' 'em a few more seconds just in case they just couldn't think of anything to say, like Hwang. But still, no one spoke or even came over to pat the shaking woman on the arm.

"What's wrong with y'all?"

The townsfolk all looked at her, a few cringin' all guiltylike, like Pyobu when Korea demanded to know who'd done Pyo's chores for her. It made Hae even madder.

"Comrade Kuil-hwa just had somethin' real awful said to her. Why aren't any of you tryin' to make her feel better?"

"It's alright, Comrade Hae-"

"No it *ain't!"* Hae cut Kuil-hwa off, stomping her foot as she glared at the bunker full of people. "Y'all're neighbours, even if you never

met before today! You can't let someone be mean to a comrade just 'cuz ya don't like her baby. It ain't *his* fault his daddy was a Yankee and it certainly ain't hers!"

Everyone looked even more guilty now, and SH shook herself, comin' back from wherever she'd been.

"Comrade Hae is right," she said, returnin' to Kuil-hwa's side. "It doesn't matter if the baby is half-Yankee. Like Comrade Korea and Comrade Kim Il-sung say- 'A person isn't defined by their origins, but by their thoughts and actions.' And I'm sure Comrade Ko Kuil-hwa won't raise a man like the Americans and their puppets."

Kuil-hwa nodded, takin' Hae's hand so she could pull her to her feet. "He's half-Korean, too, and that's how he'll be raised. If people didn't *talk,* I bet no one would even be able to tell the difference."

A few of the townsfolk lowered their eyes.

"Exactly," Hae *'hmph'*ed. "He's just a baby, and ah don't want to see any of y'all treatin' him like he's not. *Or* treatin' Comrade Kuil-hwa badly. And ah want you to step up if you ever see someone else doin' it. *Promise."*

She frowned menacingly at them until Dong-joon stood up.

"I promise," he said, a hand over his heart. "And as a former Worker's Party member, I should have remembered our General's words and intervened sooner. Personal factionalism may be different than political factionalism, but it's no less dangerous to the fabric of our society. I'm sorry, Comrade Ko."

He bowed at the waist, and the mother dipped her head, acceptin' a few other apologies and promises to look out for her.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Hae nodded in satisfaction. "That's better. We ain't like the reaction'ries- we can't go around tearin' each other apart."

"Thank you, Comrade Hae." Kuil-hwa hugged her son tighter to her chest. "I know my decision is unpopular. It is with my family,

too, and… Yeong-jun's. But…" She looked down at her son, her dark eyes softenin'. "If I hadn't found out I was pregnant, I wouldn't have been able to go on living after losing him."

The baby reached out for Hae with a tiny fist, and she gave him her hand, vibratin' as he wrapped his stubby fingers around one of hers.

'Cute!' Not as cute as a puppy or kitten, but still cute.

Kuil-hwa's eyes brimmed with love. "Jun-seong is worth any hardship."

Hae worked her finger free, even though the baby didn't want to let her go and was surprisin'ly strong.

"Keep your head up, comrade," she said to Kuil-hwa, then marched for the door.

"Comrade Hae?" someone called. "Where are you goin'?"

"To make sure Comrade Jeong-nyeo is okay."

"Hae." SH hustled after her, catchin' her just outside the shelter where no one could hear them. "Be careful with what you say to her. Don't tell her she's wrong for what she's feeling."

"She *is* wrong," Hae huffed. "You can't hate someone for what someone else did, 'specially a baby. And *you* should be more mad about what she said to Comrade Kuil-hwa."

Hae didn't know what 'slut' meant, but SH had flinched when it was said, so it made her think of one of Chungnam's words.

"I am," SH said defensively. "It was definitely wrong of her to say that, and it's… wrong for her to think that. But it isn't wrong that she feels that way. She can't help it, and she doesn't need to be told that her feelings are irrational right now."

"Ah wasn't goin' to," Hae replied indignantly. "Ah know she's hurtin', too."

Just because she was being mean didn't mean she wasn't. It meant she was.

"I'm sorry," SH said, lettin' go of her wrist. "I know you're usually good with things like that. I just…"

She tugged at the hem of her tunic, and Hae smiled at her.

"It's alright," she said, silently forgivin' her for the way she'd looked at Jun-seong.

"Do you need any help?"

Hae looked around, then back at SH, who nodded.

"Right. You can handle it on your own." Her cousin gazed over at the river. Her fists tightened, then she went back inside.

Hae girded herself, then started down the road she'd ran down earlier, towards someone in pain instead of away.

'No lookin' away.'

The peasants were all down at the far end of the field now, so the afternoon was quiet as she marched along the dirt path. She could feel an eye on her, but maybe that was just 'cuz she knew Korea was nearby. He must have moved fast when he heard Jeong-nyeo bolting for the door.

She met Yang-sin at the intersection. The woman was rubbin' her hands together in worry, her eyes fixed on the bridge over the river.

Jeong-nyeo was sitting on the edge like a kid, her heels danglin' over the water a few feet below, her face in her hands. Hae was too far away to see, but she thought she might be crying.

"Comrade South Hwanghae!" Yang-sin spun when she heard her approach, clingin' to her shoulders. "Please go talk to her! She won't talk to me and I- I don't know what to say anyways."

Hae guessed since she thought *she* would, she'd been doing a good job comfortin' folks. But she didn't really know either.

“She used to be so… open,” Yang-sin said, her eyes sad as she looked over her shoulder. “She was always so upbeat and hard-workin’. She was the sweetest thing. But ever since she moved in with me, she barely speaks or eats. She won’t work the fields, and she can’t go to the market or anywhere else. The only man she can even be alone around is my husband, and she still shuts down when he enters the room. I’m…”

Tears ran down her face as she looked back at Hae. “I’m *really* worried for her. We grew up together, we’re more like sisters than cousins. And every time I leave for work, I’m so scared that when I get home I’ll find her…” Her voice broke. “I don’t want to lose her. *Please,* Comrade Hae."

Her desperation made Hae want to hide in the soybeans. What if she couldn’t help her? What if she said the wrong thing and Jeong-nyeo ended up…?

She could still feel Korea watching her, so she straightened up, smilin’ reassuringly.

“Don’t worry!” she chirped, heading confidently off. “Ah’ll make sure her condition’s just fine!”

Hopefully.

Hae forged forward, ‘cuz Korea was watching and also because she really didn’t want to leave Jeong-nyeo sitting all small and lonely on the bridge like that.

The bridge was simple, with no railings or anything fancy ‘cuz it would just get blown up again. But it was sturdy enough to hold a couple of oxen or any military trucks it needed to, so it didn’t do anythin’ more than rattle as Hae flopped down next to Jeong-nyeo on the wooden planks.

“Howdy,” she said, as friendly as possible so she would know she wasn’t here just to scold her for bein’ mean to Kuil-hwa.

Still, Jeong-nyeo muttered, “I know I shouldn’t have said that to Ms. Ko.”

Her voice was all raspy, and Hae could tell she'd been crying for sure.

"No," Hae said, because even if she wouldn't tell her she was wrong for feelin' that way, she should know she should never say something like that again. "It was sort'a awful."

Jeong-nyeo closed her eyes. "I didn't mean it. I know she isn't lyin' about what happened to her. I just… How can she *keep* it? She's so young, and after everythin' that happened to her, how she even stand to *look* at that thing?"

Hae didn't really like that she was callin' Jun-seong a thing, but she didn't want to stop her from talkin'.

"'Cuz he's her baby," she said. "And she knows it isn't his fault."

"I know that, too, but-" Jeong-nyeo pulled her legs up to her chest. "I just don't *get* it."

"Ah don't think you have to," Hae said after thinkin' a second. "She's the only one that has to. All everyone else has to do is support her as their comrade."

Jeong-nyeo's black bun swayed as she shook her head. "I can't. I'll keep my mouth shut and not bother her, but I can't support her."

"Maybe you could at least say sorry?"

She shook her head again. "No. I *am* sorry, and you can tell her that. But I can't be around her. Or that *thing."*

That made Hae sad. She'd been hopin' she could get them to make up, and maybe be friends. They both seemed a li'l lonely after all. Maybe they just needed more time.

Jeong-nyeo was silent, starin' off into the southern fields across the river. Hae kicked her heels in the air, watching the water flow by below, all green and muddy, tryin' to think of how to get her to talk.

"Comrade Yang-sin's real worried for you," she said eventually.

“She said she doesn’t know what to say to you.”

“I know.” Jeong-nyeo tore her gaze away to look down the road, where her cousin was still watching them, her hands clasped together. “She wouldn’t.”

Hae frowned. “Why not?”

“She’s never had to suffer,” Jeong-nyeo said eventually. “It wasn’t *her* ma that died, or *her* pa that gave her to his brother. She wasn’t the one that got sold off, or whose husband died at the front or whose daughter…”

She trailed off, then said, “I’m not jealous,” even though to sounded a li’l like she was. “I love Yang-sin. I’m glad nothing happened to her when the Yanks were here. But…” Her eyes fell to the river. “She’s never had to fight to be happy. I have. And now that I can’t anymore, she can’t understand.”

“…Ah might,” Hae ventured.

Jeong-nyeo’s eyes flickered. “I mean this with all respect possible, Comrade Hae, but as awful as you had it last year, until you’ve been…” She raised her head, lookin’ suddenly alarmed. “You said you got taken to a POW camp. Did somethin’ happen to you there?”

Hae almost said that plenty had, before what she meant clicked.

“Nothin’ like that,” she said carefully. “Ah’ve never had that happen to me.”

She’d never entirely understood what ‘that’ was until Sincheon. Even after she got all the common sense that her cousins did after the first Foundation Day, she hadn’t really ever thought about it because she wasn’t supposed to have to think about awful things anymore. And after Sincheon, and some of the things she’d seen in the chaos, she’d tried not to.

But Ko Kuil-hwa and her baby made it impossible for her to pretend she still didn’t know why Korea would always have her keep watch when they were investigating a village the Japanese army had came through, refusing to let her into any of the houses,

and chase her away from grief circles, or why SH had looked at her the way she had after they'd rescued her, like she was searching for something invisible on her skin, or what her and South Chungcheong's argument that one time had really been about, or why Jae-soon hadn't let her in the barn last year.

She understood now why she was supposed to tell everyone SH had worked in a factory during the Occupation, even though she'd told Hae she'd been living in a house while she entertained people, and why Hwang had always told her to stop asking what instruments she played. And she understood that she'd been real lucky it had never happened to *her*.

Big Nose and his stinking breath flashed through her mind, the *wrong* feeling as his hand rucked up her shift coming back, even though she'd tried to bury it a long time ago.

"But ah *have* suffered." It felt weird to say that about the hole. The hole hadn't been sufferin'. It hadn't been anything. She wasn't supposed to think about it anymore 'cuz Korea was remembering it for her.

Sincheon was suffering. Not because she'd been beat and bayoneted and lost her tooth, but because she'd had to watch her people die. She'd had to see them burnt like chunks of meat, and see what someone's insides looked like when they were out, and had to hear Ra Hye-in sacrifice herself and had to put Kim Moon-sik out of his sufferin' herself.

The hole wasn't suffering 'cuz it had happened to *her* and she'd lived through it and she couldn't even remember much of it now.

But she guessed it probably was suffering to Korea and her cousins. As upset as she was whenever she saw Korea's scar or thought about how Sang had been worked like a slave or now how SH had…

Their pain was suffering to Hae because she loved them. So hers was probably suffering to them. And maybe Yang Jeong-nyeo would see it that way, too.

"Ah'll tell you all about it," she said, tryin' to sound confident, even though thinkin' about the hole, even thinking of *trying* to remember it made the bad thoughts well out of her and made her want to crawl under the bridge until Korea came and got her. "Then you can decide if ah can understand."

"…Alright," Jeong-nyeo whispered.

Hae pulled her legs up under her, getting comfortable and getting as close to huggin' herself as she could without actually doing it. She didn't have Korea here to make her give the Military Report, but she tried to turn her brain off the same way and not think about what she was sayin'.

She guessed it was a good thing 'Merica and the Southern One locking her up had made her think about Big Nose and the hole. She had more to report.

She'd never had to tell anyone about it before. Korea made sure everyone knew that bad things had happened to the provinces during the Occupation, 'cuz everyone needed to know why they hadn't been fightin' for them for the first decade, but he also told them not to say too much about it. Hae had told journalists and politicians and other peasants that she'd been locked up in a cellar by Japan, but nothing else.

Now she told Jeong-nyeo about Japan and the rat and the needles and the beetle and the maggoty rice Big Nose would bring her, and thinking about how it felt to swallow the wrigglin' larvae made Hae remember other things. How he would stand there and eat his good-smelling dinner while she lay in the corner, her stomach growling. How he'd mock her and call her 'chosenjin' which she'd never realized was supposed to be an insult until Hwang had told her the Japanese used 'Korean' as a slur. How he'd laughed at her the time she threw up and begged him to get her new clothes then left her to rot in her own sick until Eyebrows had shown up and bathed her.

She couldn't remember his face, just like she couldn't remember Big Nose's. But she could sort of see the way he'd looked at her then, as he stripped her down and wiped her clean with a wet cloth, apologizin' for not being able to get her a new shift, only wash the

old one. The eyes under his impressive eyebrows were blurry in her head, but she knew they'd been sad. She wondered if that was when he'd decided to try and find Korea or someone else to free her.

She didn't know. She didn't know if that was at the end of the hole or the beginning. It all blurred together, just like it had when she was in it. All she had left were little bits that didn't fit together right, like a puzzle without all the pieces. The needles came after asking Japan if he liked talking to her 'cuz it made him less lonely and Korea came after that and that was all she was sure about. That and how *hungry lonely bored* she'd been.

Hae wanted to smile when she was done spewin' out words, but all she could do was shake. She didn't want to remember and she shouldn't have because it made her feel sick and dirty again and she didn't want to *keep* it.

The afternoon suddenly seemed too bright, the autumn breeze too fresh compared to the sludge in Hae's insides.

"Eleven years?" Jeong-nyeo whispered into the silence, her eyes glimmering with tears. "You were in there for *eleven years?"*

The number felt bigger than her memories. But Hae knew it was true. She'd met Japan on the first day she was formed and he'd pushed her into that hole then, too. Eleven years and a couple months.

"Korea didn't know about me until then," she told her. Her throat didn't want to speak, but she didn't want the woman to think he'd taken so long to save her on purpose. "He had Hwang, so he thought he had Hwanghae. He came right away when he found out."

"Eleven years," Jeong-nyeo said, the tears startin' to run down her cheeks. "God above. My daughter was eleven."

"What happened to her?" Hae held her breath.

The woman closed her eyes, the tears still comin'. Then she rasped, "We were workin' in the field alone. My husband was a

landlord before Liberation, so it was our private plot we were allowed to keep. Usually Yang-sin and her husband would come over and help, but they were at work, and our neighbours were too scared of the armies comin' in from the south. I was, too. It was why I kept Su-nyeo home from school." She looked across the river, then lowered her gaze. "But I wanted to get the rice in."

Hae looked down at her hands.

"I saw the southern army comin', and made Su-nyeo hide out in the paddies. But they'd already seen me. A few split off and started askin' questions. 'Do you know if any KPA are still in the area? How well do you know Sincheon? Are there any guerrillas around?' I told them I didn't know, but they wouldn't take no for an answer. They started shovin' me, callin' me a Communist, accusin' me of helpin' 'the enemy.'" Jeong-nyeo exhaled slowly. "One of them tried to make the others stop, but another pointed a gun at him and told him to shut it. They started gettin'… handsy, and I ended up cuttin' one of them with my sickle. After that they said I had to do what they wanted or they'd kill me. If it wasn't for Su-nyeo, I would have made them. But I couldn't leave her alone.

"I did try to fight," she said, like she thought Hae wouldn't believe her. "But there were three of them, and they had guns. In the end… I couldn't stop it. They all had their way with me, even the one that tried to stand up for me."

"That isn't your fault," Hae said, confused that the woman sounded guilty. "You were lookin' out for Su-nyeo."

Jeong-nyeo's eyes gleamed with more tears. "Mm. She stayed quiet the whole time. We'd practiced before, when we had to hide in the air raid shelters, just in case. I wasn't even sure if she was still there until they'd finished up and moved on. Then she came crawlin' out of the rice. I couldn't move, and she couldn't understand what was wrong with me. She said she'd go get help and I wanted to stop her but I couldn't *move."*

Hae stayed quiet, letting her get herself under control. When she spoke again, her words were gummy.

"She came back with an American squad. She thought since they weren't with the puppet army, they'd help me." Her voice went flat. "She was wrong. They raped me, too. All ten of them. And they took her at the same time."

Hae's hands flew over her mouth as the woman's face crumpled, all her composure finally cracking.

"She was screamin' and cryin' and I was tryin' to get to her but they wouldn't let me go," she said through shaky gasps and tears. "She was callin' out for me but I couldn't go to her. I couldn't even tell her 'I'm here' because I was cryin', too."

Hae wanted to tell her to stop, but through her tears, Jeong-nyeo almost looked relieved, like she was spittin' out something rotten she'd been holding in her mouth for too long.

"It was the worst pain I've ever felt. Not the rape, but hearin' my baby scream like that and not bein' able to hold her. I remember thinkin' I would take a hundred men at once so long as I never had to h-hear her scream like that again." Jeong-nyeo curled up like a dying flower, pressing her face into her knees. "And now I won't. I'll never hear her scream or cry or laugh or tell me she has a weird bug to show me. Those bastards broke somethin' inside of her. She died in that field and I couldn't even hold her hand one last time. I passed out and when I woke up they were gone and so was she."

Hae hugged her, unable to fight the urge or her tears anymore as Jeong-nyeo shook with horrible gasping sobs, gripping her back tightly.

"They gave Ko Kuil-hwa a baby and they took mine away!" she wailed, her fingers diggin' into Hae's back hard enough to burst her burns. "What did I *do?* Oh Lord, what did I do to deserve this?! Why us?!"

Hae didn't know. She didn't know why Jeong-nyeo and her daughter, why Kuil-hwa, why her, why *Sincheon.* Why was it here that the miguk-nom and the Southern One's army and the reaction'ries had chosen to destroy, even over Haeju, over Pyongyang?

She knew they had a lot of Christians and landlords in Hwanghae. She knew most of the people that had fled south after Liberation came from them. But were they really all so bloodthirsty and cruel? Had her and her brother's province really grown so many bad seeds? Or was it just 'cuz they were so isolated out here that the Yankees felt like they could do whatever they wanted? Was it 'cuz they thought Sincheon was a stupid 'redneck' bumpkin town, so the people in it were worth even less than everywhere else?

She could see Ra Hye-in standing on the hill, looking down at their burning town with burnin' eyes.

"'Cuz they're devils," she whispered, clinging tighter to Jeong-nyeo.

The woman cried harder, sobbing her daughter's name over and over into Hae's chest until her uniform was soaked with it. Hae let her cry until she was all cried out, and all that was left were hiccups. Then she took her by the shoulders and made her look at her.

"They're *devils,"* she said, managin' to sound firm last her tears. "And you can't let 'em win."

The tears kept streaming down Jeong-nyeo's cheeks, red with burst blood vessels. "I wish I died with her in that field," she whispered. "I did."

"No you din't," Hae denied fiercely. "You *lived.* And you *need* to keep livin' until we're Reunified and the trials are done and everyone that ever hurt you and your daughter is dead. You need to keep livin' until the miguk-nom are defeated for good. And then you need to keep livin' because ah'm *orderin'* you to."

"I can't," she croaked. "I can't keep fightin'."

"You can." Hae gripped her tighter, trying to hold her down, to stop her from leavin' for good like Jong-suk and Chaek and Kwang-seok. "You aren't allowed to make Yang-sin understand sufferin', you aren't allowed to make me sad and you ain't allowed to let them hurt us anymore. No one's allowed to *hurt* anymore."

Her voice broke as she issued the impossible order, and she started to cry again. She tried to stop, ‘cuz Korea didn’t want anyone to end up comfortin’ her, but knowing that he was watching just made her cry harder.

Jeong-nyeo was the one to hug her this time, and even though Hae wanted to push her away so she couldn’t comfort her, she couldn’t help but curl into her.

“It’s alright,” Jeong-nyeo hushed, stroking a hand down her back. “It’s okay.”

Her hand found Hae’s, twining their fingers together, not lettin’ go.

“I’m here.”

Hae raised her face, snifflin’ as her vision swam, and Jeong-nyeo cupped her cheek. Her tears had made the medical tape give up for good, the bandage hanging off it.

“Su-nyeo had freckles like yours,” she said, her smile wobblin’. “She used to make me kiss every one of them goodnight.”

Her thumb brushed over one of Hae’s, and her lips firmed.

“I’ll keep livin’,” she vowed, teary and rough. “I’ll keep livin’ until every one of those dog’s son bastards is rottin’ in the ground. And then I’ll keep livin’ after that. I promise if you get hurt again it won’t be because of me, Hae.”

“And ah promise ah’ll do whatever ah can to kill those bastids,” Hae promised past her tears. “When Korea Reunifies us, ah’ll hunt ‘em all down myself and *git* ‘em. And you don’t have to worry about ‘em ever hurtin’ you like that again.” She grabbed her hand, squeezin’ it. “Me an’ Korea will *never* let ‘em take Sincheon again.”

She knew he wouldn’t. No matter how long the miguk-nom tried to drag out the ceasefire, no matter how much land they tried to steal, no matter how many times they tried to get onto their shores, Korea wouldn’t let the enemy take them again. War might be like a football match, but if Hae said they couldn’t give up Sincheon, she

knew Korea *wouldn't.*

"You just focus on fightin' to be happy," she said to Jeong-nyeo, smilin' through her tears. "And ah'll focus on everythin' else. 'Cuz Hwanghae is here for you, too."

Jeong-nyeo fell back into her arms, and Hae held her close, both of the women gettin' comfort from the other. The province wasn't worried about Korea being disappointed in her anymore, even though she'd broken down. She could still feel his eye on her.

She thought it felt a li'l proud.

How is a Marxist woman supposed to ever be at peace in the world when we are expected to read about history and current events? 'Militants in the Congo gang-raped a woman and her two 14 and under daughters and got them both pregnant,' 'Furuta Junko-san was kidnapped, imprisoned, gang-raped, tortured, and murdered for literally no reason and her murderers barely got punished and some are still out there,' 'Israelis would drug and film the rape of the wives of Palestinian activists at salons so they could blackmail them into giving up,' 'Korean women were rounded up and sold into sexual slavery to Ming/Qing/Japan/America, sometimes by their own fathers, and women in Sincheon had their breasts cut off and babies cut out of them.' Obviously you can't be afraid of every man, and those women that say the solution is to never interact with a man ever are wrong- men are not inherently violent and depraved, the patriarchy just tends to make them that way, and the only way to fix that (complete societal overhaul) can't be accomplished without working and organizing *with* men. We are all humans. There is nothing intrinsically male or female, and segregating ourselves only serves to other us further (no, things like woman-only train cars are not segregation, despite what some men that want to assault women on the train say; measures to keep women safe are necessary in the world we live in, I'm talking about segregating education, workplaces, children, etcetera). But sometimes at work a customer will smile at me and I can't help but wonder what it would take for him to follow me home and try to hurt me.

All Your Grief And Rage

Hae walked down the road, leaving Yang Yang-sin to run to her cousin, crouching down to talk to her. After a few words, they hugged, Jeong-nyeo clingin' to her.

She hoped she'd tell her about what happened. Even if she couldn't understand. Someone you loved shouldn't have to suffer, to be able to help you.

Korea was standing at the intersection, watching her come. She thought he might've been hidin' in the soybeans, 'cuz he glanced down and brushed a bit of dirt from his front. She didn't say anything about it as she stopped in front of him, hands behind her back.

"Korea, can we stay in Sincheon for another day? This took longer than we thought, and ah want to visit the whole county."

Korea dipped his head, then looked back at Jeong-nyeo. "Did you tell her about the Occupation?"

Hae relaxed a li'l, glad he hadn't been able to hear what they were saying. Not just 'cuz she didn't want him to feel any more guilty about not knowing she existed.

"Ayuh. Ah'm sorry, but-"

"It's fine." Korea turned away. "It looks like it worked."

Hae nodded. She took one last look at Jeong-nyeo and Yang-sin. They were standing on the bridge, talkin'.

Jeong-nyeo looked over her cousin's shoulder and gave her a watery smile.

Hae smiled back, then followed Korea.

The rest of the day was an arduous march of grief, remembered

violence, and tears, though Hae made sure her own didn't fall again. She could feel her people's words and faces wanting to blur together into something like the hole, somethin' fuzzy and indistinct that would be easy to forget and hard to keep.

But she fought it back. She made sure to take in every word and sight, and to tuck them all away as they moved from place to place.

The black stains on the walls of the Public Security Office air raid shelter where over four hundred more people, maybe as much as five hundred, had been burned to death. The shells of the powder magazines in Wonam-ri where the Yankees and their puppets had locked up almost a thousand people when Korea was on his way back with the army, starving them for a week before burning them alive, too, the mothers in one building and the children in the other, and the look in the eyes of one of the three kids that had escaped as he told them how his mother had been torn away from him. The bridge to Anak County that somehow swarmed with life as the Women's Union worked to repair it again, despite how over two thousand people had been arrested and killed on it as they fled Sincheon County. The deceptively calm Nambu Reservoir where the old women that had been telling them about their grandsons being tied up and thrown into it fell to their knees wailing and spitting on the ground, cursin' 'Merica and all his devils, and where Hae plucked a single white bone from the muddy shore.

Wells and rivers and mines, teachers and schoolchildren and farmers. Myongsa-ri, where the chairwoman of the Karyon Sub-county's Women's Union had been tortured and killed; Chongsan-ri, where the So River had ran red with blood as people were shot on its banks; Chori Sub-county, where a principal had been hung before having his head sawed through.

It didn't stop in Sincheon. They drove into Anak County, then Unryul County, where the violence had spilled into. To Unryul Mine, where miners had been tortured before being shoved into a mineshaft, and the way the voices of those left almost seemed to be absorbed by the rock walls, quieter than any mine Hae had ever visited. They couldn't afford to close it down just because the ore they were mining was sometimes stained with blood. Production was too important.

Hae stared into the long, dark mineshaft that plunged down into the earth, feelin' the weight of the mountain above her, and imagined what it would be like to fall. To have her chest drilled into like the production innovators, beat and tortured for hours, before being shoved into nothing. How it would feel to float in the dark, knowing nothing but pain, before striking the rocks a hundred feet below.

She thought the impact might be a relief, and the thought made her so uneasy that she almost jumped when Korea's hand clasped her shoulder and dragged her back from the edge.

They stayed the night in the village that had been emptied out for helping the guerrillas, gettin' their permits from the local People's Committee. Hae might have asked before why they had to, since it was pretty obvious who they were, and it wasn't like they couldn't be trusted.

She got it now, though. It hadn't been strangers that had done all this. The miguk-nom had made it possible, they'd brought their guns and army and war, and they'd done awful, terrible things. They'd slashed and burned and raped their way across her province, killin' anyone they could get their bloody claws on, but *targeting* model workers, model peasants like Kim Moon-sik, innovators, Party members, people that were tryin' to make their country better.

But how had they known who those were? The Yankees were stupid- they didn't know how to read or speak Korean. They didn't know what the letters of commendation or the armbands said, and they didn't know who was in the Worker's Party or the People's Committees. Someone had to read for them, or tell them. Someone like Ku Chun-guk, or whoever had sold out San-gon's family. People that were naïve and selfish and had ran south 'cuz'a it, comin' back sick just like the Southern One, or who stayed here and lurked in the Chondoist Chongu Party or Social Democratic Party or Public Security or even the Worker's Party like rotten seeds just waiting for a rain of blood to sprout.

They had to be as vigilant as possible. The foreigners had been the ones puppeteerin'. But the puppets had been their neighbours.

Hae didn't recognize anyone in the local People's Committee, even though she'd used to know everyone in their province's organs. They'd had emergency elections since so many comrades had been executed during the Yankee Occupation, including their provincial chairman, Jyong-jin. She couldn't help but wonder as she looked at the kindly woman that handed them their permit if she had been one of the profiteers or informants, or if the man in the corner had been looting and killing alongside the reaction'ries.

Hae knew everyone would be smart about voting, especially after everything that happened. The ones that got elected would be the guerrillas and Party members and pastors that had helped people escape the Yanks or fought against them.

But the thought still scared her. Korea had said the Southern One was kind, but he'd been wrong. He'd been just as tricked as she had. And if Korea could be wrong, then anyone could be.

They didn't sleep for most of the night. Korea took them up Kuwol Mountain, hunting for any reaction'ries that might still be prowlin' around. Hae was almost disappointed they didn't find any, which made her feel like Pyo.

But they did find more bodies. Two skeletons in a gully deep in the trees, one with a hole in its skull and a metal spike lying next to it, and one with rotting scraps of cloth tied around it.

Hwang reached out with a hand for something nestled in the ribs of that skeleton, then drew back. Korea reached in instead, pulling a too-small skull out. SH turned the flashlight beam away, but Hae had already seen it.

Three bodies.

They marked the spot and led a few villagers back there so they could be the ones to carry 'em home. The next morning, they were laid out on a white cloth in the village center. No one could tell who they'd been. No one said they were missing people like them. If there was anyone left alive that they belonged to, they were long gone.

More villages, more towns, more air raid shelters and mass graves. Hae picked something distinct from each place to remember- the smell of pumpkin bein' steamed in Mangung-ri as they visited the tunnel where three hundred people had been buried alive; the pretty flower pin in the hair of the woman who clung to her by the water of the Ryongmun Reservoir and told her how she'd seen her husband and twenty other men be driven into it like goats and made to swim until they drowned, the li'l girls holdin' hands as they skipped down the road in Ryangjang-ri, where every single man that hadn't been at the front or with the guerrillas had been executed. She tucked all the happy things away so the bad things would be easier to remember.

Everywhere she went she made sure to listen to as many people as she could, takin' in all their dark bits- the widow whose husband had been ran through with a bayonet for trying to steal rations from the Yanks, the man whose model worker wife had been thrown into a well by the Southern army, the mother whose reaction'ry husband had came back and stolen their daughter, and taken her on the retreat.

It felt like eatin' maggots again, choking them down 'cuz she knew she had to- not because she needed them to stay alive now, but because her people did.

By the end of the day she felt heavy, swollen with dark thoughts and other people's hurt. It sloshed around inside her as the Jeep rattled down the road out of Sincheon Town again.

Hae kept her eyes closed, trying not to throw up. The gold and green fields and cow carts ploddin' down the dirt roads somehow made her feel worse than the black behind her eyelids. All she could see were the photos she'd had to look at overlayed on top of the happy scenes- rows and rows of white shrouds pulled out of Unryul Mine, a boy's pale face gazing lifelessly from the dirt, the charnel piles left behind in the powder houses when their army had first got back.

"Where are we going now?" SH asked, keepin' her voice quiet, thinking Hae was asleep.

Hae didn't tell her it was okay to speak up. She was lettin' her cousin lull her like the barncats she never got to pet by stroking the back of her hand with her thumb over and over. If she was thinkin' of how warm and alive SH and Hwang were, she might not have to keep coming back to the hole in her head.

It wasn't working.

"Onchon Sub-county," Korea replied.

"We were already there."

"We're visiting the Sincheon Rest Home."

SH's grip tightened on Hae's, hurtin'. But she couldn't make her bones move. "Korea, no."

She'd taken that page of the report, too, when Hae was trying to read it on the way here.

"It's part of this, South Hamgyong."

SH's hand left hers and the Jeep suddenly swerved, making Hwang yelp and sending Hae sideways. She didn't react, lettin' herself slump limply onto her brother's lap.

"Are you *crazy?!"* Korea hissed, slamming the brake.

SH disappeared from the back seat, her boots thumpin' on the ground. Korea's door opened and he snapped at her as he was probably dragged from the driver's seat. Their boots crunched around to the back of the Jeep.

"Goodness," Hwang breathed out, his hand touching Hae's head, then gingerly strokin' it.

He'd been real quiet, only askin' people a few questions so he could write them in his notebook. He was probably going to do some sort of article about all this so everyone knew just how evil their enemy was. Hae was glad he was the information work one. She was glad he wasn't in her place. She hoped he wouldn't get all upset and guilty again after having to hear all this.

Korea and SH were whisperin' too quiet to hear. Hae only caught a few words when one of 'em got ornery enough to hiss louder.

"-her *responsibility,"* Korea snapped.

"She shouldn't have to be exposed to stuff like this," SH argued.

"She already *has* been. What do you think you heard in that bunker? What do you think Yang Jeong-nyeo said to her?"

"We don't know she knows. And that isn't the same as this anyway."

"She is a *grown woman,* not a child, South Hamgyong. This is why I wanted you to stay in Hamhung- I am not pretending this didn't happen so *you* can feel better."

There was a hurt silence, and Hae had to strain to hear SH say, "Korea," her voice desperate in a way she didn't think she'd ever heard.

Hwang kept pettin' her head as the silence stretched out.

Korea's *"Tch"* was easy to hear. He didn't say anythin' else, coming back to the front and climbing back in.

SH padded after him, hoistin' herself up next to Hae again. "Thank you," she murmured, and Hae heard her fingers brush Korea's shoulder.

Their Countryhuman didn't answer, and their Jeep drove on, SH resting her hand on Hae's bent leg.

The Sincheon Rest Home was a worker's retreat, where the people who couldn't travel all the way to town came for medical treatment or just to relax. In the past, workers had been worked half to death, and sometimes fully. They weren't allowed to rest and most of 'em couldn't afford to go on vacation, so Korea said it was important that they could now, even if they didn't have money to travel all the way to Pyongyang or Mount Kumgang. Because of that, Hae had been to most of the rest houses in their province with Hwang, since they had to make sure they were clean and comfortable, and 'cuz

she actually wasn't very good at tellin' that. Anywhere she could see the sun or feel the breeze was comfortable by her, and *anywhere* was comfortable if Korea was there. It didn't even have to be inside.

The Rest Home was empty now. No smoke came from the chimneys on the wood and brick buildings, and no one was out enjoyin' the fresh fall air or doing exercises on the grass. Only two people stood on the dirt road outside it, a man scanning their surroundings and a familiar-lookin' woman perched on the tilted edge of a handcart.

"Comrades," she said, standing and bowing as they arrived.

"Comrade Kim." Korea held out his arm, makin' her switch out of her bow to clasp it. "Thank you for meeting us here."

"Anything to get this out there," she replied, her eyes hard. "If the United Nations won't listen to us, then I'll scream louder."

Hae suddenly realized where she'd seen her before. "Comrade I-jin!"

The woman's face softened a li'l as she turned to her. "Comrade Hae. Good to see you again."

Hae almost hadn't recognized the nurse. Her hair was shorter, to her ears instead of done up like it usually was, and somethin' about her seemed… different. But maybe it was just seein' her in a choson-out instead of a nurse's coat.

"Ah'm glad you're alive," Hae said, real relieved. The woman was in the Women's Union and the Party, *and* she'd worked here. "Ah thought the Yanks would'a got you for sure!"

"They almost did," she said, a hand on her chest. "They got me at the Soktang bridge, looking for Worker's Party members. But they din't finish me off. And they never found my card."

She pulled it from her pocket, smilin' triumphantly.

"I'm a li'l less of a woman now, but they din't kill me. And I made sure to help our guerrillas out."

The ‘li’l less of a woman’ comment made Hae’s stomach churn. Her eyes dipped to I-jin’s chest.

The nurse had always been sort of ‘healthy’-lookin’. She had a round face, wide hips, and a soft belly. And while she was definitely thinner, just like everyone, she seemed to be the type to have a good starvation response like Hae, ‘cuz it wasn’t like she was wasting away.

Which made the size of her chest seem off.

The nurse followed her gaze and gave her a slightly tighter smile. “Ayuh. They cut off my breasts.”

Hwang winced, and one of SH’s hands went over her mouth, the other arm wrapping around her own chest. Hae gaped in horror, her brain trying to picture how you even did that before decidin’ it didn’t want to. Korea remained straight-faced, though she could see his lip twitch angrily.

The man by the cart closed his eyes.

“You don’t need to all look so horrified,” I-jin said into the silence. “My kids are old enough they don’t need to nurse anymore, and I wasn’t planning on having more.”

Despite her words, Hae thought she was fighting to be cheerful, too.

“And what I went through wasn’t half as bad as the women here.” She looked over at the rest house, her eyes hardenin’ again.

Between SH stealin’ the report from her, her reaction to Korea wanting to take them here, and something somehow being worse than having your breasts sawed off, Hae thought she knew what that was.

Still she asked, “What happened here?” eyes wide.

I-jin hesitated. Her eyes flicked to Korea, like she was waitin’ for him to say something. He should’ve, but he just stared at her until she said, “The Americans locked up a bunch of women here and…

hurt them."

SH untensed slightly. No one asked her to say more about it.

The nurse was doing what Jae-soon had, tryin' to keep the awful truth from her. And Korea was lettin' her, even though he'd told her not to look away.

Hae opened her mouth, then shut it. She guessed it wasn't really about them treatin' her like a kid. Maybe for I-jin it was, but Korea had said himself she was a grown woman.

It was for SH. Hae might have spoken up before she understood, but now… She'd sounded real upset when she said Korea's name. And Hae *had* been glad that Korea hadn't heard exactly what Jeong-nyeo said to her. She would let them pretend, since she couldn't anymore.

So long as *she* knew she wasn't looking away.

"Follow me," I-jin said, orderin' the man- her husband, since she called him 'yeobo'- to watch the road.

They followed her through the open gates and onto the property. Some of the buildings were missin' roofs, either because the miguk-nom had bombed it after to try and cover up their crimes, or just 'cuz they didn't like to see a place still standing.

"Were you… one of the women imprisoned here?" Hwang asked, sneakin' a look at Hae to see if that was an alright question.

She allowed it. It *was* kind'a insensitive, but they were supposed to be hearing from people about their experiences.

But I-jin shook her head. "I left as soon as our army did. I figured I'd be more use with the guerrillas." Her sandals crunched on the brownin' grass as she led them into the dormitory where the workers would sleep on their vacations, then on the glass that glittered on the floor of the entry hall. "But I came back here right away once I heard what happened."

She stood at the entrance to the room, gesturing with a hand.

“This is where they kept most of them. Others were kept in the sheds or main hall. The Americans themselves set up in the other dormitory.”

Hae peered in, her heart sinking at the rows of bunks. They were all stripped of blankets, either by the investigators or looters, but the frames were still there. And as she set foot into the room, her skin shivered.

“They took women from all over Sincheon,” I-jin said quietly, her words echoing in the hush that felt heavier than it should. “And travellers on their way from Sariwon and Haeju, thinking the countryside would be safe. Young ones, pretty ones. They brought them here for… use. For their own army and the southern one."

Hae could see a dark stain on the floorboards under one of the beds.

“Are you… quite alright?” she heard Hwang murmur to SH.

She looked over, seeing their cousin’s chest heavin’ as more blood pattered onto the floor from her palms.

“I’m fine.”

“Do you think you should-?”

“I’m *fine,* Hwang,” she snapped.

“Show us the pond,” Korea ordered I-jin after a dark scan of the room.

The woman led them back outside and around the cluster of buildings. “Towards the end of the occupation they brought the remaining women out here. Several dozen from what we’ve found so far, maybe… Oh, Ms. Dan.”

Hae blinked, then looked where she was. The ground sloped away from the rest house, a desire path leading down to a small pond with green lotus pads floating on it, wilting pink buds droopin’ over the water.

A woman sat by it, not on one of the knocked over wooden benches, but half in the water, the white skirts of her choson-ot floating around her.

“Is she alright?” Hae asked. It was starting to get a li’l cold to be soaking wet in the middle of nowhere.

I-jin sighed sadly. “No. The Yankees killed all the women when they were… done with them. Herded them into the pond and threw grenades in after them. There were only four survivors that we know of. She’s one of them.”

“The other three were those who gave their testimonies to the Women’s International Democratic Federation, aren’t they?” Hwang asked.

I-jin nodded. “They’d like to close that chapter of their life, which is why I’m here in their stead. But Ms. Dan… wasn’t in her right frame of mind to testify. She still isn’t. She keeps escaping the clinic to come back here."

Hae watched her run her fingers through the water of the pond, her long white sleeves trailing in it. She started down the desire path.

“Comrade Hae-“

“Ah want to make sure she’s okay.” She might be lettin’ them play pretend, but she wasn’t going to let someone keep hurting for it.

She knew Korea approved because he followed her. But once they got close he made a noise and stopped suddenly, spinnin’ to stare back at the rest house.

Hae got a li’l bit closer, ‘til she was only a few feet away, and saw the woman was feeding a baby, her jeogori pulled up over her chest like some women that had sons had still been doing during the Occupation and how Korea had told her to never do.

“Howdy,” the province said, crouchin’ to talk to her.

The woman stopped her tuneless humming to smile at her.

“Hello.”

Her dull amber eyes peered out from behind strings of messy long brown hair. There was a look in them Hae didn’t like. They were unfocused, like she wasn’t really seeing her, and there was something dreamy about her smile.

“How are you called?” she asked, keepin’ her voice cheery.

“He called me Bonnie,” the woman replied, speaking slow and placid. “But that’s not my name. I don’t have a name.”

“Yes you do,” I-jin said gently as she came up next to them. “Your name is Dan Yeon-hwa.”

“Not anymore. I have nothing of hers left.” She looked at the still waters of the pond, her fingers skatin’ across a dusky lotus bloom. “Only this.”

Hae frowned at I-jin, who shook her head sadly.

“Ms. Dan, could you wear your jeogori properly?” the nurse asked carefully. “There are men here, and one of them is our Countryhuman.”

“There's nothing left of her to hide, either,” the woman answered, not tuggin’ it down. “And I can’t stop feeding her or she’ll cry. She sucks everything she can from me, then she screams and screams, until…” She blinked slowly. “My son never screamed like this.”

Unsure of what to say to that, Hae asked instead, “What’s her name?” peerin’ at the baby.

Yeon-hwa looked down at the infant like she’d forgotten it was attached to her breast, even though she’d just been talking about her. “She has no name either. It would be wrong to name a punishment.”

“A punishment?” Hwang asked from over his shoulder. Korea had grabbed him and spun him away from the half-naked woman, too.

“Mhm.” She smiled distantly at Hae. “I’m being punished for

being unfaithful to my husband. I committed a sin, and now I'm being punished. Forever." Her voice darkened on the last word, and her eyes drifted to the still waters again.

"We know what you went through," SH said gently. "You weren't being unfaithful."

"I was. It's why Ho-il had to send me away."

I-jin winced, lowerin' her voice, even though Yeon-hwa could still hear. "Her husband banished her from his household after she escaped."

SH's jaw clenched, and Yeon-hwa said distractedly, "I didn't escape. He set me free. I ran, and they died."

Her smile grew more distant, her gaze fixed on the dark pond. "Can you hear them? Listen."

Hae listened, but all she could hear was the song of crickets out in the fields, the rustle of leaves on the poplar nearby, and the distant thump of a loose board in the breeze.

But Yeon-hwa said, "They're calling for me. They know I was supposed to die with them. They want a sacrifice."

"Ms. Dan," I-jin said firmly. "None of the women murdered here would have wanted you to join them. Do you think they would resent the others for getting away?"

"They escaped. I was freed." Yeon-hwa looked up at her. "It hurts. She has teeth."

The change of subject confused Hae until I-jin said, "I told you- she's only a month old. She doesn't have teeth."

Yeon-hwa looked down at the baby at her breast. "She does. She has jagged fangs and they're tearing me open. I'll be like you soon."

The words were cruel, but her tone was too empty to feel like she was tryin' to be mean.

I-jin crossed her arms over her flat chest, then dropped ‘em. “No, you won’t. And you need to nurse her more. She’s looking thin.”

She was right. Kuil-hwa’s baby had been round and flushed, since so long as she was gettin’ enough food to make milk, he could drink as much as he liked. But Yeon-hwa’s baby looked… not good. Her cheeks curved in in a way a baby’s shouldn’t, and her body seemed too small for her head.

“I can’t.” Her lips bent in a slow frown. “She has teeth. My other baby didn’t have teeth. It’s wrong, I know it. *She’s* wrong.”

SH’s hands were bleeding again. Hae got what was ‘wrong’ with the baby.

“She looks like any other baby to me,” she told the woman.

“She’s not.” Yeon-hwa looked at the pond again. “She’s a punishment. I didn’t join them, so I got this. I was set free, so I can never be free. He doomed me."

Hae shuffled her feet, lookin’ between everyone else. But Korea and Hwang were still facing the other way, SH was doing her scary staring thing again, and I-jin just looked sad.

She hadn’t had to deal with anyone like Yeon-hwa today or yesterday. A few people had been off, either distracted or twitchy, but nothin’ like this.

But she still had to try.

“You aren’t doomed,” Hae said firmly. “You’re still alive, ain’t ya?”

“No,” she answered dimly. “I died.”

“Ah thought you said Dan Yeon-hwa died.”

“She did.”

“Then why would you be bein’ punished if she’s already dead?” Hae asked triumphantly.

The woman paused. “I’m her ghost. I’m being punished for what she did.”

Hae didn’t give up. “No you aren’t. Ghosts aren’t real. And you din’t do n- anythin’. The Yankees did. You aren’t dead, and neither is Dan Yeon-hwa. See?”

She reached out, touchin’ one of the hands that was holding her baby. “You’re alive. And you’re her.”

Yeon-hwa looked down at her soft grip. “I can’t be,” she said, her dreamy voice finally breakin’, a raw edge coming through. “If I’m her… that means that everything that happened to her happened to *me.”*

“It did,” Hae said gently. “But you survived it. That’s what matters. The worst thing that could have happened is that you died. But you didn’t.”

A low sound came from SH, and Yeon-hwa lowered her head, her eyes on her baby.

“Some things can be worse than that.”

“No,” Hae said firmly, squeezin’ her hand. *“Nothin’* is worse than death.”

She knew that the people pushed into that mineshaft hadn’t been relieved when they hit the bottom. Right up until the end, they had to be hopin’ they would make it, that there was water or… something else waiting to break their fall.

Maybe Hae had wanted to die when she was in the hole. Maybe when she had been chained up, unable to even feel her own body or know her own name, *hungry lonely bored* in the suffocating dark, she had wished the rats would return and nibble her into nothing. Maybe she’d just wished for it to be over.

But if it had been, and she’d died down there, she never would have seen the sun. She never would have felt its warmth on her skin as she threshed rice or caught snowflakes on her tongue or eaten bulgogi or got to bring in the harvest. She never would’ve got to

learn how to read from Hwang or look for rocks with GG or have a bath with SH. She never would've got to meet the Gen'ral or Comrade Jong-suk or any of her other hundreds or more comrades that had taught her so many things. She wouldn't have been here today to cheer up Jeong-nyeo or any'a the others.

And most importantly she never would have met Korea. And if he found out, he would've felt guilty forever that he hadn't been able to save her.

"At the end'a hardship comes happiness," Hae told Yeon-hwa. "But if you give up when you're sad, you'll never get to be happy. Death is the end- nothin' can get better after that." She took her hand with her other one, lookin' into her eyes. "But if you're alive, you can keep movin' forward. You can make things better."

"I can't move forward," Yeon-hwa whispered, nails digging into her a li'l painfully. "Not when this weight is dragging me back."

"Then get rid of it," Hae said cheerfully. "Tell me everythin' you don't want to keep, and ah'll hold onto it."

Yeon-hwa's amber eyes lifted to hers. "But…"

"We need to remember what was done to us," Hae said, seein' that cellar door slam shut above her for the first time. "So we know why we keep fightin', and so we can avenge it. But if you really can't stand to remember, then ah'll remember for you."

She peeked sideways at SH, hopin' she might realize she was talking to her, too. But her cousin was staring at the lotuses, her blood still leaving scarlet droplets on the grass.

Yeon-hwa still hesitated.

"*Both* Hwanghaes will remember," Hwang vowed, and Korea added, "And your country," which Hae thought would have even more impact if he would actually turn around.

Yeon-hwa looked down at her baby. She'd stopped feedin', her purple lids shut now as she slept, not screaming.

"…Alright," she said quietly, tuggin' her jeogori back over her chest.

Hae sat across from her as she told her all about being kidnapped with her friend on their way home from a neighbour's, and brought to the rest home. About how she'd been torn away from her son and been cooped up with the other women in that dorm while the men came in and hurt them. How she'd had to watch her friend get sold off, and started taking care of a young girl there, having to watch the other women get abused or sometimes killed while she made the men happy, up until a Yankee soldier decided he liked her and started keeping her separate so he was the only one who could 'have' her. How she behaved herself so she wouldn't end up like the others that tried to escape, and how one night the soldier came into the shed where she was, threw a cloak over her, and smuggled her out back, far out into the fields, caressing her cheek and giving her one last kiss before setting her free. How she ran all the way into the next sub-county without looking back, and didn't know until later that the man had been saving her from being massacred like the other seventy remaining women. And then how when she'd finally made it home, injured and exhausted, her husband had turned her away, refusing to even let her see their young son, who had made it home safe.

"I left that girl there," Yeon-hwa whispered, staring at the pond again. "Yun-ji. She was only sixteen. And I just… left her there."

"You didn't know what they were planning to do to them," Hwang told her, gentlelike in a way that was finally perfect.

"No. But I knew what they had already done. What I thought they would keep doing." Her eyes had started to glaze again. "She's calling me. She wants a sacrifice."

Hae reached out, taking her thin face and makin' her look at her instead of the pond.

"No she doesn't," she said forcefully. "She was murdered an' it was awful. But if ghosts were real and she wanted anyone sacrificed, ah guarantee it would be the Yankees. Ah bet all she'd want from you would be to make it away an' live a good life. And

maybe tell her family, if they don't know."

"Do they know, Ms. Dan?" I-jin asked. "We still haven't identified all of the victims. If you could help, it would be appreciated."

"They… don't know. I know they're the Pak family in Chaeryong, and I thought about…" Yeon-hwa looked down. "But I couldn't. I couldn't be the one to tell them."

"Someone should," Hae said, thinkin' of Jae-soon and his wife. "Ah know you're real upset your boy is bein' kept away from you, but isn't that better than not knowin' where he is at all?"

Yeon-hwa closed her eyes, then nodded. "Yes. When I was in there, and I had no idea if he knew how to make it home…"

Hae put her hand on her knee. "Go with Comrade I-jin and tell 'em what happened to Yun-ji."

SH's voice was hoarse. "And then forget it all."

The woman bit her lip. "I… shouldn't forget her. She would sneak into my cot after they were… done with her, and I'd stroke her hair until she went to sleep. I shouldn't forget that."

"Ah'll keep that for you, too," Hae promised. "And maybe one day you'll be alright to remember. But until then, you just focus on doin' everythin' you can to put it behind you."

Yeon-hwa's eyes closed tight, her face screwin' up. Then she nodded, rasping, "I'll try. I'll try to forget."

"You aren't alone," I-jin said, resting her hand on her shoulder. "We'll talk sense into that husband of yours yet."

"Don't take him back," SH said sharply. "Just get your son."

"I don't think he'd have me anyway," she said sadly.

"Then all you need is your boy and your comrades," Hae said, glad to see she didn't look all dazed anymore. "And your baby."

Yeon-hwa looked down at the baby in her arms. “She’ll make it hard to forget.”

“Ah know you can do it,” Hae promised, gettin’ to her feet. “Now come on back with us. Ah don’t think it does ya any good to hang out here.”

It would be like if she went back to the hole when she had to study.

“You’ll stay at my place tonight,” I-jin said. “I don’t want you wandering away from the clinic again.”

“I’d… like a moment,” Yeon-hwa said, eyes on the water again as the sun started to set. “But I will. And I won’t come back here again.”

Hae nodded happily. “Good. Ah know you’ll be okay, comrade.”

The others started back, but she stayed as Korea went up to Yeon-hwa, fine with lookin’ at her now that her skin wasn’t showing.

“There isn’t anything that can be legally done about your husband’s attitude,” he said stiffly. “But if he won’t surrender your son once you are ready, contact me.”

“Thank you, Comrade Korea. And Comrade Hae.”

Yeon-hwa turned to the water, her skirts still floatin’ lazily in it, and Hae followed Korea up the incline, both of them silent. The others had already disappeared back into the rest house buildings.

As they reached them, Hae heard a splash, and alarm spiked in her. She went to spin around, but Korea’s hand clamped down on the back of her neck, forcing her to keep looking forward.

“Keep moving,” he said, his voice flat as he stared straight ahead, too.

“But Yeon-hwa-!”

“Comrade Dan Yeon-hwa will be fine,” Korea said, his eye not

wavering as he kept her walking forward. “You remember what I told you about problems I can and can’t solve. Sometimes people have to solve their own. And we would only get in the way.”

Hae felt her skull buzz with the urge to turn around and make sure the woman was okay. “But-“

“South Hwanghae, do you think I would let something happen to her?”

Hae immediately relaxed, knowin’ he wouldn’t. “No.”

“Then keep moving. And don’t look back.”

She did, and didn’t.

Dan Yeon-hwa stood as far out in the lotus pond as she could get without swimming, alone now. She gazed down at the water as it finally went still, the only movement that of her skirts eddying around her, ghostly pale as the water darkened under the burning eye of the sun. Everything was finally, blessedly silent.

Her reflection stared back up at her, its lips twisting up in a smile that wasn’t a million ri away, and for the first time in almost a year, it looked like hers.

The woman's choson-ot dragged behind her, leaving a trail of wet earth as she left the water. And this time, with the sacrifice accepted, no voice called her back, no clammy fingers wrapped around her ankles.

Dan Yeon-hwa walked away from the pond, her steps and heart finally on the way to lightening, the only thing in her hands a withered pink lotus blossom.

The sun was hoverin’ over the edge of the horizon when they got back to Sincheon, flooding the town with fiery light. People were on their way in from the fields with bushels of corn and namul on their backs, and a trio of children ran from alley to alley, gigglin’ as a tired-looking woman tried to herd them towards the outskirts,

back to the tunnels.

"Korea." Hae's voice was too loud in the Jeep. No one had spoken since they parted ways with I-jin and her husband. "Can you take me somewhere?"

He followed her directions, driving the vehicle across town, and around the ridge on its edge. They got out, and Hae stared out across the fields.

Kim Moon-sik's barn had been turned to a pile of burnt scraps of wood, the earth still blackened underneath it. Hae knew she had recognized the remains of the farmhouse behind the rows of corpses in one of the photos.

All that effort, and two hundred people had still died here.

She stared numbly at the wreckage, her skin pricklin' up and down, like it had been for the past two days. It'd dulled when they were travelling in the Jeep, but it had never stopped. Would it ever? Or was she always goin' to feel this way, unable to ever work the fields or inspect the offices in Sincheon without being reminded that thousands of her people had been murdered here, tortured and killed in the worst ways possible? Had 'Merica and the Southern One made forgetting impossible in her own land?

The weevils churned under her skin, and her fists clenched.

"Korea," she said, her voice so low and dark she barely recognized it. "Ah think I'm angry."

She'd been mad before, of course. Everyone got mad, except for maybe Kang. It made her mad when Chungnam was rude to SH or Hambu was bein' too prickly, and it had made her mad when Hwang had implied she was stupid.

But she'd only been angry like this twice before, when she'd blown Ku Chun-guk's stupid brains out and when she'd thrown that bed at 'Merica. Not even the Southern One had made her feel like this when he said there'd only be one Korea and he meant him, 'cuz he was too dumb and wrong to be really angry at.

“Good,” Korea said, lookin’ at the ruined model barn. “You should be.”

“Ah don’t like it,” she protested, clutchin’ at her shirtfront. “It feels awful an’ ah don’t *like it.”*

She couldn’t make it go away. There wasn’t anything she could tell herself to feel better, no way she could turn it okay in her head. There was no good reason for people to kill over land and there was no good reason to cut off I-jin’s breasts or torture Kim Moon-sik or rape Jeong-nyeo and Yeon-hwa and all the other women. There was no good reason for America to tear their country apart and *do this to them.*

“Would you rather feel nothing?” Korea asked coldly. “Because if you could walk away from everything we have seen and heard here smiling and *mean* it, then I would make sure you never left this town.”

He touched his gun so she knew for sure what he meant.

“No,” Hae said, pouting at the ground. “Ah don’t want to feel nothin’. But ah don’t want to feel like *this.”* Her nails scratched at the bandages on her neck. "It feels bad.”

Korea turned to her, the sun's fire burnin' in his eye. “Anger is good, South Hwanghae. You *should* be angry. ‘The warmer one’s love of home, parents, and brothers, the more bitter one’s hatred for the enemy.’ The more you love your fellow countrymen, the greater your anger at what has been done to them. Do you think we would be here right now if we hadn't been angry? Do you think Hwang would have published those pamphlets on March First if he hadn’t been angry at being censored and leashed?”

Hwang nodded soberly, pushin’ his glasses up.

“Do you think South Hamgyong would be here if she hadn’t been angry at what had been done to her and the rest of our women?”

SH looked rattled. “I’m not-“

Korea cut her off, his voice risin’. “Do you think we would have

ever been free if Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-suk, Kim Tu-bong, Kim Chaek, Ri Kwon-mu and our other thousands of comrades hadn't been *angry?* If our people hadn't realized that what was being done to them was wrong and unfair and needed to change? Do you think I would be here, do you think I would have saved you if *I* didn't realize that?"

Hae could still see him tearing Big Nose off her, throwin' him down and savaging him, his teeth bared as he made him hurt for what he'd been about to do to her, and what he didn't know he'd done to her, and the way he'd wiped blood on his cheek as he came to unchain her. Out of all the things Hae had made herself forget, she had never forgotten that.

"No," she mumbled.

"No," Korea repeated. "When we are told that our people, people that we *love,* have been put through tortures, been oppressed and beat down for the simple crime of wanting to be free, anger is the only *correct* way to feel."

The tendons on his throat flexed as his voice lowered. "If you aren't angry, you'll be afraid. And fear is useless. At least anger gets things done."

Hae looked out at Kim Moon-sik's barn, the orange and red of the settin' sun glinting off the rusty weathervane stuck in the ground, making it look like it was burning all over again. The only sound was SH's jagged panting.

"Mm," she said eventually, wrappin' her arms around herself. "Ah'll keep it."

Hwang's arm wrapped around her, and Korea finally didn't glare him out of it. Hae leaned into her brother, watchin' the sun set.

"South Hamgyong," Korea ordered after a second. "Take North Hwanghae and speak with that Yang Chun-yoon's widow. Here's the address. Make sure she knows where her loyalties lie."

SH took a shudderin' breath, then took the paper, saluting as she

left, Hwang on her heels. He looked back at Hae, and she squinted reassurin'ly.

"Korea," she said when they were gone. "Are the reaction'ries goin' to be killed once they're tried?"

"Every single one that should be, will be," he answered coldly.

She swallowed. "But… what if there's no evidence? Like the Southern army guy that had me beat? No one else saw that, and he din't actually *do* the beatin', so…"

"You'll testify against him, if he's still alive at the end of this."

"What if the jury doesn't believe me?"

Korea examined her for a moment, then said, "Almost anyone would believe anything you tell them. You have power. You've seen that for yourself after today. That's why I tell you to watch what you say."

"But…" Hae fidgeted. "What if they don't?"

Korea's jaw feathered. "South Hwanghae, I promise, even if we can't get a death verdict, he will spend the rest of his days labouring to make up for what he helped destroy." His eye flashed. "I will make sure Rim Gun-hon *wishes* he was dead."

Hae looked down, noddin', even though she didn't think she'd be able to feel completely happy if she knew he was out there, even if it was in prison. It didn't matter if he wished he was dead- he wouldn't be.

"Alright, Korea," she said, followin' him up the ridge she'd once charged down with the militia to free the women.

They stopped at the top, where she'd stood with Ra Hye-in, gazing down on Sincheon. From high up in the sunset, it almost looked like it was still on fire. But looking closer showed that the smoke was just from chimneys and cooking fires, and the uniforms belonged to the People's Army and Public Security. Lookin' close enough showed that the people down there were alive.

“Ah’m not allowed to forget any of this, am ah?” Hae asked quietly.

Korea was silent for a moment. “No. You aren’t. We need to remember.”

Remember what hesitatin’ did.

Hae knew none of his harshness here was about punishin’ her. She reckoned it was for the same reason he hadn’t let their people celebrate with him on Liberation Day, the reason she got now. It was why he kept pushin’ her and why he’d lurked outside the bunker to secretly listen in, and why they *had* to go to the rest house.

He was punishin' himself.

Hae grabbed his sleeve ‘cuz she knew he wouldn’t let her hold his hand, looking up at him with big eyes.

“Korea, are ya proud of me?”

He looked down at her, then answered her with a question. “At our criticism session you said you would go through Sincheon again if it meant you could save our people. Do you still mean that? After this, would you still do it all again?”

Hae gazed out at the ruins of Kim Moon-sik’s barn on one side of the ridge and the town on the other.

Sincheon had been awful. She’d been hurt and abused and had to see and hear things she hadn’t ever wanted to and no one ever should. It filled her with grief and anguish and angry weevils and other people’s hurt that she wasn’t allowed to forget. It forced her to remember the hole.

But people still would’ve gotten hurt if she wasn’t here. The awful things still would’ve happened to them. They’d still have all their hurt with no one to share it with. Hae might have been happier. But her people still would have suffered.

Even if she hadn’t been able to stop what had happened to so

many of them, at least she could make the ones that survived feel a li'l better. At least she could pull them back from the edge. Two hundred people had still ended up being murdered in Kim Moon-sik's barn, but two hundred *hadn't* been. They'd made it, 'cuz'a her and her comrades, comrades that might have already been gone if it wasn't for her.

"Ayuh," she said confidently, lookin' back up at Korea. "If ah could save even one person from goin' through this, ah'd do it all again."

Korea's eye pierced into hers, maybe tryin' to find out if he was just saying that 'cuz he would want her to. But he knew she'd never lie to him, so he nodded, satisfied.

"Then yes," he said, putting his hand on her head. "I'm proud of you."

Hae smiled, closin' her eyes as he rubbed the edge of one of her bandages with his thumb, the weevils scattering as he did.

They descended the ridge towards town, and Hae tracked down Jae-soon to tell him she hoped he'd find his wife, and give him a big hug. She didn't want to let go, afraid that once she left she'd never see him again, but eventually she let Korea pry her off him and said goodbye.

SH and Hwang met them at the Jeep a li'l while later, sayin' Yang Chun-yoon's widow wouldn't cause any problems. Korea didn't protest as Hae meekly climbed into the front seat, squished in between him and Hwang. SH got in the back, staring off into the dark town, her face blank again as her hand massaged Hae's shoulder.

As they drove out of Sincheon and back towards Pyongyang in the dark, Hae breathed out shakily, pressin' herself into Korea's warm side.

"Permission to cry, Gen'ral?"

He sighed deeply. "If you must."

Hae burst into tears.

Low mood. But the world is still more kind than cruel.

Most of the events mentioned here are real, or adapted from real events. The twenty-one men being forced into the reservoir and made to swim until they drowned isn't, but people were drowned. Kim Moon-sik's barn didn't exist, but obviously we know people were locked in places and burned down. Some of the casualties are even scaled down because they were still discovering graves in the Sincheon area into the 90s, so they don't have the full numbers at this point. Also the Women's International Democratic Federation's report noted only three women surviving the massacre at the Sincheon Rest House (though there could be more since survivors of something like that would be hesitant to come forward for fear of their reputation). I added a fourth with Dan Yeon-hwa because I didn't want to erase the identity of a real woman.

https://archive.org/details/sinchon-museum

Content warning for pictures and paintings of bodies and acts of violence. And a note that if you read 'US cannibals' and think 'they're just accusing them of anything awful,' cannibalism is mentioned nowhere in here, I think it's being used in the same vein as 'bloodthirsty' or 'vampires.' Though you never know. Men with power over people they consider subhuman can do disturbed things, clearly.

I wouldn't be surprised if some reactionaries that had justice enacted on them were included in the total death toll. The DPRK's official line was 'fair trials and proof, don't just lynch someone for collaborating with the enemy.' But there was a period between the retreat of the Americans and Southern army and the return of the KPA that there would have been only remaining right-wing gangs and collaborators and local guerrillas in the area. And I repeat an earlier point that murdering innocent people is not the same as murdering the people that did it. And if I were one of the people from the area whose neighbours had been raped and murdered by the thousands or actual soldiers that eventually got there to see a

building full of burnt children, I don’t think I would care much about the law. It wouldn't have been carried out at the behest of the government, but they also wouldn't want to lock up clearly patriotic fighters without a reason if the violence was already done. I could definitely see executed collaborators being absorbed into the official count to avoid having to punish anyone for enacting technically illegal people's justice (I think it would more be that than the 'poor optics' angle- during the war the DPRK was fairly blunt about saying 'this guy got what he deserved' because it *wasn't* bad optics to the general populace- though poor optics on an international scale would still be a factor). But the reactionary guerrillas were *not* civilians, and since it is undeniable that they committed the majority of atrocities in the area along with the American army, I find it hard to see a problem with that. I actually think it's the opposite of authoritarian to allow the people harmed to get their own justice, like the people's courts did in Seoul during the first month of the war, trying the policemen that had committed crimes against them while the KPA stayed out of it. Obviously the world can’t work like that all the time, but I think in the chaos of war that that is sometimes the most just thing. And they did keep perpetrators alive for trial, so it wasn't like they just executed everyone , and the International Women's Democratic Federation and International Association of Democratic Lawyers both investigated and gave the verdict that the main source of casualties and violence was certainly America and its allies, while the United Nations declined to investigate at all, even when demanded to, which I think speaks loudly.

The Warmer One's Love

1916

The place inside herself was far away and peaceful, disconnected from the hot summer night outside the claustrophobic walls, the stench of sweat choking the small room, and the harsh clink of porcelain.

She was far away, floating in nothing. She had no happy memories to submerge herself in. She had used to be able to think of warehouses and cooking fires and the taste of flaky fish. But there was no comfort in those now. It only dwelled in distance.

"Are you even listening to me?"

South Hamgyong drew herself up from the inside place like water from the deepest, blackest well, her eyes slowly focusing on the person that had made those memories so happy, and now made them hard to think of.

"What... was that?"

She welcomed her brother's visits because they allowed her to be *her* again for a moment. But every week it felt harder to pull herself from that place, to use casual speech instead of polite, to not say 'excuse me' and 'please' and 'yes sir.'

At least she hadn't forgotten how to speak Korean. She had plenty of practice at it. The Japanese 'clients' liked it when she spoke her language, just like the Korean ones liked it when she spoke Japanese. It made it so they didn't have to understand her.

Her brother's eyes narrowed. "I said 'What the fuck is that on your neck?'"

It wasn't her neck, just like it wasn't her hand that touched it in a vain attempt to cover what the collar of her kimono couldn't. It was

clear they were marks from fingers.

She didn't answer, and North Hamgyong's face darkened. "What the fuck did that bastard do to you?" he growled.

"Language," she said limply.

He slammed a fist on the table, making the tea set rattle and making SH's heart jump. "Don't talk about my fucking language when some Jap fucking *choked* you!"

"It's alright," she said, the words sour in her mouth. "I made him pay extra for damages."

The man had scared her, suddenly wrapping his spindly-fingered hands around her throat while he was inside her. She had panicked and managed to squirm free, fleeing from him.

Her brother's eyes flashed and his jaw locked. "'Damages,'" he said as he *'thunk'*ed his teacup down on the table, the word as bitter as the minari soup she'd given him to scarf down earlier.

He was furious. He would be even more furious if he knew South Hamgyong had allowed it.

She'd managed to get into the main room, hiding in the corner. The man had been prepared to leave, irritated that he hadn't been able to finish, and vowing not to pay her or ever visit again.

South Hamgyong would have been glad to let him. She would have been glad to have the man with the slicked-back hair and glasses leave and never return. She would have been glad if he *died*.

But if he did, then she had just let him violate her for nothing. For free. And she would lose future funds to pay off her debt.

So she had negotiated. Made him promise not to damage her too badly for fear of reprisal from Japan for damaging his merchandise. And made him pay extra for the privilege of cutting off her air supply.

"Damages," she said lightly, sipping her green tea. It was sweet

and earthy and cost far too much. But every month a fresh supply was delivered to her to serve to her customers. "This isn't that bad. It's just fresh still."

She had been hurt worse before. It was just usually where North Hamgyong didn't have to see it, or had time to fade before he visited, giving him the privilege of pretending it wasn't there. But she hadn't even been able to bathe before he arrived this time, too busy lying limp on the floor and trying to remember how to breathe. She still stank like sweat and sex. She could feel it leaking out of her pores, and knew her brother could smell it, too.

"'Isn't that bad' my ass!" he snapped, the cords on his neck straining. "You let some bastard choke you!"

'Let.'

South Hamgyong's fingers tightened on her teacup as she took another sip. "Yes, well, it's what I have to do to pay off our debt."

"You don't *have* to pay it off," her brother growled, starting their dance again. "You could leave."

"I can't," she said, taking his hand, though both of hers were wrapped around her cup.

"You can." He leaned forward, leading her. "I leave, you go take your bath, then on the way back from the bathhouse you make a break for the wall. I'll meet you at it, help you get over, then we're out. We are *free."*

South Hamgyong matched his steps in tired routine. "And then what?" she asked. "We're in the middle of the mountains with me in a kimono and house sandals, and you in footwraps. We don't know how to hunt, and one wrong plant while foraging would leave us vulnerable. We wouldn't be able to evade Japan, and neither of us can fight."

Her brother opened his mouth to protest, but she smiled sadly, her eyes dipping.

"How long until you get hurt again, and we end up right back

here?"

North Hamgyong's jaw tightened, and his fingers locked around the scar on his forearm.

"It wouldn't happen again," he said stiffly.

"That's what you said last time." Before he had picked his stupid fight and led her to this.

His eyes flashed as he stood abruptly. "Last time wasn't-!"

But as he shot up, his leg slammed the table, and the teacup he'd set on the edge wobbled, and fell to the floor.

The sound was small, the slightest *'clink.'* But by the look on her brother's face, South Hamgyong knew it was the sound of another few thousand yen being added to her debt.

They were both silent, her cup shaking in her numb fingers and his face frozen.

His throat bobbed as he looked at her, defiant and a paler green than usual. "I didn't-" His fists flexed as his expression firmed. "Leave with me tonight."

South Hamgyong took a sip from her empty teacup, smiling distantly. "I think you should go now. I would like to get some sleep, please."

Her brother bared his teeth at her and the broken cup, then turned and stormed to the door, banging on it until the guards let him out, and their dance came to an abrupt end.

There would be no point in trying to hide the broken porcelain. The guards always took stock of what she had, so they knew nothing was broken and she hadn't managed to get her hands on some weapon. They had already found the ripped obi from a few months ago.

She could feel what she had earlier as she watched the 'client' put his hand on the door, as she quivered in place, fingers gripping the

tea pot she had snatched from the table so tightly it could have shattered, as she was filled with an awful pressure and the urge to smash it over his head.

She could hear the dark thing stirring from its hibernation, the thing that had awakened at the beginning of the year as her own fingers had almost closed around that sleeping adulterer's throat. She wanted to throw her cup at the door, to heave the table at one of the barred windows, to howl and tear at her clothes and strike the wall with her fists until her knuckles tore, to shatter the porcelain like her brother, every single *piece* of it. She wanted-

But she couldn't. Everything in this cage was a number, one that could keep her here longer were it to break. She couldn't even hurt herself because she, too, was a commodity. And if she degraded her value, no one would pay for her, and she would be trapped here *forever*.

She could feel the man's fingers locked around her throat again, and her own holding them there, her mind way down inside herself.

Dreamily, she had thought it would be nice to 'die.' Then she wouldn't have to be awake for any of it. She wouldn't have to feel teeth and fingers digging into her skin, or be choked with man-smell and floral oils or take her scalding hot baths or see her brother's disappointed, disgusted, angry face glaring over the table at her like she wasn't doing this for him, like she wasn't here because of *him*.

The only reason she had managed to make her body grab his wrist and remind him not to go too far had been because she knew if he 'killed' her, she might not get her money. Just like why everything in this cage was purposefully high-quality and expensive- Japan would do anything he could to extend her contract, to add to her debt. If she 'died,' she would wake up wasted and used and not a single yen richer.

She wouldn't give any of them that satisfaction.

The thing in her head growled, far lower than her brother, and South Hamgyong made herself release the teacup. Trembling with a

pressure that had nowhere to go, she moved with a distant smile on her face, off to scald her skin and scream in the one place no one could hear her.

Her heel crunched on the already shattered porcelain, grinding it into the floor.

And to report the damages.

—

1951

Korea disappeared as soon as they reached the air raid shelter, off to the city to calm himself down with work, like usual. He'd radiated a black energy all the way back to Pyongyang. Though SH supposed they all had. Even Hwang had been tense and morose as they dropped him off at Sariwon.

Hae should have been left there, too, to make her way to Haeju with him. But Korea said he wanted her to keep working the Pyongyang fields. SH thought he might just want to keep her close after... all that.

The last two days flickered through her mind- women missing limbs, missing breasts, missing themselves, *missing,* Ko Kuil-hwa and Dan Yeon-hwa and the things that had been-

The dark thing raked its claws down the barely-standing wall, gouging lines in the crumbling concrete as it howled. It hadn't quieted since they'd arrived in Sincheon and SH had seen that board, all those faces and names, some men but mostly daughters, wives, grandmothers, sisters, women and girls made to be the victims like *always.*

She painted withered lotuses and broken glass and babies with horns on the cold grey wall, trying to press it back. Her fists squeezed tighter.

"SH? Are ya alright?"

Her eyes snapped open, and she found she was holding Hae's

hand, like she had been since the Jeep left, crushing it hard enough to hurt, though her cousin wasn't trying to escape.

SH slowly exhaled, adding more paint to the wall. "I'm alright," she said, looking at the door to the bunker.

Hae looked at it, too, her feet shifting.

Their cousins were all in their provinces, fulfilling the wishes and solving the complaints Korea had been sent for his birthday. SH would have to return to hers tomorrow, too, leaving her alone.

"Do you want to take a bath before we go to sleep?" she asked.

Hae nodded gratefully. "Ah'm not scared or anythin'," she mumbled. "Ah just... don't want to go inside yet."

SH dipped her head. "Of course. We're all dusty from all that travelling, after all."

And she could feel the words of all those women's coating her like scum. For the first time in years, she felt like it was oozing out of her own pores again.

SH crept into the bunker, careful not to wake up Liaoxi and Liaotung as she fetched their drab military-issue towels and spare uniforms.

She was actually a bit surprised Liaoxi hadn't gone with North Pyongan to Sinuiju, considering how friendly they'd seemed to be getting. But China had been awake and waiting for them to get back, so had left with Korea, of course.

Realizing that meant no one was on watch, SH doubled back to nudge Liaotung awake, informing her. The Chinese woman nodded blearily, and SH returned to her cousin's side.

Hae was pressed into the flank of the mountain when she came out, and immediately grabbed her hand again, staring fixedly into the dark forest. SH's jaw feathered as she squeezed her fingers.

There was a new wariness to her little cousin, one she didn't like

seeing on her.

She opened her mouth, then closed it, leading her into the trees.

"Are we goin' to the river?" Hae whispered. When SH nodded she said, "Kang says we're not supposed to go swimmin' with open wounds."

"Kangwon says a lot of things," SH replied, thinking about their 'chat' while hunting for herbs. She sighed. "But he's right about that. The barracks are too far, though. We'll just make sure to disinfect our wounds really well, and visit the hospital tomorrow. Then once South Pyongan and North Hamgyong get back, they can finish the bath."

They were working to get a heated one built, the kind with a wood-burning stove under a large tub, so they could boil enough water to bathe in. SH just *knew* North Hamgyong had chosen that design to mock her, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of confronting him about it. She hadn't spoken with him alone since he'd antagonized her back in July.

"And then SH can take cold baths in winter," Hae finished.

"Hopefully we won't still be out here in winter."

Hopefully the war would be over and they could start rebuilding. And punishing the men that deserved it.

But the months of on-off ceasefire negotiations had only proved SH right- America wouldn't let them just talk peace out. Men like him didn't stop until they got what they wanted.

'Or die.'

They weren't too far from the main highway, and they only had to cross it to reach a tributary of the Pothong River. It glimmered as it ran under the shadow of the small hill on the other side, a lazy brush stroke meandering away in both directions. There was an open field between them and the road, which would be busier now that it was nighttime and any vehicles would be less likely to be seen by planes, but the embankment would hide them from any

patrols that came by.

Hae stripped down immediately, tossing her uniform and peeled-off bandages on the ground, but SH's fingers hesitated on her buttons, reluctant to bare her flesh. She wasn't worried about anyone coming upon them. Even if someone that meant harm did, she had her gun this time, and so did Hae. They could just shoot him.

She just... wanted to wear her uniform.

'Silly.' She made herself unbutton her tunic. It felt dirty, in more ways than one.

"I'll do our laundry tomorrow before I go," she said to Hae, who was already dipping her toe in the black river water.

"Korea'll be mad," she warned, balancing on one foot to flick water from the other.

"Not this time." Well, maybe not about her washing Hae's uniform. But she *was* planning to filch his, too, so he might be about that. She was sure he'd return to change out of the one he'd worn to Sincheon.

Hae made a *"Grah!"* sound, followed by a splash as she threw herself into the river, and sputtering as she resurfaced.

"Is it cold?" SH asked, laying their towels out close to the water, arranging their firearms on them.

"No," her cousin said confidently.

SH padded over, stepping in, then arched an eyebrow. "Lying isn't nice, Hae."

"You like the cold," she said, smiling.

But she didn't giggle or try to flick water at her like she usually would have. She only floated up onto her back, a small spot of ghostly white in the dark tributary.

SH frowned internally, but her smile stayed on her face as she slid into the river, sighing as she submerged herself.

The water wasn't frigid yet, but it was cold enough to make her feel a little cleaner just by having it touch her skin. Though her burns took the chill less well.

"SH," Hae asked quietly, staring up at the stars. "Can you wash my back?"

"Of course." She gestured her cousin over from the deeper water so they could crouch, toes dug into the silty river bottom.

Hae was quiet as she used their hand towel to wipe her back down, careful not to be too rough with her burns. The only time she'd ever been silent during a bath was the first time, when she wasn't speaking at all. And she had *never* been this still.

"SH," she said eventually. "Why were most'a the folks that got hurt in Sincheon women?"

SH's hand stilled on her cousin's spine.

"Because men don't see us as people, Hae."

The words had came out darker than she'd meant, carrying the growl of the thing behind the wall.

"Oh." Her cousin's voice was small and sad, and it made SH exhale.

"Not every man," she clarified. "But the Americans and the reactionaries. It's why they want things to stay the same or go backwards- because they don't *want* to have to see us as people. But the majority of our men aren't like that."

She wasn't like South Chungcheong. She *knew* that most men weren't degenerate, craven, animalistic or any of the other insults her cousin had hurled at them through the years. And even the ones that were had been made that way by the old systems that said that women were lesser, no more than commodities. It wasn't something innately 'male.'

Yet still, sometimes when she was alone with a comrade, no matter how kind he was, she would find herself looking over her shoulder, waiting for him to try something, or think she felt his eyes crawling lasciviously over her body, even when she could see they were fixed respectfully on the center of her flag's flower.

She never wanted Hae to feel that way, especially now that she kept raising her head warily, scanning the far side of the river.

"But the Yankees..." The cloth crumpled in her fist.

"They're just wrong."

Maybe some of the ones in America weren't, the ones that had refused to fight. But she knew that for every single Yankee soldier here, it wasn't a matter of 'if' they would rape a Korean woman, but 'what it would take' for them to.

Hae nodded. "They're devils," she said, venomous in a way that was foreign to her.

SH bit her lip, unable to fight it anymore.

"Hae," she carefully began. "What did Comrade Yang Jeong-nyeo tell you?"

Hae was quiet for a second longer, and her heart sank.

"She said the miguk-nom beat her," she said eventually. "And her daughter."

"That's all?"

Hae nodded. "Mm. They beat her real bad and killed her kid."

SH relaxed slightly.

Kangwon could get on her case for not *wanting* to say the word, but most of the women they'd spoken to that had been... through what she had hadn't spoken plainly. They'd used the words 'hurt' or 'assaulted' or dodged around describing it entirely. No one wanted to directly acknowledge what had been done to them.

She had been worried that Yang Jeong-nyeo might be different, especially without Korea, Hwang, or any other men there to overhear. But the woman must have spoken vaguely enough that Hae didn't realize what had truly happened to her.

"There was something Comrade Yeon-hwa said that ah din't get," Hae said, her gaze on the water as SH ran the cloth across her shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Why did she say the miguk-nom were sellin' the women in the rest home? What were they sellin' 'em for?"

Relief bloomed in SH's bones, and her thighs went so weak she would have fallen if she was standing. The last bits of filth clinging to her washed away in the inky water.

"Labour," she managed after a second. "They were selling them for labour, like how women were sold to Japan during the Occupation. "

"That's awful," Hae said quietly. "Those poor women."

"Yes," SH forced out. "Those poor women."

Maybe it was wrong to lie to Hae like that. But SH couldn't make herself see it that way. Almost every woman had to grow up afraid that one day a man could take everything from her. If she took too long getting home or her family was given a good deal or a rich man needed a concubine or she needed money to live, she would have her body stripped away.

She didn't want Hae to have to worry about that. She didn't want her to be afraid of being alone, even with comrades, she didn't want her to look at the knives every single woman in Sincheon had been carrying and know that they weren't for self-defense, and she didn't want her to know just what America and the right-wing men that beat her could have done to her.

Hae had been lucky. SH had asked her careful questions once she had started talking, and she was sure she had never been violated,

that what they had interrupted when they rescued her had been the first time. She had been locked away for eleven years, alone, completely at the mercy of foreign men that hadn't seen her as human, and she had somehow escaped it without that part of her being torn away. And she had been pinned down and beaten by a group of the most violent, degenerate men alive, and still avoided what happened to some women just because they'd wanted to go to the market.

And she shouldn't have to *know* that she had been lucky. She shouldn't have to know that every single battle they took part in risked that luck breaking.

So many women never had the chance to be innocent, or if they did, it was taken from them. If SH could keep her cousin that way, she would do anything she could to.

She wanted her to keep believing that death was the worst thing that could happen to you, she wanted her to keep believing that forgetting was easy and that she and the Jeollas had only been made to sing and dance and play games to entertain. SH wanted her to keep seeing her as *pure,* even when everyone else knew she wasn't.

"That's why we're lucky we have Korea," she said to Hae, putting her arms around her shoulders. "And the General and our cousins." And North Hamgyong, she supposed. "They're good men, and they'll help us Liberate *all* of our women. One day no one will ever remember a time Korean women weren't just as free and equal as men."

No one but them.

"SH." Hae put her hands on her arm, holding tight. "Are you angry, too?"

"I..." Her hold tightened around her cousin as her throat fought to keep her silent.

*'Anger is the only **correct** way to feel.'*

"Yes," she admitted, choking the word out in a way that almost hurt. "I'm angry."

It was like a curtain had been pulled back, torn out of the hands that so desperately clung to the fabric, as she finally let the truth behind it in. It felt like a relief to say it, to finally acknowledge it, like her ribs could at last expand enough to get a full breath.

In her cage, anger had been the sole domain of men. Of the 'clients' that choked and beat and dominated her, taking their anger at being bossed around at work or nagged by their wives out on someone that couldn't fight back, and of her brother and his dour face, smashing that teacup and picking fights, getting her caged in the first place. It had been something disgusting and unsightly.

And even once freed, and she had learned from Korea that anger didn't always have to be cold and bitter, but something righteous and hot, she couldn't afford to wear it. On women, passion was so easily read as hysteria.

But she *was* angry. And she thought she had been angry for a long time. When that man had fallen asleep on her arm, when that other's hands had closed around her neck, every time she had to negotiate with herself as the ware she was trying to sell or scrub her skin until it bled, every time America had called her 'doll' or when Jin-suk sobbed into her arms or she heard about some new horror that men had managed to visit upon their women, when she had seen the ruins of her city and every time her brother *looked* at her like that-

South Hamgyong was angry. And if she hadn't been, if part of her hadn't responded to that look in Korea's eyes as he entered her cage, blood on his hands, she wouldn't be here now.

"I'm angry," she repeated, pulling her cousin close and burying her face in her shoulder, shaking with the force of the feeling she finally allowed to flow through her. "I'm really *really* angry."

"Me too," Hae said, leaning her head back so their singed cheeks were pressed together. "But ah love you, cuz."

SH smiled tremulously into her burnt skin. "I love you, too, Hae. And I think you were very brave for going back there."

"Ah'll get braver," Hae promised. "And ah'll get stronger." She twisted in her arms to look at her seriously, eyes like large pools of moonstone. "Then ah'll keep you safe. Ah'll make sure no one ever hurts you or Korea or any'a our woman or *anyone* ever again."

"It's Korea and I's job to keep you safe," SH said, though her heart swelled. "Remember?"

Hae thought for a moment. "We're comrades, so it's both'a our jobs to keep each other safe. So you'll keep me safe, and ah'll keep you safe."

SH smiled, and for a moment the dark thing stilled.

"Deal."

—

"I want you in the fields tomorrow after reporting to the Supreme Commander," North said, not leaving the Jeep. "You'll join North Hwanghae in your province in a few days."

Hae nodded, subdued in a way that made his jaw ache, even though she had finished crying thirty minutes ago. She looked up at him from under her stubby lashes, pushing her bottom lip out.

North sighed in consent, and she leaned into the driver's seat, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face in his stomach, making the burn gash twinge.

"Ah *hate* 'em," she heatedly declared into him. "Ah hate the reaction'ries an' ah hate the Yankees an' traitors an' 'Merica an'-"

North waited, his jaw clenched. "And?"

"Nothin', Korea," she mumbled, then mumbled somethin' else he still wouldn't respond to.

He put a hand on her head, pushing her away. "Get a new bandage

on your cheek."

He nodded to SH as she bid him goodnight, then drove the Jeep back into the trees.

"Stealing my transportation again?" China asked from the back seat.

"My country. My vehicle," North answered, unable to avoid tensing, even though he had expected the other Countryhuman.

"You can consider this your one warning that I don't actually need your keys to hijack your GAZ."

"Touch my truck and die." If North Hamgyong didn't get him first.

"Aiya," China sighed, draping his top half over the back of the driver's seat. "You're lucky my little sisters and I need to watch our waistlines."

North hit the brake abruptly, halting them on the highway. "Go back to the bunker," he growled, his skin prickling up and down.

It hadn't stopped, day and night, over every inch of Sincheon and Hwanghae province. Now that Hae was out of her land she was free of it. But he wasn't. He never was. And between it and the burning rage that clouded his vision and choked his throat with bitter acid every time he thought of Hae clinging to Yang Jeong-nyeo, Dan Yeon-hwa looking at the child that had been forced on her with desperate hopelessness and then conviction, San-gon clutching his old blade, or any of the hundreds of other stories and scenes he had witnessed in Sincheon and the *millions* of others that had taken place all over his country-

"I can't be around a foreigner right now."

It didn't matter that China's soldiers were nothing like America's or Rhee's. He was still a reminder that the war wasn't over, that they had retreated, that it was *his* fault that the enemy had been able to visit such destruction on his people-

"I might be a foreigner," China said, tilting his head to look at him.

"But I'm not exactly foreign to the concept of what an occupying force can do to your people. And how it can affect you."

He was on North's blindside, and he refused to turn his head to see what expression he was making. But his voice was solemn enough that the Korean's knuckles tightened around the wheel.

The Chinese country *would* be familiar.

"If you want my opinion- though I'm sure you don't- a tactical retreat was the only thing you could have done last year," he continued, slightly lighter.

"It was," North clipped, throwing the Jeep back into drive. "That's why I did it."

He couldn't have China thinking he *was* affected, beyond being furious at what had been done to his people. They had to retreat- if they hadn't they would have fallen and the same atrocities that had happened in Sincheon and were still happening in the south would be happening everywhere. The Americans and the traitors had been the ones to do it. The past couldn't be changed. North could only use it to chart a course forward and avoid the same mistakes. He had to keep repeating those words until he *felt* them.

"Here." China's closed fist entered his field of view, forcing North to lean to see the road. "Give these to your Little Tiger."

"She doesn't need anything," North grumbled. "And get out of the way."

China's hand touched his chest, making him flinch as he slid it into his breast pocket. North took a hand off the wheel to bat him away.

"Milk candy," the other country explained, leaning back out of hitting distance. "She likes it. And she shouldn't have a problem accepting it from you."

North *'tch'*ed, making sure the objects in his pocket really were candy.

Whatever. China would just try to gift it to her anyway. At least

this way North could prevent his province from spiralling over being bribed again.

Once at Jonsung complex, North ditched China and went immediately to Pak Hon-yong's room, waking him up to make his case. But again his appeal was denied.

His General was still up, hunched over his desk by lamplight. He looked up from his papers as his Countryhuman slammed the door. "You've returned. How was it?"

North gave him a bleak look, and he nodded soberly.

"No matter how we bring an end to this war, the Imperialist aggressors will pay for what they have done to our country."

"What's the situation at the front?" North asked, bringing his chair over to sit across from him.

The Premier rifled through the papers spread over his desk, then slid a tactical map to him. "Not much has changed since you left. The line is mostly stable. The main thrust is still being made in the eastern sector."

North nodded, surveying the lines and unit identifiers.

After losing the ridge where they had repulsed the puppet army's 36th Regiment over a week ago, his Third Corps had pulled back to a series of hills farther north, between Mundung-ri and Satae-ri, taking up defensive positions there that they had spent months digging. The Yankees were moving with their puppets to seize the ridges, ostensibly to prevent North's army from using them to launch an attack on their troops west of the Haean-myeon valley.

That was likely a part of it. But North knew that America's main motivator was what it had always been- to steal as much of Korea as possible.

The offensive had only opened four days ago, with the Americans and the French launching one of their usual unending artillery barrages before sending in assault teams. North's 6th Division had held them off for the first day, but after realizing they had

underestimated them again, the enemy had changed tactics and managed to seize a lesser height, which they hadn't managed to reclaim even with repeated counteroffensives. But even then, the Americans' main force hadn't made gains by the 16th or today. North was pleased to hear that while he was in Hwanghae province his comrades had even managed to replace a battle-weary regiment. Though he was less pleased by how things stood overall.

It was a stalemate, just like the war in general.

"We need to reclaim that height," he said, shoving the map away. "I should be there."

He had visited on his tour down the front, but it wasn't enough. He had seen the way his soldiers eyes had lit up as he spoke with them and how their defensive efforts grew even stronger as he passed. Everywhere he went, the line had been reinforced. But they needed *more.* They needed to advance.

"Comrade Pak Hon-yong hasn't yielded?" his Premier asked knowingly.

North *'tch'*ed in answer.

The talks were paused. He should be able to go to the front. But his Minister of Foreign Affairs insisted he shouldn't, since his presence could jeopardize the chance of the negotiations restarting.

"His points are good ones, in this case," his General said. "The enemy is already using moving the location as a sticking point. We don't want to give them another."

North knew he was right. Ridgeway wanted to move the talks to Panmunjom, a village farther east, insisting that Kaesong was compromised after so many 'incidents.' But it was obvious that the location hadn't had anything to do with them. All it would accomplish would be extending the process even more. And he and his provinces going to the front would just give them another excuse.

But still...

"I should *be* there," he repeated, frustrated.

His insides were writhing, tying themselves into knots. Every time his mind wandered back to Sincheon, to Hae and his people's tears, that tiny skull, that lotus pond and air raid shelter, a seething red engulfed his vision, setting his blood aflame.

"I *need* to-"

He cut himself off, hearing the note in his own voice. He grit his teeth, balling his hands on his thighs.

"I share my county's sentiment," his General said after a moment, quietly. "Perhaps you could visit Wonsan. No one could complain when you're repulsing a landing party ri from the frontline."

North exhaled slowly, trying to force his head to clear. "No," he said when he sounded steady again. "We know the enemy will take any chance to complain they can."

And he had to control this.

"I will stay here and conduct my duties as needed."

The Premier dipped his head. "As you wish. But I have been thinking about paying a visit to our comrades at the front soon, if you would like to accompany me."

North straightened, eye wide. "That's too dangerous."

He had been alarmed enough to find out that he had actually visited the front for Liberation Day last year (which he had wisely not informed him of until after). The note North had received hadn't came from Pyongyang- it had come from far closer, too close, considering his vehicle had actually almost been bombed.

The man smiled, eyes twinkling. "Then I suppose you'll have to come with me to make sure no harm comes to Korea's Premier. Maybe we'll even have the chance to fight off an ambush, like old times."

There would be no fight. If an enemy soldier even *looked* at his

General wrong, North would turn them into mist before they knew what happened. He had no idea how he had ever let him onto the battlefield during the Occupation without having a heart attack.

"I'll come," he said, grateful for what he was doing for him, even if it made his pulse unsteady.

"Good. I'm sure you will be alright until then." He sobered, folding his hands over his desk. "Now, would you like to report on Hwanghae?"

North hesitated, then his jaw feathered. "No. South Hwanghae will report tomorrow, and North Hwanghae is going to start working on his exposé immediately. I... can't."

He said it through gritted teeth. It was a weakness, but he knew if he had to recall everything he had seen and heard there, just what had been done to their countrymen...

Korea had to do what was best for his people. And if he had to think of that again right now, there would be no way to convince himself that was remaining in a politician's seat and not going directly to Busan to launch a suicide attack on America and Rhee, tearing apart anyone that came between him and them.

His comrade dipped his head. "I understand. How fare our comrades?"

"North Hwanghae kept his composure and didn't put his foot in his mouth too many times. And South Hwanghae handled her tasks very well." Not the way he would have, but that was good. What had happened to Sincheon had already made their people angry. But that wasn't enough for all of them. He needed them healed, or close to it.

And Hae was good at that.

"And Comrade SH?"

North thinned his lips. "I warned her not to go."

They couldn't afford to look away from their people's suffering,

but he knew she didn't have to see it to know. She had already been working with the women abused by the Yankees and their puppets- she shouldn't have had to be exposed to the aftermath on such a scale.

But it was... useful that she had been there for Hae.

"I'll make time to speak with them both tomorrow," his Premier said, then hesitated.

North was automatically wary. "What?"

"I don't think this is the best time to inform you of this, but..." He sighed. "I can't keep something like this from my country for a moment longer."

He rummaged through his drawer, pulling out a page from a newspaper. A quick glance at the article titles- everything from *'COMMUNIST ARMY EXECUTES THOUSANDS OF PATRIOTIC CHRISTIANS'* to *'RUSSIANS SABOTAGE PEACE TALKS'*- showed that it was a reactionary rag.

His eye was drawn to a headline in the corner, and his heart stilled. The needles under his skin intensified, the red mist descending over his vision again as the paper crumpled in his grip.

His General nodded severely. "Articles like this have appeared in several papers from the south. Only the 'independent' ones, so far."

For deniability, either if she ever switched sides or if North accused them of using it to try and interfere with the ceasefire.

Because that was what this was for. A subtle threat from 'independent' newspapers that only existed with the puppet government's grace, and so with America's. It could be dismissed as gossip or the accusations of a few conspiracy theorists. But North saw it as what it was- a direct message from America.

*'If the talks succeed and you Reunify, you won't be able to keep this from **your** papers, too. Everyone will know.'*

"Don't address it directly," he forced through gritted fangs. "Have

the *Rodong Sinmun* run an article on the conditions *all* of Korea's provinces faced during the Occupation, and remind everyone that possession of enemy leaflets or newspapers without intent to destroy is a punishable offense. And if this leaves *anyone's* lips I want them to know that it is considered treason and I will treat it as such."

The Premier nodded, making a note. "The only other parties that are aware so far are myself, our agents in the south, those responsible for monitoring enemy papers, and Comrade Nam Il. He had to be prepared in case it would affect the talks."

"No," North forced out, fingers digging into his legs. "Peace will not be jeopardized over slander like this."

It couldn't be.

"Is there anything about the others?"

His General shook his head.

There wouldn't be. They were supposed to be seen as 'loyal,' 'saved from Communist hands.' Their reputations couldn't be tarnished, though North had no doubt they would face the same treatment if their Reunification came from a ceasefire. Though they would handle it better.

"I want this treated like any other enemy lie," North ordered. Even though this was one true. "And if anyone tells South Hamgyong about this I will put them up against the wall myself."

He usually refrained from making threats like that around his Premier, but he couldn't help it this time. He knew that even if every single one of their people refused to believe the slander, it wouldn't matter. She would know. And she would always wonder if they *did* believe it. She would always wonder if they were looking at her and seeing someone weak and powerless.

A victim.

North bared his teeth as he tore the paper to scraps, despising that the enemy could tear their pasts from them like that, uncovering

things that were supposed to stay buried.

Why did his brother have to let America make him use those *damn* Commands?

His Premier didn't protest, like he hadn't protested when North removed those that spread that rumour after Liberation. It didn't matter if it was the truth- that wasn't why it was being said. And the only ones that had known at that point had been men that deserved to be locked away. They had deserved worse than that.

North shoved his hand under his eyepatch, rubbing roughly at the scar there. *'Ssi-bal.'*

He wanted to kill America, and every single one of his puppets. He wanted to-

"Do you have my book?"

His General handed him his old leather notebook, and North removed himself to his desk, trying to drown out his thoughts with names- Kim San-gon, Yang Jeong-nyeo, Ko Kuil-hwa, Kang Dong-joon and everyone else in the bunker; Kim Myong-gum, Jong Kun-song, Ju Sang-won and the others that had survived their own massacres; Kim I-jin and Dan Yeon-hwa; Oh Pil-rae, Min Song-bin, Ok Chun-yong, Paks and Kims and Ris from all across Sincheon, Anak, and Unryul; and every single name on the lists of the missing and dead that he hadn't written down yet. He drew symbols next to the ones he could, little codes so he would know who was a martyr, who was a traitor, whose debts had been returned and whose still needed to be balanced.

He drew two bags of grain next to Yang Chun-yoon's name, then struck them through, the same thing he had drawn next to Kim Sok-won's, the same symbol that sat next to the names of allies and enemies alike. The only difference between the two was whether or not a snakelike line came before it. They both meant the same thing- 'Got what they deserved.'

He took a moment to go back through the names he had already written down, finding the sections he had filled after the 1946 and

1948 elections, and after he had regained his northern provinces, updating several- People's Committee and Worker's Party members he had still been holding out hope for, but now knew were gone- and went back even farther for some- comrades from the war against Japan that had given their lives defending Hwanghae. Next to Pak Byong-sol, a man from the later days of Korea's Army who had fought with them all the way to Liberation, Jo Pong-ok, the fourteen-year old chairwoman of the Raksan Primary School's Children's Union who hadn't given away her guerrilla comrades even under torture, and Choe Kwang-seok, who he had never been able to repay for helping look after Hae during her time in Sincheon, he drew a single messy eye. It was done in the grey of pencil lead. Only he knew it was the colour of chestnuts. Only he knew it meant 'martyred.'

He went to turn the page to resume writing the names of the deceased, and stopped, finding himself out of pages. After thirteen years and thirty-two years of names, his record was finally full.

North stared numbly at the thick, worn book, its pages swollen with decades of damp, dirt, and his people.

It wasn't like every single person in it was dead. There were thousands of names crammed into the small pages.

But too many of them were. And too many from the last year alone.

A shadow hovered over his desk, and he looked up to see his General holding another book out to him. It had a fine, unblemished leather cover, less scuffed than his had ever been.

"I noticed you were getting close to the end the last time you were writing," he said, smiling. "I thought you might need a new one."

North took it, running his fingers over the blank pages inside, smooth to the touch.

"It was made in our own paper mill this time," his General said. "And most of those pages will be filled with the names of people born in a free Korea, those from Jeju to North Hamgyong."

North stroked a hand over the cover. He was right. He had to be.

"Thank you," the Countryhuman rasped, returning to his writing, trying to stop the fire raging in his blood.

Eventually his Premier left, telling him he hoped he would get some sleep and knowing it was in vain. North kept writing until he had filled the first two pages completely, the syllable blocks so crammed together that he almost didn't need to use the symbols to obscure what was being said.

He sighed, closing the cover heavily and rubbing his scar again.

It hadn't worked. He could still feel the anger roiling under his skin, only made worse now from putting names and faces to those that had suffered again.

He needed to do something. He couldn't go fight at the front, but he still needed to do *something*.

He opened his first book again, flipping back to the post-criticism session with his provinces section, finding that name again, glaring at it like he could burn it out of existence.

Rim Gun-hon. A soldier in the puppet army, though North hadn't been able to find any details on him. There was a chance he wasn't even an officer, only a gang member wearing the uniform, or someone assigned specifically to the task of hunting down Hae in Sincheon.

All three options posed a problem. North knew any non-rigged jury would believe Hae about what had been done to her. But even she admitted the man himself hadn't directly harmed her, nor had she seen him harm anyone in Sincheon. Leading a reactionary gang responsible for heinous crimes was still an offense punishable by death, but after victory, the eyes of the United Nations would be on them, waiting for any excuse to depose the Socialist government North knew his people would elect, no matter what America wanted. They would look for any chance to protect the high-ranking puppets that had slaughtered for them, and use them to sabotage them from the inside. And if the man was a special agent,

there likely wasn't any record of him being in Sincheon, while if he was a member of the right-wing groups, America would try and claim he was a civilian, and that anyone that had collaborated even slightly with his army or his puppets was in danger, breeding distrust and fear in North's populace, just like in the wake of their retreat in December.

'The right of justice should belong to those who are wronged.' North Pyongan had said those words contemplatively when he had returned from Ganghwa, and North agreed heartily. But he knew that even after Reunification, they would have foreign fingers trying to interfere in their system, claiming it was barbaric. They had said that about refusing to allow Japanese collaborators to participate in elections, even though that hadn't involved any violence and the people in the south had been calling for the same thing.

If they could Liberate their country through combat, it would be different. They wouldn't have to worry about appeasing foreign parties or working with the monsters whose orders had caused the carnage all across Korea. He knew America would do anything he could to stymy Reunification if it came through negotiations, just like before. It would just lead to another-

North took a deep breath. He wasn't thinking about that right now. The point was that while he was sure he could get a lifetime sentence for Rim Gun-hon, and he would be satisfied to have him spend the rest of his life breaking his back in a mine to rebuild Hwanghae province, Hwanghae *wasn't.* If the right of justice couldn't be given to those who were wronged, then the method should be.

He took a fresh sheet of paper from his desk drawer, then hesitated.

No. That would be too irresponsible and adventurist. It wouldn't serve the war effort as a whole, and he couldn't risk an agent getting discovered either uncovering his location or eliminating him if he wasn't at the front. Already it seemed like the Americans cracked their codes as soon as they were utilized, and another operative went dark every day. North was sure they had a leak, and he couldn't risk jeopardizing anyone else in any chain just for this.

But when he thought about forcing a ceasefire, and the months between it and Reunification giving Rim Gun-hon and others like him time to flee to Japan or America to evade paying for what they had done, living fat lives with blood caked under their nails...

A spark lit in his mind. There *was* an operative that was disconnected from any chains of command. One he had considered saving for a situation no one else could resolve. One who, even if discovered, wouldn't risk any other agents.

Well, he could risk one other.

North tapped his pencil on the desk, thinking.

He had no way of knowing where Pak Seo-nam was. He'd lost contact with him after the puppet government returned to Seoul, and hadn't heard from him even after they'd left again. He could very well still be in Busan. Or he could be dead.

But if he *was* in Busan, then North knew he would be keeping an eye on his target. He could reach him that way.

Would she even be able to receive a message from North right now? He hadn't tried, not wanting to put her at any more risk than she already was.

But this wouldn't be too dangerous for her. All she would need to do was get information to her handler. He knew from experience that she was resourceful enough to do that without being caught.

If she did get the message, would she be able to pass it on? *Would* she? She was loyal, but he knew she wouldn't stick her neck out for no reason. He didn't want her to.

North chewed on the inside of his lip, then nodded, starting to pen an 'advertisement.'

A civilian paid to put it in the southern paper for a week, with a real item behind it so he would be none the wiser, keeping him safe while not putting any of their agents at risk. Instructions for Pak Seo-nam not to carry out any actions himself if he deemed it too dangerous, only hunt Rim Gun-hon down and find out if he still

lived. And a few signifiers so both parties would know it wasn't an order. He couldn't make it one in good conscience.

He knew the message might not reach her, and he knew even if it did, it might not reach Pak Seo-nam. The man could be dead or so deep in hiding that he'd abandoned his mission.

But North didn't think so. He was also loyal, and wouldn't crack under torture. Even if he was caught, she would stay safe. And if she thought she wouldn't, she would likely just ignore his message.

Still, even if this led to nothing, it soothed the prickle in his skin at least slightly.

He couldn't Liberate their country fully or shut America and his lying, slanderous mouth up or stop the radio broadcasts calling for his province or track down all of those accused by the people of Sincheon whose names he had written in his book and make sure every single one had two struck out sacks of grain next to it.

But he *could* make sure Rim Gun-hon would never hurt any of his provinces or people again.

—

SH's breath came in unsteady gasps as she leaned against the bunker door, her nails scraping at the steel behind her. The thing behind the wall panted with her, its heaving sides making the concrete bulge, distorting the images she tried to paint over it to hold it back.

She didn't understand. It should be gone. She'd admitted she was angry, she'd admitted that she was furious and she wanted to see every single man that had ever laid hands on her or any woman to be destroyed for it. She didn't have to hold it back anymore, so she shouldn't need to paint the wall, there shouldn't *be* a wall, there shouldn't be anything to hold back. The dark thing should be *gone.*

But it wasn't. And as she laid on Hae's cot with her cousin curled up next to her, her face peaceful, all she had been able to focus on was the bandage on her cheek and the burn under it. All she had

been able to see was her face in the POW camp, sullen and bruised, and the way she jumped now when a branch cracked in the woods on the way back to the bunker. All she could see were the faces of all those women in Sincheon, from elders to mothers to Party members, Public Security, militia, and *children*, little girls.

It was always them that were made to suffer the most. When men were shipped to Japan or conscripted for the army, it was for labour. For women, it was for their bodies. They both suffered, but the men could come home and forget. The women couldn't. Even if they returned to Korea, they would be ostracized by their neighbours, like Ko Kuil-hwa, or rejected by their families or made to raise a child they didn't want, like Jin-suk had almost had to, like Dan Yeon-hwa *would* have to. Not even a uniform or position or gun had been enough to save them from the same fate. There was no escaping for them, there *was* no forgetting.

SH squeezed her eyes shut, biting down on the inside of her cheek as she tried to paint back the feeling of hands on her breasts and thighs and throat, and the dark thing that slammed on her wall with the blood that gushed from the inside of her mouth.

Her nails sank into her burnt palms, and the feeling only made it howl louder. She couldn't even paint now without it hurting because of America, because it wasn't enough that his soldiers were raping and murdering their people, he had to bomb their land until it was unlivable, too, to drive them underground like moles, to raze their fields and topple their factories.

She could still see the corpse cloths in Hungnam, and the women wailing over them, made to suffer even when they weren't the ones harmed directly.

Her country was being destroyed because men like America, *countries* like America, couldn't take no for an answer. They couldn't comprehend that every woman, every nation didn't belong to them, that they didn't exist solely to plunder and own. Because when they were denied, they had to *take,* whether it was Yang Jeong-nyeo and her daughter or Korea or *her*.

The thing screamed as it hurled itself into the wall and SH

screamed, too, throwing her head back and howling up at the sky until her lungs gave out and she was left gasping for air.

She leaned back, sliding down the door, her palms leaving bloody paint strokes like those holding back the dark. It had gone quiet, calmed by the pressure released by her cry. Her throat felt raw, and there was a lingering sense of shame hanging over her as she heard South Chungcheong chide her for hysteria.

But it wasn't. It was *rage.* And she was allowed to feel it. She wasn't a girl trapped in a cage anymore, only allowed to raise her voice to sing for the pigs that visited her, or when she was muffled by bathwater. She was South Hamgyong province, and she was allowed to be furious at what was being done to their people. It was better than feeling nothing.

Her palms stung, and that felt good, too. It felt good to be able to hurt herself and know that the only thing that would come of it was Korea calling her an idiot if he saw the crescent moons carved into her pale skin, while he hid his own. No fear or anxiety over lost profit. Just a sting. It was *her* body, and she was allowed to do what she wanted to it, even if it was stupid. And she was the *only* one.

Despite the sense of relief that brought her, despite how good it felt to scream and finally admit that yes, she was angry, she was furious, the dark thing was rage and always had been...

It was still there, lurking behind the wall. And she didn't know how to get rid of it. There was a creeping feeling that she couldn't, that it would always be there until the war was won, America was dead, Korea was Reunified, and *every* woman belonged to herself.

And she had a feeling that even that wouldn't be enough. That even when none of her 'clients' had been able to plant a seed in her, the years in that cage still had. That they had left another stain on her, one she would never be able to wash off, no matter how cold of water she used.

Despite how the dark thing was slumbering again, and the wall had been reinforced with a riot of paints... As SH held her head in her bloody hands, she knew she would have nightmares tonight.

She thought she always would.

Oh, you thought that out of all the pieces of North the provinces have, North Hamgyong was the one that got his anger? Wrong! SH is the eldest daughter, of course she inherited his all-consuming rage. And Kangwon is the eldest son so he got the praise kink. You will notice that in every single POV of hers before this, she never uses the word 'angry' or anything like it to describe herself.

Torturing women chapters over. For now. Unfortunately the torturing of women will never truly end until society is rewritten. And even then.

I'll be on hiatus for a few days because I'M GOING TO CHINA! I said I would by this next last year, and I have succeeded. No DPRK yet. ㅠㅠ But soon. Pleaaassse.

Risk and Reward

1938

"I'm afraid any catching up will have to wait for a minute."

Choi Jung-nam and Suzuki Yoshi blinked, the latter looking uneasy.

"Were you followed?" the woman- quite a bit older than when Hwang had seen her last- asked in a hushed voice, casting her eyes toward the rotting straw door of the cow shed.

"No," he quickly assured. "But I have an important question. You both saw the news in August 1936?"

He didn't need to clarify any further. Though it was over two years ago, they both immediately understood what he meant.

"There's another Korea," Suzuki-san said, tugging at the loose strand that had escaped her bun.

"Ah, yes," Hwang recalled. "You printed some of our press releases back then."

"Hai," she confirmed. "But I already knew before your messenger came."

Hwang blinked, surprised at that. "How?"

"Give us more credit, Prof," Choi Jung-nam said with a grin. "We're *your* students."

"Except one of us was convinced it was photo retouching and wouldn't take the newspaper copy editor's word that it wasn't," his wife said demurely.

"Who was that again?"

Suzuki-san ignored him. "Even if I couldn't tell it wasn't retouched, I knew Korea-sama would never pose with any of my people like that, let alone Japan-sama himself."

Hwang coughed awkwardly. Korea hadn't grown... tolerating of the Japanese until years after their last contact with the Japanese woman. And he had always sent Hwang or another emissary to speak with her instead.

"Yes, well, you were correct and our newspapers spoke the truth. There is another Korea." Hwang glanced at the door, then lowered his voice. "Do you know where he could be?"

Suzuki Yoshi had served as their informant in Seoul (and Korea's excuse to return to the city) for years, locating the Jeollas' location and Gyeonggi's first one for them, as well as playing a key part in South Chungcheong's retrieval. Even after they had deemed it too dangerous to meet personally after that event, once they had started to gather Korea's Army, Korea would occasionally send one of them to see if she had any new intelligence, though he hadn't sent any members from their new combined army recently, as he didn't want any of them being observed returning to the secret camps.

The Japanese woman tipped her head now, puzzled. "Isn't that what Korea-sama wanted to meet with us for? I've honestly been expecting him ever since we were told, or at least someone that works for you."

No. And he would likely attempt to stop Hwang from asking if he was here.

"No time to explain. Do you know where he could be?"

The Japanese woman shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. I looked for information or rumours after I saw the paper, but I haven't found anything. The picture was taken in front of Chosen Jingu, but that's all I could find out."

And anyone that had seen the Shinto shrine would recognize the white shinmei torii gate that stood before the tall stone staircase. Hwang had.

He clicked his tongue in dismay. "Do you-?"

The door swung open with the crash of straw on straw and he froze, forcing himself not to jump. He turned to Korea normally.

"Ah, did I take too long?"

His Countryhuman glared at him in irritation as he holstered his pistol. "I told you to give the all-clear as soon as you confirmed they were alone."

All these years and he still wasn't convinced Suzuki-san wouldn't betray them.

Hwang dipped his head. "My apologies. I got caught up in asking how their children were faring."

He silently pleaded his former students wouldn't challenge that.

They didn't. "Sorry, Korea," Choi Jung-nam chimed in. "I shouldn't have got him talking, yeah?"

Suzuki-san bowed apologetically, making the Countryhuman tense.

"It's fine," he said quickly, then squared his shoulders, stating in an almost aggressive tone, "You are married."

Hwang had passed the good (and predictable) news on to him years ago, when the guerrilla he had sent to speak with the couple returned with it. Choi Jung-nam had asked the Japanese woman to marry him almost the moment he returned from his education in Japan.

"Yes," Suzuki-san said, almost apologetically.

Choi Jung-nam sounded more defensive. "We love each other," he said, clasping her hand. "And she's an amazing wife."

"Mm," Korea said inscrutably. "North Hwanghae, go keep watch."

Hwang moved to obey, but his country added, "And take Comrade

Choi Jung-nam with you."

The province exchanged looks with the man, who moved slightly closer to his wife.

"Are you sure-?" Hwang began.

Korea cut him off. "You were in the middle of catching up, weren't you? Go finish."

Hwang dipped his head, glancing at Choi Jung-nam as he did. The man hesitated still, but his wife brushed his arm. He briefly squeezed her hand, then followed Hwang from the cow shed and into the muggy summer night.

"Will she be okay?" Choi Jung-nam whispered as the door shut.

"You don't need to worry about her safety," Hwang assured him. "Korea has gained a more... internationalist spirit over the years."

There. He didn't think that would get him beaten by footwear even if his Countryhuman overheard.

"I'm more worried about Suzuki-san apologizing to him again and ensuring he stops using her as an informant," he said, hoping to comfort him.

Choi Jung-nam snorted, yet Hwang could still see him cast a concerned look over his shoulder as they took up position by the gate of the old chosonjip.

Even estates like this one had started to become abandoned as Japan's practices grew more draconian. In cities, Japanese companies outnumbered the Korean, and made far more capital, driving the others out of existence. And in rural locales the Japanese bought up more and more farms, while taxes drained the remaining peasants and even landlords of their harvests, going to feed the soldiers that had moved beyond Manchuria to invade the rest of China last year. People were hemorrhaging from the countryside, either in an attempt to earn a living in the city or for foreign climes- puppet Manchukuo, the Soviet Union, or Japan for the poor, or across the ocean to America for the more wealthy.

"How are your father's lands faring?" Hwang asked as the other man lit a pipe, squinting down the dark country lane to make sure it was vacant.

"Still lording over the little folk," Choi Jung-nam reported with a puff of smoke. "He even bought out a neighbour's farm last year. Rich prick. But at least I don't have to deal with it. Jung-hae's set to inherit." He scrunched his nose at his brother's name.

Hwang shook his head, bemused. "I'm surprised you never cut contact with them."

"I thought about it after I married my wife," he confessed, kicking at the dirt. "Pops wasn't too happy I chose her. Not even because she's Japanese- just because she's poor. But it's not worth the hassle. I'm a civil engineer, he's a fat sack of shit- Pardon the language, Professor- that runs roughly thirty ri of farmland. We barely ever see each other if it's not a holiday. And I usually work on those."

"And how are your children?" Hwang asked, genuinely wanting to know but also slightly concerned that Korea had seen through his mistrust and would ask for details.

"They're great," Choi Jung-nam said fondly. "Little devils, but great. Their mother's teaching all three of them to read. And I've been teaching them math."

The words filled Hwang's chest with an unexpected surge of emotion that made him suddenly misty-eyed. He could still see a young girl in a patchwork skirt mouthing her way through a stolen book, and a boy with messy hair and a dark suit bent over his desk, nose to his textbook while his peers gossiped.

"I'm glad," he said after a moment, managing not to sound choked. "And I hope you know I'm very proud of both of you. You've truly come a long way."

Choi Jung-nam snorted. "Not as long as you. From high school teacher to revolutionary." He quieted, looking down. "When I think about that, it doesn't feel like we're doing enough."

"Nonsense," Hwang tutted. "You did exactly what I instructed- received an education. Both you and Suzuki-san have learned skills that will be invaluable to us once our country is free, and I'm sure you're raising children that will be just as opposed to this Occupation as their parents are."

The man nodded. "They know it's wrong, for both our countries." His eyes flicked down with the ash from his pipe. "You know, I always meant to come join you, to fight, but after Jung-ui was born, I just..." His hands, worn from a job that could have been non-strenuous but that he chose to lend his labour to, curled into fists. "I couldn't give them an excuse to hurt him."

"I understand," Hwang said knowledgeably. "I've seen it happen plenty in the army. The idea of sacrificing themselves is acceptable, but once the danger shifts onto a loved one, it saps their fighting spirit. Several soldiers have chosen to give up the fight after their wives gave birth back home."

Choi Jung-nam looked down, and Hwang quickly realized he had said the wrong thing.

"I meant no insult," he said hastily. "I do understand. It's hardwired in human beings to protect their young, and it's a difficult instinct to fight. Humans may be thinking creatures, but that doesn't mean that fighting your instincts is simple. In fact-"

"Prof, it's okay," Choi Jung-nam interrupted. "I know you didn't mean anything by it."

Hwang cleared his throat, embarrassed. "It's likely for the best, anyhow. Korea is going to need civil engineers when we're independent. Your skills are too important to lose to war."

"What's the point of having a rich asshole for a father if you don't get to use your nepotism to force your way into a Tokyo university?" Choi Jung-nam gave a short laugh before his lips twisted. "It just stings, having to design the crap the Japanese want. I want to build houses and architecture that *we* want. Every time I have to submit a design plan for another Shinto shrine it makes me feel like a traitor."

"You aren't," Hwang assured him. "Almost our entire population has to work for the enemy. So long as you aren't in charge or causing harm, you won't be considered a collaborator."

Though his father might be.

"Thanks, Prof." Choi Jung-nam shook his head, pulling his eyes back to Hwang with a lighter tone. "So, want to tell me why you didn't want Korea to know you asked where the other Korea is? Can't be because he's competition or anything. That article of yours made it sound like they were friendly. Unlike certain other brothers." He made a face as he thought of his again.

"They *are* friendly," Hwang said carefully. "Korea only..."

He searched for the right words to say 'Now that Korea has acknowledged that his brother actually exists, he refuses to speak of him or make may other attempt to rescue him from Japan's clutches.'

Hwang had thought the decision he had made when telling them- or likely before, after the criticism over Seodaemun- would have been repealed once they had joined with the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army. With a greater wealth of informants and soldiers, they would have had a better chance at rescuing his brother. Yet when the provinces had asked, Korea had simply repeated the harsh words he had back then- *'We have more important things to do.'* Any further attempts to ask only resulted in him snapping that he had said he would only speak about South once.

He knew that no matter Korea's motivations, that sounded cruel, and couldn't be said to one of their people.

Hwang settled for, "Korea only didn't want to make either of you feel like you should risk yourselves to find out."

Choi Jung-nam raised a brow. "Either of us?"

"I'm sure."

His former student smirked. "So you *are* okay with us risking ourselves to find out?"

"In this case, yes," Hwang said bluntly. "One of our Countryhumans being in Japanese possession is unfortunate for several reasons. I believe any risk would be worth it to free him." Realizing how that sounded, he added, "Ah, but I don't want you to risk your safety. It's just that in this kind of scenario, it would be necessary. Or, ah-"

"Relax, Prof." The man waved a hand, still unbothered by his penchant for attempting to swallow his own foot. "I get it. 'Any sacrifice for the mission,' right? That's how revolutionaries are. It's why I couldn't join."

Hwang bobbed his head guiltily.

It wasn't as if he *wanted* them to risk their lives, or that he wouldn't feel terrible if something happened to them in their pursuit of information. But he knew an unspoken truth that he thought his cousins may not. Sometimes sacrifice was necessary. A few for the many, soldiers for the Provincehumans. Provincehumans for Korea.

'Any sacrifice for the mission.'

"Do you think they're done yet?" Choi Jung-nam asked, tapping the ash from his pipe as he craned his neck towards the cow shed.

"Let's go see," Hwang said, relieved to escape the awkward turn the conversation had taken.

As they approached, they could hear voices filtering out from the straw shed alongside the lamp light. To Hwang's relief, he didn't hear any anti-Japanese slurs.

He stopped in his tracks as he actually heard the opposite.

"Suzuki Yoshi." Korea sounded stiff and formal. "You proved me wrong a long time ago."

There was a touched smile in the Japanese woman's voice. "I'm honoured you feel that way, Korea-sama."

Hwang exchanged looks with Choi Jung-nam. He wasn't sure if

the man remembered the words Korea had been referencing, but by his equally wide eyes he very well could.

He heard Korea's boots on the packed dirt floor and hurriedly whispered, "Do *not* let him become aware we overheard that," before hustling forward to reach the door before Korea, pushing it open.

"Ah, Korea," he said, feigning surprise. "I'm sorry, I was just coming to make sure everything was alright."

"It is," Korea clipped in the same voice he used when someone had just caught him giving away rations or doing anything remotely kind. "She has her orders. We move out."

"Could we-?"

"No." Korea shoved past him, then turned to look back at Choi Jung-nam and Suzuki-san. "Korea thanks you both for your efforts. I look forward to seeing you after Liberation."

"And we thank you for your efforts." The Korean man dipped his head. His wife almost bowed before catching herself, copying her husband's posture.

"We're telling our children about you both," she said, hands to her bosom.

"Not who you are," Choi Jung-nam assured them. "You know how light-mouthed kids are."

"But about how you're fighting." Suzuki-san looked to Hwang. "And how much we both owe you, Sensei."

Glasses almost misting again, Hwang said, "I assure you everything you have is thanks to your own hard work. I merely gave you encouragement. But thank you."

He straightened professionally, clearing his throat. "What is our best defense?"

The two smiled, finishing the old call-and-response, "Our critical-

thinking."

"And what is our best offense?"

"Our intellect!" the couple chorused, then laughed like they were schoolchildren again.

Hwang grinned, promising, "We'll converse again when Korea is free," as he followed his Countryhuman.

"Long live Korea!" Choi Jung-nam called after them, throwing his fist in the air. "Go get 'em, Prof!"

"Long live Korea and a free Japan!" Suzuki-san cried boldly, her own hand held high.

Korea scrunched his face, but she couldn't see, and he said nothing to her, merely shouted back, "Long live the Korean people and their comrades!"

Hwang gave one last look over his shoulder at his former students standing silhouetted in the thin moonlight outside of the derelict chosonjip, their arms around each other, and smiled fondly.

Always fascinating, how one little thing could set a chain of events in motion. If Choi Jung-nam hadn't been brave enough to attempt to publish his true thoughts in that essay of his, or if Suzuki Yoshi hasn't attempted to steal that book, and Hwang hadn't witnessed it, none of them would be here today. The two humans wouldn't be married and three new lives wouldn't have been made.

Even if all he had given them was encouragement, a few tools, and a place to express themselves freely, he was very proud of himself for producing two fine students, and helping them find each other. And truly even prouder of them.

"If I may ask," he began when the old farm had vanished behind them, and they were on their way back to meet up with Hae and North Chungcheong. "What were the orders you gave Suzuki-san?"

Korea had been tight-mouthed as ever on the way here, though the trip had required diverting from their return to Paektusan from

their recruitment mission around Taejon.

"I want her to print another round of pamphlets explaining that there are two Koreas," Korea answered without looking at him. "Japan was too thorough in his destruction and censorship. Every single one of our people needs to know without a doubt that Korea is fighting for them."

Hwang raised his brows knowingly. "That seems like a task our soldiers could have carried out for us."

Since Korea was no longer attempting to rescue his brother, there was no reason for him to risk getting so close to the capital.

"We were in the area," his Countryhuman clipped.

Hwang deliberated, then decided that the pursuit of truth was too important not to at least attempt.

"Korea, may I ask why you didn't want to ask Suzuki-san if she could find your brother's location?"

Korea was silent, the only sound the crunch of his heels on the dirt for the next minute. Hwang was beginning to think he wasn't going to receive an answer, just like on the way there, before he spoke.

"It's too dangerous. There won't be any civilian sources to get information from. The only ones that might know anything about... South-" The name carried an awkward reluctance, as ever, as if he already regretted saying it before it finished leaving his tongue. "Will be Occupation officials."

"I'm glad you don't see Suzuki-san as disposable," Hwang said delicately. "But don't you think it might be worth risking her safety in this case?"

Korea hiked his pack higher, checking behind them for pursuers. "No. She has too much information about us that could be tortured out of her. And even if she knew where... he was, I won't jeopardize any of our comrades' safety for an infiltration. If I can't free him, then there's no point in knowing where he is."

Hwang couldn't fathom that. Every little piece of information was important. Even if they truly couldn't rescue South, shouldn't they know where he was so they could reach him expediently after Liberation? Or at least to provide peace of mind.

Then again...

He thought about how he would feel if he had known that Hae existed, known she was down in that hole, even where the hole was, yet knew that an insurmountable force stood between them, one they couldn't risk crossing.

He supposed he *could* fathom it. Even if he didn't agree or quite understand. It wasn't like Korea to view a force as insurmountable. This was the country that had almost single-handedly infiltrated the Pyongyang Men's Prison, launched a raid on a brothel in broad daylight, attacked Namsan Residence directly (twice), and led a war party against a prison in the middle of the capital.

Hwang felt a twinge of guilt as his eyes strayed over to his Countryhuman again.

If it hadn't been for their criticism back then, would he and Kim Il-sung have saved his brother by now?

"Korea..."

"Enough, Hwang," he ordered, more heavy than sharp. "My brother will be Liberated when our people are. Not before."

"He will be," Hwang vowed, hand on his breast.

Regardless of the fact that he had never met this South, he was also still Korea. Hwang and all of the provinces had a duty to Liberate him from Japan as his Provincehumans.

And the Korea they knew loved him. He was his brother. That would be enough on its own.

They walked in silence for a few more minutes, then his Korea cut his eyes to him.

"So. How *are* their children faring?"

Hwang chuckled nervously.

—

1951

Surprise inspection on the Haeju People's Committee? Check. Greet the new provincial chairman (after the former had been publicly executed by the enemy)? Check. Ascertain that the Mobile Medical Units had been visiting the most isolated of Hwanghae villages? Check. Address complaints of army violence, suspicions over a defector from the south, allegations of petty theft, and assist several refugees with integrating into the workforce? Check, check, check, and check.

Hwang let out a breath as he settled onto the low stone wall that had once stood outside he and his sister's Haeju residence. Unlike most of the others, they hadn't taken over a former Japanese abode, or a chosonjip evacuated by the wealthy, but rather one of the more Western-style colonial buildings. His sister hadn't liked the small covered windows in the former options, and hadn't wanted to take over one of the more luxurious ones with an inner courtyard, so the larger, open windows had fulfilled her need for light. She also hadn't wanted to live in something Japanese. Though he had a suspicion that Western architecture would now also be detestable to her.

Fortunate then, that their house had been razed to the ground. Or Hwang *would* say that, if the rest of his literature hadn't been burned alongside it.

And if those ghostly shivers didn't run through him as his palms rested against the rough stone, telling him that many of their people had suffered here.

He exhaled tiredly, rubbing down the horripilation that pebbled his skin.

Once he had enjoyed feeling those shivers. When he would cross

into Anju, where Joseon soldiers had once blown up their own powder houses, committing suicide in the face of the invasion of Jin, or Namwon, which the Japanese had devastated during the Chongyu War. Whether they recorded suffering that had been a part of victory or loss for Korea, they always recorded *history*. When so much of it was forgotten or obscured, that sixth sense (and Hwang meant that in an entirely scientific way) was proof that those battles had happened, that the lives lost *had* been lost.

It was difficult to consider that proof a good thing, now that his own eyes had witnessed the present suffering, and his own ear slits had heard his people's accounts of it.

He had always known, rationally, that the shivers had meant death, and quite a lot of it. And he had experienced them in places whose destruction he had seen the aftermath of. All of those villages burned by the Japanese army in the name of frightening their populace out of offering their guerrillas support, both the ones they heard of months later and travelled across the country to find, and those whose smoke they had been able to witness rising into the sky, but had been too late to save.

Hwang was never sure if his cousins had realized it, but it was usually the latter that held those crude slogans, carved into the remains of houses, jangseung, or even bodies. And as he had stared up at *'DISOBEDIENCE WILL BE REAPED BY OTHERS'* gouged into the doors of a church, he had felt those shivers as his body took in the suffering of people whom he had shared meals with and taught night-classes to only a week past.

Yet the wake of the American occupation somehow felt different than that, though he knew in the end it wasn't. The Japanese had been just as brutal in their methods. As horrific as it was to admit, while all of the brutality had sickened Hwang, none of it had surprised him. Pregnant women being cut open, babies having their craniums crushed, men sodomized and hung- none of it was new. And with thirty-six years (and then some, given the unofficial control Japan had held over their nation before the annexation in 1910) in which the Japanese had time to commit their atrocities, they had amassed a far greater death toll, even without the Americans' sustained fire-bombing.

Perhaps it was the scale. Japan's violence had been spread out, with much of it committed during 'peacetime.' It had been kept relatively quiet, both to keep the eyes of the world off of Korea and to avoid overly upsetting the civilian population they were attempting to govern. Those who fought or would fight for freedom, and held the desire to look past the censorship saw what would await them if they did in the decimated villages, protestors murdered in the streets, and political prisoners vanished into the depths of prisons like Seodaemun. But the average citizen was kept unenlightened, allowed to believe that the Occupation existed unchallenged, and that if there *were* challengers that they were violent instigators who had to be put down in order to keep the peace. They had never been subjected to the same wholesale slaughter that their comrades in Manchuria or the Chinese had, though the façade had started to crumble once the second World War began.

There had been no façade, no pretending, in Sincheon at least, so far away from Pyongyang and the other cities on the warpath. Regardless of America's restrictive press blackout, the town wouldn't have had much attention on it. And while the violence hadn't been an outright bloodbath for the entire two months (though hearing the experiences of the witnesses, one couldn't be blamed for thinking that), it had been well known what had been transpiring. There had been no disguising of the trucks that carried prisoners into the country to die, no end to the public executions. There had been no 'There is no violence.' There had only been 'The violence is necessary.'

So much of it, and in such a short time. Tens of thousands dead in under two months.

And so much of it committed by Koreans.

Maybe those were the reasons for Hwang's newfound discomfort with the sixth sense, and why he couldn't simply feel the excitement of brushing up against the past. He could no longer think of that suffering as faraway- he had been forced to confront not with just his head, but with his emotions that every single time he felt that feeling, it meant that their people had been hurt, even if it was centuries ago.

He would like to think it was that, over it solely being shame that his sister had experienced it and he hadn't.

As he had watched her accept the feelings of their people and embrace them freely, he had to admit that he had felt an... uncomfortable emotion tighten his chest, replacing the guilt he had finally managed to unburden himself from, bringing with it a new variety of shame.

Hae had been right- sacrifice was about the person doing the sacrificing. It had been her choice to go to Sincheon. She had done what she felt she must, and Hwang had done what she wanted by carrying on. And he would do it again, as much as the thought hurt him.

Yet now he felt something that made him even more uneasy, if only because it had less virtuous origins than being distraught that he hadn't kept his word to Hae or came back for her.

As, at seeing how the people of Sincheon and the surrounding counties had looked at his sister with tears in their eyes or grateful smiles on their faces, Hwang had felt almost... jealous.

He cringed at the thought, glancing both ways down the broad side street, as if one of the passerby hurrying by might have overheard it. Flushing, he took his glasses off to polish with a cloth.

Obviously he wasn't jealous of Hae for being subjected to what she had been- having to witness the horrors in her report, losing people, and being beaten so viciously. It was more so how... close it had seemed to bring her to their people. It had been her they were focused on as they poured their hearts out, and her they had thanked, or implored to return for tea or supper. Even if they had been calling her Hae, it had been *her* they were seeing as Hwanghae.

Hwang knew that had been by design. While he did think Korea's approach had been overly forceful (almost cruel, one might say in their mind), he was aware why he had been pushing Hae like he had, but not the male Hwanghae. Hwang had never shied from what had been done to their province. He had went over the reports

as soon as they came out, both every accusation from their government to the United Nations, and that of the Women's International Democratic Federation. He had watched the informational film reel that had been released, and gone over the transcripts of the trials that had already been held. He had told Korea he would like to hold out on visiting, but only until Hae felt she was ready.

He had never looked away- his sister had.

Should he have *wanted* to look away? Should what he had heard from Hae have made him so revulsed and grief-stricken that he couldn't bear to hear any more of how their people had suffered? Unlike her, he had been eager to learn. Should he be ashamed of that?

Perhaps not. It hadn't been morbid curiosity driving him, but a desire to know exactly what had been done so he could spread the word. The truth was important.

But maybe he should have felt a shred of hesitation, even if it had only been something he needed to overcome.

He knew even if Korea hadn't pushed Hae to be the main interviewer in Sincheon, things still would have transpired similarly. Even if she had wanted to remain silent, Hwang would have ended up asking a question that was too insensitive of a victim, and his sister would've had to cut in, having to soothe their feelings and take over, like she usually had to while they were going village to village to explain the Agricultural Reform or Labour Law, so that the peasants who hadn't received any education yet could understand them in their entirety.

Hwang wished he could say his jealousy stemmed solely from an intellectual frustration at his words not being as understandable as hers, as it had been back during the night-classes of the Occupation. But truly it was how easily Hae *connected* with people.

Beyond the night-classes, during their guerrilla days it was always she that every single village they visited became enamoured with, and nowadays it was she that was always receiving invitations to

important events in people's lives. Truthfully, she needn't have ever worried about not being able to share a domicile with Hwang- if Korea had forbid it, she simply could've skipped into almost anyone's house in Hwanghae province and asked if she could sleep there. She was charming, industrious, energetic, and- though Korea had disallowed them from getting drunk without permission- she knew how to drink with the farmers like she belonged.

Hwang wasn't blind (well, not metaphorically). He knew he had his own strengths- Hae could never write reports the same way he did or actually enjoy going over the budget or do the information and publicity work he did. They were both equally important in their own fields.

But this wasn't about importance. It was about his sister always having felt closer to their people. He may be able to converse more easily with other intellectuals (and he meant no offense to any other social class by that), but most of their people were peasants. Peasants and now workers, especially in Hwanghae. And his sister had always felt like one of them.

It went back further than that doomed village in South Jeolla- it was even in how their lives had been before Korea had recruited them. Hwang had been in the privileged position of being a teacher. And yes, teachers were underpaid, he had been closely monitored, and had been forced to pretend he supported the Occupation. But he *had* been paid, at a time when many Koreans were not. He had enough freedom to occasionally sneak away for his illegal book club, and he had been provided with food and board, even if they were underwhelming. His glasses had been taken out of his salary, but he *had* a salary, one he could afford to lose a dozen yen from every year to pay Japan back.

He had always been highly aware that he was more privileged than the vast majority of his people, enough to swiftly realize exactly why North Hamgyong seemed to despise him when they first met. And while their peasants hadn't exactly been living in a dank hole in the ground like Hae had, in a way it was her circumstances they had been closer to. Trapped, not by choice like Hwang, but against their will, not knowing when they would eat next, with no protection between them and the Japanese authorities, unable to

see the world around them, cut off from their history and in some cases their own language.

It all came back to suffering. Hwang had been miserable. But Hae and their people had *suffered,* and that bound them together. Just like at Sincheon.

The Provincehuman sighed heavily, finally placing his glasses back on his face, bringing the world into focus again.

He was glad he hadn't suffered, truly, not in the way they had. But he found himself yearning that he could have that same level of intimacy and understanding with their populace that Hae did, even lacking it.

'Back to work.' It might get the shameful thoughts out of his head.

But as he stood up, something pricked at his brain.

Hwang aborted his move to stride away immediately, instead stooping to unlace his military-issue boot, a process that took some time, as did relacing it once he had turned it upside down, pretending to shake a small rock loose. It gave him the chance to peek down the street from the corner of his eye.

When he was done, he straightened, then set off for the edge of the city instead of the center, making a subtle hand motion as he did.

The street he and his sister had chosen to live on was a busy one, only two streets over from the main road so that there would almost always be light and sound, even at night. Even now that their capital was destroyed, it was still fairly busy, with essential workers using it to avoid more rubble-filled roads to return home from work.

But it was a residential street. And with most of the houses decimated like the Hwanghaes', there was no reason to linger on it.

Hwang greeted the few workers he passed, trying not to appear tense as he made sure to quickly distance himself from them, careful not to give in to the urge to look over his shoulder.

Haeju was located between Haeju Bay to the south and the Suyang Mountains to the north, which the Kwangsokchon originated from before emptying into the West Sea. The stream split the older original central town from the more recent sprawl to the east. It was this Hwang walked towards, purposeful in his movements. He would've made a show of checking a list if he had one, but all his files were mental, so he settled for walking the same brisk way he had to his other appointments.

Like every other bridge over every other waterway, these had all been destroyed. But Hwang found a spot where someone- a farmer most likely- had placed a few old barn boards over a thinner section. The waters had gone down since rainy season, so the province was free to pass over into the rough foothills that sloped up to the looming Suyangs.

Under their shadow and amongst a grove of walnut trees that had been reduced to stumps, Hwang stopped, looking around, checking his watch, then folding his arms as if he was waiting for someone.

He had been expecting the man tailing him to approach stealthily, either circling around to climb the nearby slope to eavesdrop on his conversation with whoever he was waiting for, or for an ambush.

But instead he came directly up the same path Hwang had, walking confidently with his hands in the pockets of his ragged trousers.

The province turned, hand resting on his pistol as he took a brief moment to confirm the details he had observed both times he looked around to see him loitering around the mouth of an alley.

Middle-aged, tall, muscular, tousled dark brown hair, skin that was only a few shades lighter and lined from sun damage from what Hwang could see above the checked blue fabric wrapped around his lower face, and worn clothes that suggested he was either a refugee or pretending to be.

"Can I help you?" Hwang called politely before he could get too

close, hypervigilant of the hands hidden in those baggy pants.

He relaxed slightly upon seeing one of his bodyguards flash a signal from the very hill he had expected his pursuer to climb. The other man had likely taken up position on one of the other vantage points Hwang had made sure to give them access to. They had either seen his sign or, more likely, been aware even before him that he was being watched.

He still kept his hand on his firearm as the man declined to stop his approach.

"You don't recognize me?" he called in a rough voice.

It did almost sound familiar, which only served to make Hwang uneasy. His sister had been responsible for dispossessing most of their plentiful landlords, but he *had* spoken to more than a few, those who had been deemed likely to respond favourably so long as the person explaining it to them used the language of business (and was an intellectual male).

But favourable did not always mean 'supportive,' nor did it mean 'still favourable.' Thinking of all those landlords and their sons that had 'came back' to Sincheon, Hwang sharpened his voice.

"I'm going to have to ask that you refrain from coming closer and tell me why you've been following me."

The man paused a few metres away, then huffed a laugh. "You really don't recognize me, Prof? How about now?"

He unwound the blue cloth from his face, but it was unnecessary. The way he had used the term of address had already pulled the file from Hwang's memory cabinet.

"Choi Jung-nam?" he asked in disbelief.

His former student grinned, exposing a mouthful of yellowed teeth. "It's been awhile. You're not a peanut anymore."

"Indeed it has, and indeed I'm not." Delighted, Hwang hustled forward to shake his arm, remembering to signal his men off.

"Almost thirteen years it's been, if I'm not mistaken. I didn't recognize your voice for a moment there."

Choi Jung-nam's grip on his forearm was as firm as the last time. "Sounds about right. And yeah, take my advice- stop smoking."

Fear for his teaching voice was a large part of what prompted Hwang to (barring his momentary relapse with North Hamgyong).

He chuckled, then asked, "What happened to you after Liberation?"

Choi Jung-nam was of the Haeju Choi Clan, and his family had deep roots in the area, but his father had owned land stretching from the southern plains of Hwanghae into Gyeonggi province. 'Halfway from Seoul to Pyongyang,' as Suzuki Yoshi had once said. Hwang hadn't been surprised to find those lands in his province already abandoned by the rest of the Choi family. Whether his father still lived or Choi Jung-hae had inherited them, they would both know they had far too many business dealings with Japan that preyed on their peasants to avoid being judged as collaborators.

But Hwang had expected the man, his wife, and his children to make an appearance in the north at some point. He'd even debated sending a letter to his former address, though in the end he decided he didn't want to make them a target for the puppet regime.

Choi Jung-nam winced at his question. "We actually left Korea just before Liberation. I saw the way things were going, and, well, it didn't seem like it was going to be entirely safe to be Japanese here for awhile. Or even half."

It was Hwang's turn to wince. They still had a Japanese portion of the populace, and many with Japanese blood. But it was true that they weren't exactly looked favourably upon.

"You might be right," he admitted. "Though I can't imagine it's easy being Korean in Japan right now, either."

Another result of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, aside from sowing the seeds of future conflict, and prepping the stage for

Japan to remilitarize and rejoin the international community as an American puppet, was that when the treaty came into force next year, just like Koreans in Korea, Koreans in Japan would be officially freed from Japanese citizenship. A good thing, on the surface. Those who had been forced to migrate there for work or education, or who had been tricked or brought forcefully for manual labour or other unsavoury work would now be able to return to their home country without hassle.

Except Korea was at war. And even if they achieved a ceasefire tomorrow, it would still be years before the country was stable and prosperous enough to support the roughly six hundred thousand or so Koreans left in Japan. And now those hundreds of thousands of people were going to be left stateless in a country that hated them.

Choi Jung-nam's eyes flickered. "No. It isn't easy. A lot of them blame us for losing the war, somehow. Just like the Kanto Carnage."

In 1923, he had attended Tokyo University, whose buildings had been destroyed by the Kanto great earthquake. He had been one of those working with Korean labour unions to distribute aid after the disaster, and been present for the aftermath, when Japanese Nationalists and other right-wingers had taken advantage of the chaos and engaged in witch-hunts against their Korean neighbours and their own leftists.

"Small-minded hatreds will always find a justification," Hwang sighed. "I hope it's alright to ask, but if you were in Japan before Liberation..."

Choi Jung-nam saw where he was going. "We didn't see the bombs. We were staying with a university friend in the countryside outside Nagoya so we wouldn't get fire-bombed. But my wife came from Hiroshima. She still had family there."

"Ah," Hwang said softly.

"They dropped those bombs and killed, what? Two hundred thousand people?"

More. And likely far more when it came to future cancer rates.

Choi Jung-nam shook his head. "But how many politicians do you think they killed? Ones that actually *counted?"*

"Very few," Hwang guessed. "As ever. When whales fight, it's the shrimp's back that gets broken."

Another shiver ran through him, his own this time.

"Yeah," Choi Jung-nam said bitterly. "As ever."

Hwang beckoned him over, and they settled onto two of the stumps, the human man bringing out a pipe to light.

He caught the province's look. "What? It's too late for me."

Hwang shook his head. "So, how is Suzuki-san? And your family?"

His former student brightened. "My wife is amazing. She's finding it harder to readjust to Japan than she thought, and it's difficult to get a job with her accent. But she's taken control of the apartment building we live in. Mostly a bunch of countrymen live there, and she's decided someone needs to stick up to the owner for them. Our youngest still lives at home, and our other two live in the same building. They're both married."

"Korean or Japanese? Not that it matters," Hwang swiftly clarified.

"Jung-ui married a girl from Seoul a year before we left, and Hye-ja only left the nest a few months ago for a Korean boy over there. But I think our youngest might marry Japanese. He's smitten with girl who lives down the road." He smiled wryly. "I can't exactly judge him."

Hwang laughed. "I suppose not. Make sure Suzuki-san doesn't get discouraged in her job hunt. She's a smart woman- she should be working at the press."

"The Korean press, if we're lucky," Choi Jung-nam said, sucking on his pipe. "After this war's over, we're moving back."

Hwang straightened, delighted. "Truly?"

"Mhm." He nodded. "We left because I wanted to keep my wife safe. But she's not any safer over there. Most of her own people don't accept her, and with all the Yanks..." He shook his head. "My daughter doesn't feel safe, either. She's gone back to using her Japanese name. They might've been discriminated against if we stayed here, but I think they're in more danger where we are."

Hwang bobbed his head. "Aside from the initial bit of chaos right before and after Liberation, we didn't see too many hate-crimes against undeserving Japanese."

Aside from running out land and business owners. But they had been of the deserving. The violence of the oppressed tended to be more considerate than that of the oppressors.

Most unjustifiable anti-Japanese crime had been directed at children, those that carried Japanese blood unwillingly, as those children in Sincheon had carried American blood. And most of it had came from their own families.

Choi Jung-nam let out a long sigh, smoke billowing out. "We shouldn't have left."

"You can't change the past," Hwang pointed out. "And perhaps your momentary move will lead to other good things, like your two youngest finding love."

The man gave a lopsided smile. "Thanks, Prof."

Realizing he had yet to ask a very important question, Hwang inquired, "If you're *planning* to move back, you haven't moved back yet. So what are you doing here?"

Choi Jung-nam's weathered face grew more serious, and he tamped out his pipe.

"I came to be a spy."

Hwang blinked, taken aback. "Pardon?"

The man's expression didn't change. "I'm one of the engineers that have been contracted to rebuild Seoul and restructure key

zones in Busan. They were looking for educated Koreans in Japan without left-wing ties. And there aren't many of those."

"You do have left-wing ties," Hwang pointed out.

"No one knows I'm a Marxist," he returned. "I was involved in independence movements in Japan and back here, but it was always just for independence. And I was never in the Communist Party."

"Suzuki-san's father was," Hwang remembered. "You underestimate how far back America's agents would've pried into your past, and how insubstantial your relationships need to be to be considered suspicious."

"Evidently they weren't suspicious enough not to hire me," he countered.

"They might be if someone becomes aware that you snuck across the 38th Parallel to meet an enemy Provincehuman."

"No one saw me." He plucked at his blue cloth mask. "I left my good clothes in a cache, too. I cut my hair before I left, and I'll shave it off once I get back. I was given the day to survey the city, so as long as I hurry, no one will miss me. And you know I'm good at sneaking out. And I'm observant. I know you've got two guys on those hills and they've been following us since you spotted me while you were taking that break."

He leaned forward on the stump. "I know I don't exactly have clearance to get into classified government files or stuff like that. But I'll be going back and forth between the UN Headquarters in Seoul and Busan, where the American Countryhuman's been staying. I think there's at least a chance I could be useful to you."

Hwang rested his elbows on his knees, steepling his fingers as he thought.

He was right. He *could* be useful. As a civil engineer, he would have the right to access plenty of areas in Seoul and Busan, and more freedom to wander than most. He would also be able to bypass certain military checkpoints between the two cities, and

perhaps locate enemy warehouses and supply caches.

And his background was convenient. Neither he nor Suzuki Yoshi had ever declared themselves Communists or joined any overtly left-wing organizations. Choi Jung-nam was the son of a wealthy, Japanese-collaborating father that had lost his lands, and whose entire family shared those views. And he had never disowned them. And despite his more hands-on approach, he was technically part of the (admittedly more conservative) intellectual class.

But...

"Why do you want to do this?" Hwang asked, raising his gaze.

The man straightened. "Suspecting me, Prof?"

"We're at war," he said simply. "I need to suspect everyone. Even former star students. And this would carry quite the risk."

Choi Jung-nam's lips pressed flat. "I know. And if I was caught, my family could pay for it."

"That price used to be too high for you." Hwang cocked his head. "What changed?"

"It's exactly because it used to be too high for me." The man heaved a sigh, leaning back as he looked out at Haeju. "When we heard the radio announcement that Japan surrendered, it was the happiest day of my life. Even more than our wedding day, or when any of the kids were born. But we were in Japan. The bombs had just hit. We couldn't celebrate. All I could do was go try to find work like usual. And I thought, 'Korea is free. But what did *you* do to get it there, Jung-nam?"

Hwang opened his mouth, but he interrupted him. "My wife is the one that worked for you. She's Japanese, and she did more to Liberate Korea than I ever did. All I did was use daddy's money to run away to school in Japan." He held up a hand. "I know it was important, and I've learned skills I can use for our country. But instead of sticking around to use them, I ran away again. I was planning to come back once everything was peaceful. And even

though it wasn't why I left, it's still cowardly."

Choi Jung-nam looked intensely at Hwang. "I don't want to be a coward. I don't want to sit back and let others pay the price for me. Korea is going to be free, and I want to have a hand it that. I want to make sure there's room for me and my family here."

"There's room for every Korean and like-minded comrade in Korea," Hwang assured him.

He didn't falter. "I wouldn't *feel* Korean if I kept hiding. I'd feel like I was betraying my country. I want to be able to look around at a free, Reunified Korea and say that I had a part in it." Leaning forward, he stared gravely into Hwang's eyes.

"No matter the cost."

It was strange, to be looking into the worn, weathered face of a man with almost fifty years and still be able to see the ones that had came before it. The fresh-faced first-year student that looked younger than him, the third-year student whose broad shoulders had grown to strain against his suit, the young man that had returned from Japan whom Hwang had caught a secret glimpse of on one of their many Seoul trips, and the confident adult with three children.

And Hwang had only changed once. He supposed as the years went by, he would have to grow used to watching the people he knew age around him, while he stayed the same. One of the Hwanghaes would have to.

But Choi Jung-nam's eyes looked the same as they had back when he had turned that essay in, the same eyes that had made up Hwang's mind to invite him to share more of his opinions instead of silencing him for his safety. Bright and defiant.

The province hesitated, then closed his own eyes. "Alright."

Choi Jung-nam's face lit up, and he quickly said, "I don't have the authority to sanction making you an agent. But I'll ask Korea."

"I need to get back to Seoul by tonight," the man reminded him.

"If he agrees, someone will be in contact with you."

His former student jumped up, flashing a grin that still looked boyish. "Thanks, Prof. I promise I won't let you down!"

Hwang stood, and he vigorously shook his arm. "And promise you won't get hurt."

"No promises," he replied, winking. "Sometimes you've got to risk everything for the mission, right?"

With a pang of worry, the province said, "But only if you must."

"I know." He sobered. "I'll be careful. I don't intend to make my wife a widow."

"Good. I'd never hear the end of it if you did."

They caught up for a few more minutes, both unable to resist before Hwang made himself say, "You should probably get going now."

"Yep." Choi Jung-nam slapped his thighs. "Off to wait in tense anticipation."

"If someone does make contact with you, the code will be our old call-and-response, so you know they aren't with the enemy." He arched a brow. "You do remember it, I hope?"

Choi Jung-nam laughed. "I'd hope so. My wife taught it to the kids. They know about you now, and Comrade Korea. We told them as soon as we were Liberated."

Hwang smiled. "I hope you told them I'm looking forward to meeting them."

"Once the war's over, you will. I'll come back and I'll finally get to engineer the things that *we* want." Choi Jung-nam tied the cloth back around his face, his eyes squinting up. "See you later, Prof. And long live Korea."

"Long live Korea."

He watched his former student walk away with a spring in his step, stroking his chin. The only reason he could foresee Korea denying the man's request would be the risk of Hwang knowing he was an asset. If Haeju was captured and the enemy got their hands on him, the South of Korea could Command the information out of him.

But in that case, they could simply send someone to recall him swiftly. And he was certain they could work something out for Suzuki Yoshi and the rest of his family. More agents were always needed, after all.

The matter couldn't be discussed over communications channels. He would summon Korea here to ask.

Hwang was reluctant to risk his former student's safety, but...

He understood not feeling like you had done enough.

Thinking about how schools were founded in Japan to teach the young Koreans there about their language and culture (so they could one day return home and also so they could receive education from Korean teachers without being prejudiced against) and the Japanese government and ruling Americans cracked down on them, forcing them into Japanese schools instead because they were considered Japanese citizens. They prohibited Korean language learning and closed the schools completely when people protested. Then when they and their allies protested louder the US called them Communists (because most Koreans supported Socialism and most sympathetic Japanese were progressives) declared martial law and the police killed a sixteen-year old boy. Then they forcefully disbanded Choryon, the organization that ran the schools. Then when we had to sign the San Francisco Peace Treaty the Koreans in Japan were no longer considered Japanese citizens and lost the right to compulsory education. So they had no education. But then the government very 'graciously' offered that they could attend public schools if they agreed that there would not be Korean education on the curriculum. If you've heard of Chongryun, that's actually where they come from. They're the successor of Choryon, providing

zainichi with education in Korean schools. They had to make sure the schools were considered miscellaneous schools in order to give Korean education, which wasn't often granted and had to be negotiated for. But the only four pro-South Korea Korean schools obtained it easily, as well as Article 1 status by agreeing to comply with the government's 'no Korean education' regulations (complying with the oppressor, very pro-South Korea). And it only got harder for Korean schools once Japan recognized the South.
Also on the subject of zainichi, they weren't eligible for welfare in the past as they 'weren't Japanese citizens.' The South also wouldn't accept them back. The North was the only place that would take them. They were also the only ones that would give Choryon and Chongryun the funds they needed to stay open (which only started after the war) since they're not eligible for national government funding. The expanded rights that miscellaneous schools have now (they used to have to take qualification exams to prove they could take an entrance exam for university, which meant they had to take evening classes at a regular school as well as attend their school, but they don't have to do that anymore, and they can participate in inter-school sports) were won by Korean schools. And now they're also not eligible for even local government subsidies unless they change their curriculum to the Japanese one, they've been completely cut out from the Tuition Waiver Program, and their students were denied the covid financial support. Most of it gets blamed on the abductions which is always so stupid to me. One because Kim Jong-il said it was rogue actors and two because even if it wasn't, WE HAVE DONE MUCH WORSE. 'Oh noooooo a few people were kidnapped, how could you do this to usssss??' 'You colonized our country, made us change our names, erased our history, knocked down historic buildings, tried to erase our language, committed multiple massacres (Kanto Carnage, for instance), kidnapped THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE to be sex slaves and basically regular slaves (of which many zainichi are descended from), never gave reparations (the South got them, the North didn't), and are still participating in a sanctions regime that starves us.' 'Oh my god that was aaaaages ago, get over it.' I don't think anyone should be blamed for their race or their ancestors' actions (so long as

they're not still supporting or committing them) but I do think Koreans have a lot more right to be racist towards Japanese than the opposite. But nooooo, the government uses one incident to justify their racism while crying that we need to stop being blamed for all the ones they caused. A victim complex you only see in colonizer countries- US, Britain, Israel, Japan are the worst for it.
'Korean schools teach anti-Japan thought.' The school curriculums have community work and cultural exchanges and heavily emphasize being friendly to Japanese, and contributing to Japanese society, according to observers. I think if the students are having anti-Japan thoughts it might be because they aren't considered citizens and keep being discriminated against, often violently.

Also hiiiii. Sorry this chapter took so long I was recovering from the burnout of wishing I was still in China.

Adrift From Your Moor

“Great job today, boys,” South Pyongan called. “I’m headed out tomorrow, so if any of you want to try and regain your dignity, you’ll have to fail again tonight.”

“Looking forward to it!” one of the engineers shouted back.

“I don’t think Korea wants you wrestling our engineers,” Chagang said as he fell into step beside her.

“Hey, all he said was ‘Teach them how to kill tanks.’ He never said, ‘Don’t beat the crap out of them in between.’” She slung her olive tunic over her shoulder as they went to pick up their post-training rations. “’Sides, they like it. Boosts morale.”

“They never win,” Chagang pointed out.

“Exactly.” South Pyongan winked. “Fills ‘em with determination to try again. Can’t let a chick come out on top, can they?”

She actually kinda sorta *had* to beat the crap out of them. Engineers always gave her way more back-talk than regular soldiers, and were less likely to pay attention when she was trying to teach them the best ways to disable a tank. She didn’t know why, but she was going to blame North Hamgyong for it. And yeah, she could go off about the Party line and women’s rights and boring stuff like that, but the quickest (and most fun) way to get them to listen was to piledrive ‘em into the barracks floor. So she’d continue doing that.

“So, did Korea send you just to tell me to head back tomorrow?” she asked her cousin as they stood in line in front of the kitchens, after trading insults with a few of the boys. "Or is he making sure I’m actually being useful?”

He'd given her the 'great honour’ of not just having to deal with her own province stuff- complaints, People’s Committee work,

kicking idiots' asses, etcetera- but having to travel across province lines to help out with training the new tank-hunting teams for the front, too. Apparently just because she'd spent some time in one and knew exactly what you *didn't* want to happen to it, that qualified her for engineer-training duty. Okay.

"Both," Chagang said bluntly.

She scrunched her face. "Come on, when have I ever skipped out on something like this? That bastard."

"He wouldn't have assigned you this if he didn't trust you would do it."

South Pyongan considered that. Eh. She guessed it was true. It wasn't targeted then, just Korea being Korea. She *was* near the front after all.

"Do you know if North Pyongan left Sinuiju yet?"

Chagang nodded. "Korea recalled us both early in case of delays from the supply line being bombed."

He didn't say anything else, but he didn't have to. It was weird that her brother could've easily came here with him, but hadn't.

South Pyongan felt something in her chest squeeze at that, just like it had when he'd parted ways with her without protest after Foundation Day, the truck that had taken them to Anju together rolling almost without pause towards his province.

'Ugh.'

Chagang winced, making her look away.

"Yeah, well, he knows I've got shit to do." She held out her tray so the server could pile her the bowls high with rice, soup, cucumber kimchi, and even a few pieces of chicken. They got to eat *good* at training.

"Little more for your province?" she prompted, smiling winningly. They were in Kangwon, but hey, might still work.

The serving chick hesitated, looking around as she raised her ladle slightly.

"Nepotism," Chagang intoned.

"Tch. Yeah yeah." South Pyongan lowered her tray. Louder, she said, "Yeah, that was a… test. You passed." Even though she'd clearly been about to get more sweet sweet cucumber kimchi. "Never give someone more than they're allotted, even if they're important or whatever."

She bumped Chagang as she left the line, totally by accident.

A few engineers beckoned to her from where they were sitting outside the mouth of one of the tunnels bored into the ridge with some other tank experts. She almost went to join them before she spotted who was squatting with them and quickly turned heel.

"Sorry, guys," she called. "Feels like a dug-out kind of day."

She hustled away with her tray, totally not running away. She didn't have anything to run from. What would she be running from? Nothing, that's what.

Korea had everyone digging even more tunnels all over the frontline- bunkers, dug-outs, foxholes, huge underground rooms and ri of corridors she wasn't allowed to sleuth around in. You name it, if it could be digged, it was being dug. South Pyongan thought they might go all the way across the Peninsula by now.

She sauntered towards one of the dug-outs, where a few men were playing cards while shovelling rice into their faces.

"Comrade South Pyongan." One of them quickly rubbed kimchi juice from his mouth. "Hey."

"Hope you comrades don't mind if I join you."

Whoops. That word slipped out again.

It wasn't like it was only Communists that used it, but she was trying to annoy Korea, so she couldn't. Good thing he wasn't here.

Obviously they didn't mind if she joined them, because duh, who would? So South Pyongan flopped down on the lip of the dug-out, the opening big enough for her to sit comfortably without ducking, slinging her legs inside.

"Deal me in," she ordered, pushing her tunic off her shoulder, leaving her in just her sleeveless undershirt.

Ahhhhh. Fresh fall air. And no one-eyed prude to tell her to keep her shirt on. She'd been roasting all summer, even worse than last year. It'd been hotter, and she'd been… in the tank for a lot of it, but with the sheer amount of burns she had, this one felt worse. It was kinda hard to focus on teaching someone the best place for a tread to be hit by a booby-trap to make sure it wouldn't carry a tank up a hill ever again when all you wanted was to cram your hand down your shirt and scoop the sweat out of your cleavage so it would stop stinging the burns there.

A few of the guys eyed her as she slurped down her rice and soup, making her smug, before she realized they were looking at the bandages instead of her muscles. Bleh.

She'd been following Korea's orders about staying covered, more or less. It wasn't like she *wanted* people thinking about how gross and burned she was under the wraps. The ones on her face were bad enough. But come on, she needed to take advantage of the weather while it was still nice. And there weren't any Chinese around.

"Those hurt much?" one of the men asked, a cigarette clamped between his teeth as he dealt her cards.

"Not enough to stop me from putting you on your ass later, Pak," she retorted.

On the General (an expression Korea had been stubbornly refusing to call her out on), if she caught *any* one of them trying to go easy on her later, she was breaking a finger. They could still hunt tanks with just nine.

"We'll see about that," he responded. "Comrade Chagang going to

want to play, too?"

South Pyongan looked over her shoulder at where her cousin was marching towards them. "Yeah."

He had a great poker face (which he had *not* gotten from her brother), but she didn't think he understood how card games worked. Like, any of them. The look on people's faces after they found out he had the worst hand in all of Korea and no clue how to play, yet had somehow won because he'd been so convincing no one called his bluff was always classic.

South Pyongan shifted aside so her cousin could squeeze past, folding himself up inside the dug-out, checking her own hand.

Ohhhh yeah. She was taking these suckers for all they had.

Which wasn't much. Gambling wasn't exactly encouraged in the army, so usually they just played with pocket change.

"You're leaving for Chinese National, Day, right?" another solider asked as he laid a card down. "Are you coming back after?"

"Don't know," South Pyongan replied, tossing her own down. "There'll only be four days left, so probably. You losers need all the help you can get."

The training was running from September 6th to October 5th, eight hours a day with Sundays for rest. For everyone else. For South Pyongan Sundays were for rushing back to her province to work more. And tomorrow would be for doing whatever she was told to in Pyongyang.

Sometimes she almost forgot which was worse. Not being able to see her brother at all when they were in different provinces, or being in the same city, but unable to talk.

Then she thought about hearing he'd gotten snatched by traitors before and remembered. Definitely the first one.

But neither compared to the whole 'sunk at sea' debacle.

"We'll see who's a loser after this," one of the Kims smirked, totally bluffing.

"Still you." South Pyongan selected her next card. "So yeah, I'll probably be back Tuesday. Unless Korea wants me for the front."

She looked hopefully at Chagang, who was looking at his cards with great solemnity. He slowly plucked one and placed it down, giving nothing away. Even though she didn't think anyone had actually mentioned the name of the game they were playing to him.

"The defense of the center sector is going well," he said. "The enemy hasn't been able to progress. They have pulled back to recalculate. I doubt Korea will deploy us to the front just for that."

'More like he can't convince anyone to let us deploy to the front just for that.' South Pyongan knew Korea was just as antsy as her to get back to the fighting. It was fun to run around the mountains and simulate taking out tanks, but nothing like the real thing.

"Seems a mite unfair," Pak said, putting down another card. He knew the situation since South Pyongan had complained about it before. "If we're not getting anywhere with those talks, I don't see why some of the best soldiers in our army have to be kept off the front."

"Right? That's what I'm saying." South Pyongan caught Chagang's look. "But it's diplomacy or whatever."

Choe snorted. "Yeah, big fans of that, the Yanks are. Rhee, too. I remember how enthusiastic he was about sorting things out peacefully. He accepted all our peace overtures *real* diplomatically."

"Ah, but he's allowed to be a violent bastard," the other Kim reminded him. "He's got Yankee money smoothing things over with the rest of the world for him. We don't have the cash to make sabotaging the talks look good."

A few of the men grumbled, and South Pyongan joined them.

God- Whoops- General, that pissed her off so much. The Yanks could literally get caught out bombing the neutral zone and that

was fine. But *she* couldn't go defend their own land from invaders or they'd look bad.

"So what do you think?" Choe said, finishing off the last of his soup and wiping his mouth with the back of a hand. "Comrade Nam Il said we'd be okay with making adjustments to the line the Yanks proposed. Are we really giving up on the 38th Parallel?"

South Pyongan opened her mouth to say 'We'd better fucking not be,' before seeing Chagang's expression.

'No gossiping.'

Gah. It was creepy how much he could look like her brother sometimes.

"I don't know," she said reluctantly. "Korea's number one priority is ending the war so we can… work out Reunification."

And she just knew he hated that even more than her. She'd heard him on Foundation Day, that flowery fire-and-brimstone language he'd used as he promised they'd keep fighting for eternity if they had to, a million times more passionate than when he'd told the provinces not to question the decision to accept the current line, or even his cold, detached tone as they'd voted to accept the ceasefire in the first place. He was being a politician again, covering up how he really felt to act all magnanimous.

Whatever. She wasn't going to call him out on it. He'd just give her another lecture on responsibility and embarrass them both.

"And… what if we can't?" Dan, the youngest engineer of the group ventured, his cards forgotten by his side. He flushed as everyone turned to him, averting his eyes. "What if we sign an armistice, then America refuses to let us negotiate, just like last time?"

South Pyongan shrugged. "Then I guess we go back to war."

"Can we do that?" Dan raised his gaze to her. "The South knows his army's no match for ours now. I doubt he'll want to start another fight. And if we can't even risk sending you comrades to

the front because it would look bad, how could we start the next war? We're already getting blamed for this one. If we actually did it…"

South Pyongan didn't know what he wanted from her. Did she look like she knew the ins and outs of politicking? She was here to hit stuff and show them how to get an enemy tank stuck moving forward.

"Look, Korea isn't going to let that happen," she said firmly. "Whether or not we had to start the next fight, he wouldn't let our country stay Divided."

Especially not when it would keep him and his crybaby brother separated.

"And the southern army does not follow South," Chagang said. "It follows the Syngman Rhee clique. And they crave conquest."

Well, South sort of was also there. But South Pyongan guessed they weren't trying to turn their people against him. It was just Korea they were trying (and failing) to get to wake up and smell the roses. And realize that one of the thorns had jabbed his eye out.

"I can tell you with full confidence," she said to the men. "We won't get stuck Divided."

She'd never let her brother be separated from her forever. And even though Korea's brother was a whiny little gullible bitch, she knew he wouldn't either.

Those stupid thoughts she'd had back when she hadn't been sure if North Pyongan was in the enemy's hands or not flickered in her mind, about responsibilities, ending the war no matter what, and not being capable of what Korea was when it came to their siblings.

South Pyongan shook her head irritably. She didn't have to think about that. She didn't have to then, and she didn't have to now.

"And I can *also* tell you with full confidence that you owe me money." She spun another card down onto the dirt floor. "Boom."

Pak cursed, and Choe shook his head despairingly. Dan stared at her, long enough to make her want to squirm, then nodded.

"Alright. Thank you for that, comrade."

"Yeah, sure."

A shadow fell across the dug-out, and South Pyongan craned her neck to look over her shoulder.

"Do you mind? You're kinda blocking the… sun."

'Ssi-bal.'

The province quickly jerked back around, realized it was too late because she'd literally just looked him dead in the eyes and addressed him, then looked back, propping herself up on an arm.

"What do you want?"

The gunner she'd replaced in Tank 44 half a lifetime ago, Oh Renjiro- No she *hadn't* remembered the name, she'd asked the engineer battalion commander who the half-Jap was when she'd thought he looked familiar- stood behind her, looking awkward.

"Comrade South Pyongan. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a moment?"

Dammit. She'd caught him eyeing her up a few times over the course of the program, but there were five teams that needed training, with one former tankman (or province) in each, so he'd never had an excuse to talk to her. And she thought he was too much of a coward to try during their breaks.

"I'm clearly sort of busy here." She gestured at her uneaten cucumber kimchi and the card game.

Choe raised his eyebrows at her.

Okay, yeah. That had made her sound like a bit of a dick. But she didn't want to talk to a half-Jap on a good day, and right now her 'uncomfortable conversation' alarm was going off.

"How about tomorrow?" she suggested slyly.

"I thought you were leaving tomorrow," Oh Renjiro said. "That's why I wanted to talk now."

'Dammit.' So close.

"Fine," she said, turning back around and looking at her cards. "If I'm not busy later, we can talk."

"Alright. I'll be standing sentry up on the height." His footsteps crunched away on the dirt.

Saved. Obviously South Pyongan had no intention of talking to him later. And she had her own room down in the tunnels, so she wouldn't have to see him at all before tomorrow, when she could jet off.

She *wasn't* running away. She just didn't want to have any weird talks she had no use for. She didn't even know what he wanted to talk about anyway.

"You were a little brusque there with Comrade Oh, don't you think?" Pak asked, still chewing on his cigarette.

"He's part Jap," South Pyongan muttered, fiddling with the edge of one of her cards. An ace. "He's lucky brusque is all he's getting."

"He wouldn't've been sent here if he wasn't a patriot," Kim Number One pointed out.

Kim Number Two nodded. "And like the Supreme Commander says, 'It isn't a man's origin that matters, but his character.' And Comrade Oh seems like a good guy."

The words were too much like what Yun-suk had said. *'You should be nicer to Comrade Oh Renjiro. He's a nice man.'*

Ugh. It wasn't like she could argue with him after he'd name-dropped the General.

"I guess," she muttered, using her short steel chopsticks to stab at

the cucumber still on her tray as she ignored Chagang's stare.

That was why she hated that he used to be a part of her brother. Not just because he had a bunch of embarrassing memories about her, but because she couldn't shut their silent communication off like she could with the others. She knew he was reading her like an open book right now.

Choe suddenly frowned, looking confused. "Hey, shouldn't you two have met before? I heard him say he was with Tank 44 on the way to the Raktong. That was the one you were with, right?"

Curse her big mouth. Even when she didn't tell them the full story, she couldn't resist bragging about being a Hero of the Republic.

"Maybe," she dodged.

"The hell you mean 'maybe?'" Kim Number One said, sounding confused as he demoted himself to Kim Number Two.

"I don't know," she said, sweating. "It was awhile ago, okay?"

The new Kim Number One raised his bushy eyebrows. "You don't remember everyone you served with? There's usually only about five people to a tank."

'Too many.'

"I remember them!" she snapped, making him draw back in surprise, and her change her tone. "I mean, obviously I remember them. That guy was just the one that I replaced whenever I joined the crew, so I haven't talked to him much."

Or at all.

"What happened to the rest of your crew?" Dan came in with another ray-of-sunshine question.

Pak slugged the kid on the shoulder as the other men quieted.

They didn't have many tanks left. And most of them had gone out

in service. South Pyongan's crew was far from the only one that had gone out that way, too.

"I've got to go talk to that guy," she said, unable to sit still anymore. "Get the rest of my winnings for me and take my tray back to the kitchen, big guy."

Chagang nodded, and she scarfed down the rest of the cucumber, then shoved the empty tray his way, wiping her face on her arm bandages as she got up, snatching her tunic and leaving, trying to saunter instead of storm.

Ugh, she hadn't even got to enjoy the kimchi. That would teach her to always leave her favourite food for last. Or no, probably not. But it did irritate her.

'Okay, buddy,' she thought, glaring up at the ridgeline. *'Let's talk.'*

Yeah she hadn't thought this through.

She'd marched up the mountainside, but by the time she got to where Oh Renjiro was standing, she realized Korea probably wouldn't take 'He interrupted my dinner' as an excuse for beating the crap out of one of their guys (without consent). So now they were both just kind of standing there.

Great view, though. She could see across the fields of the Iron Triangle (she resented foreigners naming things in their country, but it was a badass name, so she'd let it slide) all the way to the mountains south of Chorweon.

She could *also* see all the craters left in the fields, and the deathbirds circling around the front, killing their guys. On top of the blockade off the coast of Wonsan, Kangwon also had to put up with the passes through his mountains being bombed every day to stop supplies from getting to the front.

Maybe she'd join up with one of the aircraft-hunting teams when they got back to Pyongyang. She couldn't hunt tanks without going to the front, but if the pilots were going to insist on continuing to

bomb their cities, then they were fair game.

"So…"

Ugh, right. She'd forgotten he was here.

"Yeah, what is it?" she said, tearing her gaze away from the planes to glare at him. "What did you want to talk about?"

Oh Renjiro rubbed a hand over the back of his head. He looked similar to how he did last year, but his black hair was a little shorter, cropped instead of cut, and his moustache was a tiny bit thicker. It was probably never going to be anything impressive, though.

And something about him still said 'Jap' in a way that made her arm hair prickle.

"I wanted to say… thanks."

Warily, South Pyongan prompted, "'Thanks?'"

The man nodded, his dark eyes sliding towards her. "For kicking me outta that tank."

The province's eyes slid away. "Oh."

"I know you're not exactly fond of me, and I know why, even if Comrades Dae-ho and Yun-suk wouldn't say," he continued. She hadn't known he'd been on a given name basis with them. "But it doesn't matter. If you hadn't taken my place, I'd be dead by now."

If she hadn't taken his place, the rest of the crew might still be alive.

"I'm all my mom has," Oh Renjiro said, even though she'd be thrilled if he shut up now. "If I left her alone… Well, she's Japanese. I'm sure you know she wouldn't have many friends to look after her."

South Pyongan blinked. "Your mom's the Jap?"

“Yeah,” he said, catching her confusion. “Why?”

‘Blame his father,’ Dae-ho had said about him being half.

“I mean, I sort of thought-“ She cut herself off. “Uh, never mind.”

“Dad was with the KPRA,” he said, looking out across the plains. “But he died in the border skirmishes.”

South Pyongan rubbed the back of her bandaged head. “Sorry?”

“It’s not your fault.” He looked back to her. “You stopped me from joining him, even if it wasn’t your intention. I just felt like I owed you thanks for that.”

“You don’t… owe me anything,” she muttered. Seriously, she’d been psychically trying to send him slurs pretty much every time she’d seen him. Though she guessed now she had confirmation it hadn’t worked.

“Maybe not.” He shrugged. “But I feel better now that I have. And… there was something else I wanted to ask.”

Feeling like she wasn’t going to like it, South Pyongan ventured, “What?”

“Could you tell me how they died?”

“Yeah, no,” she responded immediately. “Not happening.”

He frowned. “Why not?”

“Because who just goes around asking how people died? Your Jap side must make you a freak.” The province crossed her arms over her chest, tensing as the *‘clang’* of a bunker door closing echoed up from below.

‘Stupid.’

“They were my comrades,” Oh Renjiro said quietly. “And all anyone would tell me before I was reorganized into infantry was that the tank went into the river.”

A breeze rustled across the scrub brush on the ridge, and South Pyongan slid her tunic back on, drawing it closed over herself.

"Was it quick?"

She could still hear the scream that had left Yun-suk's mouth as she disappeared out the front hatch of the tank, and the crunch as Commander Chul went rocketing overhead. She guessed it had been quick for them. And Dae-ho had been too out of it to realize what was happening.

But Kim Se-woon had seen his daughter die in front of him, followed by his future son-in-law in his arms. It had probably felt long for him. Those minutes of living in a world without his kid had probably felt like a eternity.

"Who cares?" she asked defensively. "They're dead either way. What difference does it make if it was fast or not?"

"I care," Oh Renjiro said, somewhat heartedly. "They weren't just my comrades- they were my friends. And clearly you care, too, or you'd have no problem telling me."

"I-" She cut herself off, looking away. "Hate Japs."

General, Korea could *not* know she'd just said that to someone that was technically one of their people.

The one next to her sighed heavily. "Can you at least tell me if they received their medals for shooting down that plane posthumously?"

Korea had said they could. She still had to receive hers after all. She was just putting it off because she… didn't feel like it. Not yet.

"What's the point?" she said. "They're dead. We don't even have bodies to bury them with."

And none of them had any family left.

"Right." Oh Renjiro looked south, maybe towards the river their tank crew was buried next to. "Did they go out like Heroes of the

Republic?”

Had they? They'd been beyond cool at the front, staying until the last moment, shooting until they couldn’t anymore, taking out as many of the enemy as they could. If they had gone out there in a blaze of glory, flames pouring from the tank, it would’ve been heroic beyond a doubt.

But the reality had been way more… sudden. A bomb, a stupid stuck hatch, and a lot of bad luck. Then they were all gone, just like that.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” South Pyongan turned abruptly, already sliding down the ridge, pebbles spraying away from her boots.

“If you ever do, please tell me,” Oh Renjiro called after her.

She didn’t answer.

She didn’t know if she could say her tank crew had gone out like Heroes of the Republic deserved to.

But she did know she wanted to see her brother.

—

North Pyongan shifted nervously as he stood outside the bunker, eyes scanning the dark treeline. He straightened as he heard the branches rustling.

The person that emerged wasn’t who he had been waiting for specifically, but relief still welled in his chest.

“Sister.”

“Hey,” she said, sauntering over.

“I thought you wouldn’t be returning until tomorrow morning.”

She shrugged. “Training was over for today. Figured I’d head back late instead of early. You know how Chagang gets in the mornings.”

“Of course,” he said, smiling. “Chagang.”

South Pyongan kicked at the dirt, and his smile turned down.

“Are you alright?”

“No touchy-feely crap,” she said with disgust. “We’ve been having way too many gross conversations lately.”

“None of our conversations are gross to me,” he said sincerely, making her clap her hands over her head.

“That *counts* as touchy-feely, and next comment gets you hit.”

North Pyongan chuckled, waiting for her to talk. Eventually, she huffed, removing her hands from her ‘ears.’

“It’s just… Ugh.” Quickly she ran through her version of her conversation with Oh Renjiro. As always, North Pyongan filtered through the frequent self-flattery and things that obviously hadn’t happened (he was very doubtful the man had gotten down on both knees and apologized for being Japanese before his sister would deign to speak with him) to pick out the core details.

“Why don’t you want to tell him what happened?” North Pyongan asked.

He already knew, of course. His job was to try and make his sister acknowledge it, too.

“I don’t know,” she said, glancing towards where the sound of hammering was coming from. “Is Kangwon building that bath? Green and grim isn’t back yet, right?”

“Hae is helping him,” North Pyongan said, gently guiding her back onto the track. “Why do you think you don’t want to tell him?”

“I don’t know,” his sister repeated uncomfortably. “I haven’t even told *you* what happened.”

Which was rare for her. They told each other everything.

“Do you want to tell me?”

“No,” she said after a moment. “Too many gross talks, remember?”

He nodded. He knew it was no use trying to convince her. She hadn’t spoken to Korea about it when it happened, and she wouldn’t speak to him now.

“But you wouldn’t be bringing this up if you didn’t want to tell Comrade Oh Renjiro.”

She scrunched her face. “It’s just like… They were his friends, too. I guess. I don’t get why they’d want to be friends with a half-Jap, but whatever.”

“He *is* fighting for Korea,” North Pyongan reminded her.

He might have his biases against the Japanese, but they didn’t extend to the half children. So long as they had some Korean blood, they were Korean. Especially if they fought.

“Not what we’re talking about,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “Anyway, it’s sort of like, I want to tell him. But then again, I got lucky that none of them had any other family so Korea couldn’t make me pass on my condolences and tell *them.* And it kind of seems like passing up a gift if I tell someone I don’t have to.”

“I think you’ll tell him,” North Pyongan said.

South Pyongan gave him an affronted look. “Okay, well now I *definitely* don’t want to.”

“You will,” he said confidently. “You know it’s the right thing to do. And my sister always does the right thing.”

She was silent for a moment, her diamond-shaped eyes dipping down. “That’s not true.”

He opened his mouth, but she cut him off with a look.

‘No gross talks.’

Obliging, he changed course. “And at least part of you wants to tell him. And you always do what you want.”

“More true,” she said, slightly smug, then heaved a sigh, her top half slumping over. “Ugh, fine. I’ll think about it.”

North Pyongan shook his head, smiling, as his eyes trailed back to the trees.

But they snapped back to his sister as she said, “But I don’t always do what I want. I’m not beating the shit out of Korea for separating us.”

“Because you know it’s the right thing to do.” For once he was able to say the words without sounding overly rueful. “We both need to be less codependent. And it’s working.” He smiled at her. “Korea said I did a good job with my efforts in my province. I even managed to resolve a Party issue. The Pakchon County Party Committee was placing a limit on recruitment. I made them stop, and repealed the penalties that shouldn’t have been meted out."

During the temporary retreat, many Party members had buried their cards or even burned then out of fear. But while membership cards were precious, the circumstances had been extreme. The Central Committee had ruled it overly harsh to impose penalties for many cases, especially at a time when they needed as many active comrades as possible.

He had sought the recruitment problem out at its source after reading one of the complaints a rejected applicant had sent to a Korea, and realizing that the numbers of new Party members accepted into the Pakchon cell was exceedingly low, made the Committee members there confess to him that they were placing a hard cap on new members out of fear of compromising the working class core of their Party, and convinced them to lift it by reminding them that most of their population was peasants, and that most of the workers of today had been peasants yesterday. So long as they remained committed to the working class and stuck to their line, they would always be a working class party, no matter how many peasants they admitted.

And he had done it all without wishing his sister was there once.

Well, he had wished she was there several times. But he hadn't yearned for her guidance at any point, or Korea's. And despite having his restriction on prayer lifted, he hadn't felt the need to do that, either, though he had checked in on those involved with Ro Sang-ung's debacle the year before, and joined the church in a small candlelit vigil for all the martyrs, led by Kim Rak-do.

North Pyongan tried his best to always keep pride from his heart, but after Korea had given him an approving nod after his report, he couldn't help but feel a small glow of it.

South Pyongan looked less pleased. He frowned, tipping his head at her. She looked away.

"I'm going to hit the really uncomfortable cot," she said with an exaggerated yawn. "You can go back to waiting for whoever it is you're waiting for."

He gave a slightly sheepish chuckle. Of course she had noticed his wandering gaze.

"I'm waiting for Comrade Liaoxi," he confessed. "And Comrade Liaotung."

"Right." His sister ambled by him, bumping him affectionately as she went.

He smiled, turning back to the trees, then looked back as she spoke again.

"Hey," she said. Her back was to him, and she was shadowed by the overhang of rock above the bunker door. "Weird question, but if I got kidnapped by the enemy, would you come save me?"

He opened his mouth to say 'Of course, always,' when she added, "Even if it would sabotage the peace talks or something?"

His lips touched again as he thought.

"What if we already signed an armistice?" she asked without an

answer to her first question. “But then that Yank screwed us over and refused to let us negotiate Reunification, so we were deadlocked or something. But I was stuck in the south. Would you come get me, even if it meant restarting the war?”

Would he? Before he would have answered ‘yes’ immediately, as she had when they voted against accepting the ceasefire. The idea of leaving his sister in the south, in enemy hands if they weren’t Reunified, was abhorrent. He would risk anything for her, do anything to save her.

But could he, if it would mean the bombing that had finally came to an end would begin again?

He could still see the ruins of Sinuiju, the sundered bridges and polluted waters, the burnt timbers and shattered tiles, the empty, smoking farmland and cratered roads, the patches of oily black ash where villages had once stood, and the hundreds of people holding their candles, each one representing a life or more that had already been snuffed out. And still that sea of flame had only been a drop in the ocean of the departed.

If it came to it, could he subject their people to that again for his sister? Could he sprint down the wrong path and leave those he was supposed to be guiding to die, along with their siblings, for his?

“I would want to,” he said, and the words tasted like guilt for too many reasons. “But I couldn’t.”

South Pyongan didn’t turn around. “Me neither,” she said after a moment.

His heart cracked, even though it was the right thing, even though he supposed he had already known that. She hadn’t been in Busan when he had returned from Guk Island, after all.

“But we don’t have to worry about that,” he said, shame churning in his heart as he fought the urge to explain himself. They both had to be thinking the same thing. “You know Korea wouldn’t tolerate a deadlock."

North Pyongan didn't think their Countryhuman would restart the war for one of his provinces, even if he wanted to. But when it came to his own brother...

Keeping their country Divided would be even more disastrous than a continued war. When he had that excuse, the province knew he would stop at nothing to get his sibling back.

"And I doubt we would even have to worry about being the ones to break an armistice," he continued, trying to reassure her, and himself. "A deadlock wouldn't be a victory to America or Rhee. One of them would break it eventually."

And what would happen to his sister before then?

He bit his lip, swallowing the urge to give more excuses. The only true comfort would be taking the words back. And he couldn't do that. They would both know he was lying.

"Mm," his sister said casually. "I wouldn't need to be saved, anyway. I'd just kick that Yank's striped ass, then take Rhee and South out while I was at it. Or drag that little bastard back here for Korea."

"Right," North Pyongan said, guilt still staining his mouth bitter.

"I was just making sure we're on the same page," South Pyongan said, hauling open the door, still without turning around. "Night."

"Goodnight," her brother said softly.

The slam of steel was final, rolling up the mountain ridge like the heavy peal of a mourning bell.

North Pyongan sighed, burying his face in his hands.

Maybe he should have lied from the start. But it was still a sin, and… It was too important to lie about.

He heaved another sigh, then straightened as he heard the rumble of an engine. Before long the crunch of tires on undergrowth joined it, and the Jeep rumbled into the clearing, followed by the GAZ. He

hustled forward to help Chagang and the newly-returned Hwang cover their vehicle, while the two Chinese women hid theirs. It seemed Korea wouldn't be returning tonight, though China flitted by, disappearing inside after reminding his provinces to hide the Jeep well.

"Hello," North Pyongan said to Liaoxi as he staked the tarp down.

"Hello," she politely returned. Almost… too politely.

The Korean frowned. He had thought it was only his imagination when she turned down his offer to travel to Sinuiju with him. He hadn't needed her for moral support, he had only wanted to catch up, since they hadn't had the chance since she had returned from China. And her poems made fieldwork lighter.

He had told himself her excuse- *'I'm sorry, comrade. Don't be mad, but I think my sister could use my help here. I'll have to stay behind, I fear-'* had been understandable. They would have been in their separate provinces in their country, and would both likely still be on edge from Liaoxi going missing and China's trial. His wasn't the only sister that had been fretting when they were 'lost at sea.' Of course the Liaos would want to stay together.

But now he was certain there was a coolness to her usually soft voice, and she almost seemed to be purposefully avoiding his eyes as she finished camouflaging their Jeep.

Kangwon and Hae had emerged from the trees, done with their work for the night. Hae threw herself at her brother, chattering eagerly, asking a hundred questions about Haeju, while their other cousin led the rest of them into the bunker with his electric lantern.

"Comrade Liaoxi." North Pyongan stopped her as she tried to follow them. "Could I speak with you?"

She turned, and he got the sense that it was almost reluctant, as he had when asking her if she wanted to accompany him. Nervousness still fluttered under his breastbone, for some reason.

"I'm glad to see you're okay," he said, feeling almost awkward. "I

didn't have the chance to say that after you returned. And... I'm glad you did."

“I think it might be for the best if we spoke less,” the Chinese woman said suddenly, her words carefully neutral and like a filleting knife to the chest.

North Pyongan’s heart sank as his lips parted in surprise. “Did I… do something wrong?”

Nothing came to mind. Maybe she was upset over him outright confessing that Korea had been the one to order him to find out what he could about China from her. But she hadn’t seemed upset at the time. She’d laughed and said she… liked him. And considered him a friend.

“It’s nothing you’ve done." Her expression didn’t flicker from pleasant politeness, but he couldn’t help but notice that she still wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Then… is Comrade China the one?” He supposed the other country might not like that the two provinces were friendly. He knew Korea didn't. He had given him a look that bordered on wary whenever her name had came up in his Guk Island report. But it was surprising it was the Chinese Countryhuman that would move to stop them when his own hadn’t even said anything out loud.

“No. China isn’t the one telling me to run.”

His heart twinged in his chest as she rejected his rhyme for her own.

“I simply think we’ve grown too close,” she said, hands clasped professionally in front of her. “I think it would be better if we kept our relationship that of guest and host. I hope you can understand.”

“I…” North Pyongan wanted to argue, but if it really was her choice, then… “I understand,” he finished quietly. “If that truly is what you want.”

“It is,” Liaoxi said, dipping her head before he could catch the look in her eyes. “Thank you. Goodnight.”

She turned and slipped inside, leaving him standing in the dark, uneasy, his insides swaying like a ship unmoored.

I think South Pyongan's native habitat would be 2chan/4chan. Or no. It's like when an animal or plant gets introduced to somewhere it's not native to but has evolved in a way that specifically makes it hyperadapted to the new environment, quickly becoming the apex organism. She could do damage.

An important part of China's character to me is that modern day he refuses to sleep with any adult he took care of as a child because he still sees them as a little sibling and also doesn't want to abuse the power dynamic (there's also probably a desire to leave some things as sacred when he's trampled so thoroughly on his own beliefs about love and intimacy). But I was thinking about the humour of that. 'Oh my God, girl, we've literally all slept with China. He's like, the best. You need to hook up with him at the next party.'
***Deep sigh* 'I can't. He led my Young Pioneers group to plant trees when I was seven.'**
I don't think he would actually tell people directly that's why he wouldn't sleep with them. But I think with how thick he would lay on 'meimei' after rejecting a woman, some of them might get it.

In The Tiger's Den

[image]

China's birthday party was hurting Chagang's head. Likely more than Korea's head had hurt this morning when the foreigner burst through his door to announce it was his birthday. And more than China's after Chagang had witnessed Korea physically toss him back out into the hall, directly into the wall.

The underground mess hall was full of Chinese soldiers. Division commanders, political workers, and model soldiers that had served bravely, and were being rewarded. Korea and the General themselves had shown up to congratulate them in person. Peng Dehuai was also there, toasting his comrades.

The vivid excitement at their National Day, and at being honoured this way by their ally should have been solely relaxing. But more unpleasant colours seeped through the swirl of emerald and azure.

The stab of maroon that came from North Hamgyong every time he looked at SH. The blaze of deep red that came from her, no longer restrained, as she did the same. They had been forced to share a truck on the way back from their provinces. Chagang did not think it had gone well. The occasional spark of chartreuse and ochre as South and North Pyongan's elbows bumped at the table, and the waft of grey as the latter's eyes strayed to Liaoxi, seated across the room. The returning shades that came from her when he wasn't looking. Hae had returned to radiating her pink, squished next to a Chinese engineer as she threw questions at him. Chagang was glad he had not seen her after her return to Sincheon. The reporting session before had been painful enough. But the olive of worry was welling in Hwang as he asked his own questions of the Chinese. It would build and build until he wicked it away with some internal comfort. Then it would build again.

Kangwon, Gangwon, and their headaching auras of pain had been removed when they returned to the hospital, but the feeling

plagued every single one of his cousins. It plagued Chagang, too. The spurts of flax and mahogany made it hard to taste the bean sprouts on his plate.

Korea was the most painful, as usual. This was unfortunate for Chagang as he was sitting guard in his blind spot. While his pain was still hidden, his other emotions were not. Maroon swirled around him when he looked in Pak Hon-yong's direction. Ochre bubbled up whenever one of the Chinese soldiers leaned over to speak to him, even as it was choked by an invisible hand. Dark blue prickled along his skin as his eye landed on one of them eating, before shame overcame it. The grey-yellow of discomfort sheathed him like a second skin.

Chagang knew if it wasn't for the Supreme Commander, he wouldn't be here. The man would send him secret looks from the other table every few minutes, silently calming him. Korea's restlessness would ease, the colours retreating slightly. But it was only a few minutes before they were at full strength again.

Over it all swirled the grey of the Chinese soldiers' sorrow, eclipsing the actual cigarette smoke that brushed the ceiling. Everyone here had lost someone. Sometimes they were here because they had been the sole survivor from their unit to remain to carry out their mission. And despite the fact that violet came from them as they were praised for fighting for Korea, not a single one wanted to be here, hidden in a Korean tunnel. They wanted to be home, celebrating their country's second National Day with their families and countrymen.

Chagang fought through the haze of emotions to find China. He was seated in a corner table, masked like his provinces. But the Korean could see his neck swivelling as he followed a conversation between several of his people.

If he was dismayed like his soldiers, he didn't feel it strongly enough to show. Unlike what he had felt on Korea's Foundation Day.

Chagang would not tell his Countryhuman that the Chinese man had been there if he wasn't asked. It would only unsettle Korea. It

would unsettle him more if he knew what colours China had been emitting. It came close to unsettling Chagang, despite them being pleasant for him. It was the strength, when usually he read nothing from the foreigner.

China caught him looking. He tipped his head so the Korean would know he was winking. Chagang looked away.

Across the room, SH politely disengaged from the soldiers crowded around her, making her way to their table.

"Korea," she whispered, leaning down. "What did you get him?"

Korea made a hissing sound under his breath, irritation spiking, though his expression remained neutral. "I told you I'm not paying tribute to him."

The same dark blue spiked from her. "And I told *you* it's usually called a birthday present, and he got you one, so you need to get him one. Don't lie, Hae told me he got you that knife."

Korea grumbled, his hand going to the sheath at his hip. "I only told her that so she'd stop saying I let him bribe me."

"If it's not a bribe, it's a gift," SH said with a smile, in case anyone was looking. "Which means you owe him one."

More irritation stabbing her, Korea growled, "I owe him *nothing."*

SH narrowed her eyes. "I reminded you to get him something before I left, so you've had plenty of time. I'm asking him if you gave him a present tomorrow. If he says no, I'll be peeved."

"I have never cared about anything less." Korea turned from her, loudly asking a soldier down the table about his recent service at the front.

SH looked over him at Chagang. *'Make sure he gets him something.'*

Chagang blinked back past the pain in his temples. *'I cannot promise.'*

Just because he would go with Korea to the military complex did not mean he could convince him to get China a birthday present.

His cousin huffed, returning to her table.

"You should get him something," Chagang attempted, voice thick.

"No."

His eyes dipped to the space before his country. "And you should eat."

The provinces weren't being served as filling meals as the Chinese. The foreigners had pork to go with their rice, bean sprouts, lotus root and walnut soup, and patjuk. The Provincehumans had millet, bean sprouts, and smaller soup bowls.

And the red tablecloth in front of Korea was bare.

His Countryhuman's eye went to the food in front of the Chinese soldier answering his question, that swirl of irritation and shame swirling around him again.

"No," he repeated, then leaned away, clearly done talking.

It had been worth a try. Even if he knew it wouldn't work.

Stewing with new irritated colours now, Korea was even more painful to behold than before. Chagang tried to block him out and focus on speaking with the soldiers next to him. His Countryhuman had deemed it necessary to recall all the provinces to show how grateful they were for the PVA's help. He would make sure he played his part in that.

While fighting the urge to squeeze his eyes shut and smash his head into the table until the pain stopped.

—

North was exhausted by the time he returned to the bunker. Sitting in that mess hall under the eyes of all those Chinese soldiers had been torture.

He wasn't dragging China's dead behind him. He just... They deserved to be in China, *with* China. Not eating lacklustre fare under the earth while bombs rained overhead, destined to return to combat tomorrow. And not while their Countryhuman sat masked in the corner, unable to even reveal himself. He should have been at home, making his people feel the way North's had on their Foundation Day.

Actually, the people in China might think they *did* have their Countryhuman. North had been sure the recorded interview and photographs that had apparently been used as evidence at China's trial had been entirely a scheme, one cooked up between him and that reporter. But speaking with one of his own journalists that had recently returned from China confirmed that 'China' was actually there, and had been there since the war began. He had no idea who it could be, and the real China had given him no answer more useful than *'I plucked out one of my hairs to create a copy of myself.'*

But that didn't matter. China *wasn't* there. And he should be. His people deserved to see their country's face as they celebrated their People's Republic. And he deserved to see theirs.

North knew he resented him for that. He had to. Any present would just seem like a pathetic attempt to make up for it. And North didn't *have* to make up for it. It wasn't him keeping China here.

He caught himself turning the object in his hand obsessively, and made himself stop, not wanting to bruise it.

The outside door slammed open, and the chatter of his provinces filled the bunker.

"No, seriously," South Pyongan was saying. "You tell that Mao guy that he's my new best friend for getting us these. If I've ever said anything racist about you guys, I take it back."

"Have you said anything racist?" Liaotung asked.

"Oh look, the door was unlocked," SH interrupted. "Korea must be back."

A knock came at his door. North stayed still, not answering. He had wasted too much energy escaping Chagang at the military complex, then sprinting all the way to the orchard, then here, to make it pointless.

"He probably went to go meditate under a waterfall or something," South Pyongan said.

SH huffed. "Or he's avoiding me."

"Whyever would he be avoiding you?" China's voice innocently lilted.

"Goodnight, Comrade China," North's province said with perfect politeness. "Happy National Day."

"Thank you. I assume I'll be receiving my portrait for the next one?"

"I was too busy this year," SH demurred. "I need as much time as possible to make it. A painting of a comrade such as yourself is deserving of my undivided attention."

"I would consider myself lucky to have even half the attention of a woman like you," China purred.

"Alright, that's enough," Liaotung said as the same time as North Hamgyong barked, "Everyone out of the *fucking* hallway."

The others walked deeper into the bunker, which was good. North had been about to lunge out and put an end to the flirting himself. He didn't care if SH found it amusing. He did not.

"I'll keep watch," he could hear Hwang volunteer.

North could tell he was worried about Choi Jung-nam. He had been even more distracted than usual at the banquet.

He'd agreed to the man's request to be an agent, even with the vulnerability of Hwang knowing his identity. They had that suspected leak, after all, and too few spies to deal with it. The access his contracting job would get him was too useful to turn

down. And when it came to recruiting agents, trust was the most difficult factor. North was fairly certain he could trust Choi Jung-nam, even if he wouldn't have without prior acquaintance, due to his background. But that background just made him less of a target for suspicion by the enemy.

Hopefully he could solve the issue of the leak. And safely. Suzuki Yoshi had done too much for Korea to be left a widow.

He could hear Hae flounce off with her brother, both of them chattering about the things the Chinese soldiers had told them about their lives back home.

So many of the details were similar to those of North's. It made him... uneasy.

'I don't think 'yours' and 'mine' are quite as delineated as you would like.'

When the hallway was empty, North opened the door, darting a hand out and seizing China- who he had known would still be standing there- by the wrist, and dragging him into his room. He slammed the door, quickly releasing him.

"Should I be worried about what you're going to do to me?" China asked, too used to the man-handling to be ruffled by it.

North didn't answer, crossing his arms, rubbing his thumb across the object hidden in his hand again.

'Stupid.' He should just throw him out again. It had been satisfying to do it this morning, even if he'd just been startled that the other man had been *right there* when he opened the door.

China's eyes strayed around the small, grey room. "You really haven't done anything with this place, have you?"

When he looked back, North was holding his hand out, looking determinedly away from the item in it.

China tipped his head. "A persimmon?"

North tried not to bristle at the judgement he was sure he heard there. "It's for your National Day. I couldn't get a peach. They're out of season."

He bit his tongue on 'It's not an expensive knife.' Clearly. And he didn't owe China one. He hasn't asked for his gift to be so expensive. He hadn't asked for a gift at all.

China plucked the orange, acorn-shaped fruit from his hand, examining it. North tried to keep his back straight.

And how exactly did SH think this was better than getting him nothing? He didn't have the money to buy anything like a hand-crafted, personalized blade. No matter how much effort he had put into it, it would still be pathetic in comparison.

Ssi-bal, he should have at least taken the knife off of his belt. That just made it seem like he was rubbing the insult in.

"You'd actually give me a fruit?" China asked after a few moments of scrutiny.

North *knew* he heard judgement now, and couldn't fight his rising hackles, even though he had known the fruit wouldn't mean as much to the other country as it did to him. "If you don't want it-"

China held the persimmon away from his reaching fingers. "Aiya, did I say that? I'm just surprised. I thought you were being generous enough with that patjuk before."

"I wasn't the one that made the menu," North grumbled. He had only exempted his provinces from some of it. And himself from all of it. "And your soldiers are aiding mine. It's only right that we help feed them."

Especially after China had left that... gift when he had departed for his trial. Even if it rankled to give away their limited resources when there were starving Koreans.

"Well, thank you regardless." China held up the persimmon, smiling at it. "And thank you for this."

North looked away.

"Do you want to share it with me?"

"No."

"Are you sure?" China tilted it towards him.

"If you don't want it, just say that," North snapped, flinching back from the fruit.

"I do want it," the other country assured him. "I just thought it might make you less resentful if some of it went to a Korean."

North hunched his shoulders. He had been trying not to let his feelings show on his face earlier. But of course China had seen. He hoped none of the soldiers had.

"I'm not... resentful," he muttered. "Only at America."

That was who his ire should be directed solely at. Him and Rhee's clique, the bastards torching their fields and murdering their peasants. *They* were the reason his people were starving. And one good meal for a few dozen Chinese soldiers wouldn't have put a dent in that, anyways.

"Well, you can still have half." China held his hand out.

North hesitated, then passed him the tiger-hilted blade, glancing away from the clear difference between the two gifts in China's hands.

"Your husa," the Chinese man remarked. "I was hoping for a paring knife, maybe."

"I haven't stabbed anyone with it yet," North muttered. "And don't pretend you don't have a paring knife in your sleeves."

China smiled slyly, not answering as he used the husa to cut the persimmon into two parts, one large and one smaller. He held them out. North took the smaller half and his blade, wiping it carefully on a cloth pulled from his belt before sliding it back into its sheath.

His ally was already biting into his half, eyes rolling back in his head as he moaned. North would have accused him of playing it up, but he had seen him have the exact same reaction every other time he had eaten a fruit.

'Unpleasant.'

North examined his own half reluctantly. He had chosen the best persimmon he could find in the orchard so early in the season, with taut, unblemished skin. He'd never had one without black spots on it before.

He wanted to go give it to Hae or one of his other provinces, but SH would hear his door shut. He'd already gotten lucky the first time.

Swallowing his saliva, he took a bite, fangs piercing the orange skin with a popping sound. He ate it as swiftly as possible, with small, precise bites, twisted away so China couldn't see.

"Mm, it's actually for the best you couldn't get a peach," the other country remarked.

North gave him a suspicious look over his shoulder. "Why?"

China thought for a moment. "If I explain the joke, I suspect I'll find it less amusing."

North glowered, turning back around so he could wipe his mouth on the unburned part of the back of his hand, then dart his tongue over it, making sure not to waste a drop of the nectar. Persimmons tended to be too sweet for him, but personal preference had never played a part in what he was willing to eat. For example, South Hamgyong's cooking.

"I know it's my birthday, but I actually fixed up a present for you comrades today," China said, taking longer to finish his half. "It will be awhile before it's ready, though."

"What is it?" North asked warily, trying not to look at the fruit still in his ally's hand.

China smiled, taking another bite, juice running down his chin. "It's a surprise."

"I hate surprises."

The man bobbed his head. "So you've said. But I promise it's a non-harmful surprise. Heaven punish me with lightning if it's not."

"You won't need heaven to do it." North watched him lick juice from the back of his hand the same way he had, and realized he was salivating again.

Swallowing, he tore his eye away from China's persimmon, going to his pack in the corner. He lifted it up, removing what was under it, waiting for the sucking sounds of his ally licking his fingers clean to end before he turned around, holding it out.

Raised eyebrows as China dried his fingers on a handkerchief that disappeared back into his sleeve. "Another present? Aiya, and I only got you the one."

"It isn't a present," North clipped. "I'm only returning it."

China took the large photo book from his hands. Stamped on the leather cover were the words *'Property of Meng Yuyu.'*

The Chinese country opened it, greeted with black-and-white photographs of his dead soldiers. Men with missing limbs and cracked skulls, skin torn by shrapnel, and unidentifiable for all the colourless gore they had been turned into. Each with their name, rank, and hometown written on a piece of paper slid into the archival sheets with them.

"I was wondering where this went," he said after a moment.

"You knew I had it." North knew he would have asked if he didn't. The book was too important to lose.

"En." China continued to flip through the pages, taking a second to read each identifier. "I was wondering when you were going to give it to me."

North had wanted to wait until he could trust himself. He wasn't sure he ever would be able to. But at least he didn't think he was at risk of hurting China right now.

"I should have done it sooner," he admitted. Even if he couldn't have. He should have just left it with Peng Dehuai to give to his country.

"It's alright. They weren't going anywhere." China brushed his fingers over the second to last photograph. A charred black mass, barely recognizable as human. But there was a name with it, in different handwriting than the rest of the book.

'He Sengqi, private, Shancheng Village, Liaotung Province.'

"And you got her photos developed."

North opened his mouth to deny it, then shut it when he realized it was obvious he had. "She did most of the work," he said instead.

Meng Yuyu's negatives had been neatly arranged in the pages with the descriptors she'd already written out with them. He Sengqi had been the only blank photo.

China looked at the last few names and ranks without photographs, written under He Sengqi's short obituary.

Zhao Qiaolan. Feng Jiahao. Wu Shanyuan. The same name as on the front of the book. Hong Hongjun.

China smiled, and North looked away.

It wasn't enough. He knew that.

The other country flipped to the final page, and his teeth flashed at what he saw there.

The group photo. The note with it read, *'63rd Army, 188th Division, Second Battalion, Korea's platoon.'* North had debated erasing that part. It being written by Meng Yuyu was the only thing that had saved it.

"Did you look at this one, comrade?" China asked.

"Yes," North lied, though he had slid it into place without even glancing.

But China was already pulling it out and showing it to him. North looked at the wall for as long as he could without making it obvious, then reluctantly turned his eye to it.

China had told them not to wear masks, to only smile if they felt like it. North hadn't wanted to look over and see the kinds of faces people who knew they were going to die would make. He had seen enough of them in his life.

But the Chinese soldiers were smiling. All fifteen of them, along with Meng Yuyu, had wide grins on their faces as they faced the camera with their arms around each other in the darkening trench. The platoon commander and Hong Hongjun, Meng Yuyu crouched at his feet with his pistol, Yao Song with his picture of Li Meihua, Zhang Guangqiang with his foot on He Sengqi's shoulder, Wang Wei caught mid-laugh.

North was the only one unsmiling, staring into the camera like it was the bore of a gun.

There were two copies. The one still in the book was pristine, but on this one, on the photo itself, the pencil lead pressed hard so the words would be visible against the dark background, were Chinese characters. North didn't need his knowledge of Mandarin to know what they said.

'The 63rd Army Lives Forever!'

"See?" China hummed. "I told you they would turn out."

North averted his gaze. His mouth opened, then closed. His burns ached as he wrapped his arms around his chest, pain shooting through the gash and down into his insides. He squeezed harder.

"I'll turn the other copy over to my archivists," China said when he hadn't spoken. "But you should keep this one."

"I don't want it." North's voice sounded too much like a rasp.

"I can't keep it." He gazed down at the photograph. "There's no reason for me to have this. I'm not in Korea, remember? We haven't even met."

North didn't respond. He didn't want the reminder. He would already remember.

"Please," China said softly. "I'd rather not throw it out, or give it to someone it means nothing to."

Reluctantly, North took the photo from him, wordlessly going to his pack. He placed it carefully with SH's sketch of Seoul. Two pictures he would rather not look at.

China looked pleased. "Thank you. And thank you for the persimmon. It was a very nice gift."

North grimaced.

Sounding suddenly bright again, China said, "Wait here a moment. I have something I want to show you."

He darted from the room before North could say anything, leaving him blinking at empty air.

"This is *my* room," he muttered.

He glared at the door. He should lock it before the other country came back.

But just as he went to do that, China was slipping back inside, two objects in his hands. After a moment, North identified them as the handheld radios he'd looted from the Yanks after Hoengsong.

That battle had gone so well. If they'd just had accurate intelligence on Chipyong-ri-

"Look." China tapped the bulky, military green transceivers together.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?"

Actually, on a second glance, they did look... off. The backs had been removed, and a confusing mess of wires sprouted from them. The backpack-mounted radio was in the same state, North could see as China slung it off his back and set it delicately on the ground. The batteries had been removed, along with several panels, and it looked like it had been gutted. China set a bag down with it, revealing that it was full of assorted wires, switches, antenna, and the batteries from the radio.

He blinked expectantly at North.

North looked at the mess, then back at him, deadpanning, "You're collecting scrap."

China shook his head vigorously. "These are BC-611-F transceivers," he explained, tapping the handheld radios together again. "And this is a SCR-300 unit. Or was." He gestured at the gutted equipment.

North knew what they were. Just because their army didn't have the capability to mass-produce handheld radios didn't mean he didn't keep up to date on them.

"And?"

"And these are awful," China said cheerily. "Their casing is leaky, they're barely useful for communicating between platoons, let alone with battalion or division headquarters, the battery life is shorter than your temper, and they only have one frequency. But what if they *weren't* awful?

China paused, clearly waiting for a response. North slow-blinked.

Undeterred, his ally continued, "Imagine if we had handheld radios with longer battery life, the transceiver power of long-range radios, and shorter antennas. This one-" China bent, whipping out an antenna that was at least one hundred centimetres long. "Is *much* too ungainly. Think about it- you locate an enemy sniper unit, and take out your radio to inform your comrades in the other platoon,

but it's already too late. They've seen your enormous antenna waving over the treeline, and you're dead."

"Doesn't the SCR-300 fix those issues?" North asked.

It had longer range, more channels, and a much shorter antenna.

"Yes," China said with a tinge of impatience. "But it's backpack-mounted." He nudged the unit. "There's no hiding this. If you have an SCR-300, then everyone *knows* you have a radio."

"A visible radio is useful," North pointed out. "The infantry knows who's responsible for communications."

China pouted. "But it's not useful for fun things. And if we wanted to talk to each other, we'd have to lug those around on our backs. I don't know about you, but I don't want to do that."

"I don't want to talk to you at all."

Ignoring him, China hefted his transceivers again. "Imagine if we had these in Seoul. We wouldn't have had to worry about getting separated. We could've coordinated our attacks and been even more deadly. Imagine if each of your provinces had one of these. After every battle, you could easily do a head-count."

North narrowed his eye at his tone. "Are you... trying to sell me something?"

"I'm just showing you my pet project." China crouched, rummaging through the bag. After a second the Korean realized he was supposed to be looking at what was in there, even though the assortment of parts made no sense to him. "I've been playing with these whenever I get the chance. So far I've managed to expand the battery casing to fit a battery with more charge, seal some of the cracks in the plastic, and replace the antenna. I was having some trouble with changing the frequency, but I believe I've figured it out."

China looked up at him, holding one of the radios out. North took it.

"Switch it on," China urged.

North examined the handheld, finding the switch, then pulled the antenna up, slightly wary of being electrocuted by the sheer amount of exposed wiring.

"Hello," China said into his device, and the words echoed from the one in North's hand.

The other country's eyes lit up, and he beamed, wider than North had seen before, and he realized his teeth weren't perfectly white. There were small yellow spots on his canines.

"It worked," he crowed, snatching the transceiver back from North. Turning it over in his hands, he babbled, "I was worried it wouldn't after everything I did to it. This was the test run to make sure my modifications didn't break them. Obviously I need to find a way to enlarge the shell itself to fit all the wires back inside with the battery without sacrificing portability, and I still need to find a way to expand the range. But I got my hands on some long-range tech from the Yankees, and it proved useful for the antenna. I'm sure I can work something out with it." He smiled, tapping the handheld radios together again, triumphantly this time. "And then we can always be in contact."

Always being in contact with China was something like North's idea of the worst torture imaginable. And he had been tortured for real several times.

But he was focused on something else, as something he had been suspicious of since August resurfaced.

"Is that what you sent Liaoxi with North Pyongan to get?" North demanded. He could remember his province telling him about the gutted communications building, and Liaoxi's determination to complete the mission. "You risked your province for *signals technology?"*

"And you risked yours to teach him a life lesson," China said flippantly. "Let's agree not to judge each other."

North couldn't agree to that if he wanted to. But he kept his mouth shut. He hadn't seen China excited like this before. It was... unnerving.

No. He'd seen him this excited once. When they were on Bukhan Mountain. His eyes had been lit up in the same way as his words rushed out of him, talking about wanting to create. He had said something about inventing, too.

"You actually know what you're doing when it comes to technology?" North asked, making sure he sounded more disbelieving than impressed.

China nodded enthusiastically, packing his things away in the bag again. "I haven't had any formal training, but I find most of it is common sense. This part goes here, that part goes there. You just need to get it to do what you want. And I'm *very* good at that."

North... was realizing that he didn't actually know much about China. Well, no. He knew *too* much. But he was realizing that while he knew what he looked like when saying goodbye to his people, and how deeply he felt for them, he didn't know whether he had any hobbies, aside from his obsession with art. And that he liked persimmons and peaches.

He didn't *want* to know. It was just an observation. And a curse that while China knew... uncomfortable details about him, too, he also knew too many mundane things from all of his questioning when he first arrived.

'You'd be surprised what you can learn about people when they're not thinking about their responses.'

"Tch." North swivelled his head abruptly, alarmed. "What are you doing?"

China had folded his long legs under himself, taking a seat against the not-so-far wall next to his bag and radio.

He raised his eyebrows. "Sitting?

"Why?"

"I thought we could talk more," the other country said breezily. "You're usually not at the bunker so early, so I doubt you're going to sleep yet. And we haven't had many chances to just sit and talk, have we? Usually we're fighting for our lives. Or I'm being yelled at."

"By who?" North asked blankly.

"Hmmm. I wonder." China smiled.

The Korean sighed. "If I don't let you stay longer, are you going to sit outside my door and annoy me?"

"Oh no," the other Countryhuman assured him. "I won't say a word. I've recently become fixated on that big lock of yours." He gestured to the steel mechanism. "I'll just stand outside quietly and attempt to find a way to open it."

The image genuinely raised the hair on North's arms.

"Fine," he said, crossing them over his chest, refusing to sit. "Talk."

China leaned back on his palms. "You never told me what your plans for the future are."

"Why do you want to know?"

"I told you my plans," he reminded him. "And I'm interested. You managed to do a lot with your country in five short years. If I want to follow your success, I should take the opportunity to learn from you."

North's people *had* managed to do a lot. And the idea of China having to say that something in his country had been adapted from a Korean idea, the same way North could (and did not) say about Soviet methods pleased him.

"I'm sure you have a lot of interesting ideas for the future," China added, looking up at the Korean.

"I am... thinking about switching to a cooperative farming system," he admitted.

China smiled. "Tell me about it."

North did. Then he told him about carrying on the anti-feudal, democratic revolution until the eventual Socialist Revolution. And about his plans for post-war reconstruction. And his interpretation of some of Marx's writings.

"It's obvious when he said 'religion is opium for the masses,' he meant that it's addictive and deteriorating," China insisted.

"Did you even read the rest of what he said?" North retorted. "'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed.' He meant it's a distraction from their material conditions."

"Then I don't think that he knew the evils of opium." There was an edge to China's voice, and North recalled his country's history with the drug. "And are you telling me you're a Taoist after all?"

"No," North heatedly rejected once again, leaning forward over his crossed legs. "I think religion is useless. Once the people all live good lives and believe in themselves and those who work for them, it will wither away. They won't need to distract themselves anymore. Which is what Marx *meant."*

China scrunched his face playfully. "Then I hope they hurry up. Maybe I should start mass-producing books about self-worth."

North snorted. "If you do, give one to North Pyongan."

The Korean country had been carefully monitoring what he said, not wanting to give China too much of an insight into the inner workings of his country, since he was sure that was why he was being pressed on his plans. But he'd actually been doing less talking than expected. The other Countryhuman had frequently chimed in when told of projects North had planned out, giving explanations of similar things he intended to do, or explaining how his ideas differed, leading them off into tangential debates that didn't really offer insight into anything other than their personal opinions.

Occasionally China would derail topics completely to ramble on about something, usually industrialization. His eyes lit up again

when he did, abruptly sitting up as if stricken with inspiration. He lost all traces of his languid arrogance when this happened, his tongue moving almost too fast to be understood, leaving North to have to focus intently to absorb everything.

The other country was lying on his back now, looking at him. North had found himself lying down at some point, too, nowhere near his bedroll. The floor was hard, but he was too focused on explaining how he planned to cover all of Korea with fruit trees to care.

"Trees are one of a country's most precious resources. They provide shade, timber, fruit, morale..." North felt like his words were starting to wander, but China was nodding intently.

"I plan to replace my deserts with forests," he said. "Sand doesn't do much for the eye."

"How-?" North cut himself off, sitting up as the heavy steel door opened. Ssi-bal, he hadn't locked it since the person he wanted to lock out was inside. "South Hamgyong."

"I was waiting for you to come back," she said, yawning. "But you've been here the entire time, haven't you? Are you... sleeping here tonight?"

Her eyes strayed to China, clearly not just wondering if her Countryhuman was going to return to the city.

"I intended to," China said, leaning on an elbow.

North hesitated, glancing at him, then away. "...Yes."

SH nodded blearily and hesitantly, thankfully not asking about presents. "I'll get you some pillows."

"We don't have pillows." He had been rejecting the provinces' requests for them. They couldn't waste supplies on something frivolous.

"We do now." SH tipped her head to China. "Our comrade brought some."

"A birthday gift from home," he demurred. "I decided to be generous with it."

"I don't need one," North said.

His province sighed. "Ugh. Men."

"Don't lump me in with him," China protested. "I'll take as many as possible. Silk, preferably."

"You get one. Cotton."

After she left, North refused to look at China. He shouldn't have said he was sleeping in here.

The other man didn't mention it, unbuttoning his jacket and removing his many belts as he got ready for sleep. North stayed fully dressed, not even removing his eyepatch. He actually adjusted his buckles, tightening them.

When SH returned, she was carrying China's bedroll, alongside actual pillows and blankets that were evidently also part of his birthday gift. "There, now you'll finally be comfortable. Korea, you know the Premier said we shouldn't put ourselves through hardship for no reason-"

"Get out of here," he growled.

SH paused for a moment, squinting at China in what was almost a glare.

He smiled. "Goodnight."

"Hm." She turned and left with a, "Goodnight, Korea."

"She's amusing," China said as he spread out his bedroll, and North reluctantly arranged his new pillow and blanket on his.

"Stay away from her."

"I don't think she would have me, anyhow. She believes I'm courting someone else."

"I doubt anyone would have you." North didn't care who he was courting, so long as it wasn't one of his provinces. Or people.

"You wound me." China spread himself out on his bed, draping the thin olive blanket over himself. "I'll have you know that I've turned down at least ten marriage proposals in my life."

North tugged his own roll away, hesitated, then moved it even farther before laying down. Even pressed into the wall as far as he could go, it was still too close. The room really wasn't that big.

He hesitated, fingers on the string that tied his eyepatch. Kangwon said he shouldn't sleep with it on, since it could chafe, and breathing was good for it. But still...

He untied it, half-turning his face as the cool air of the bunker wafted across the exposed socket. He glanced over at China, unable to help looking somewhat defiant.

The other country didn't pretend he wasn't interested. His eyes bored into North's missing one, making the scar itch as they flicked over it.

But he also didn't gape. Curiosity sated, he lay back down.

North eyed him, wary, but he'd already started talking again. A little bit of tension went out of him.

He listened as the other Countryhuman launched into an explanation of his imagined dedesertification that somehow morphed into how many textiles he intended to create for his people.

Talking with China was... nice, he was forced to admit. It was engaging to discuss theory and praxis with him. With his provinces there was always the element of them looking to him for guidance. Even Hwang- who had read every work on Socialist theory he could get his hands on, and thoroughly studied the material conditions of their own country- depended on him to know how to implement it. The time for debates was at the mass meetings with their people, which lacked the... North didn't like the word 'intimate.' Maybe

'private.' Yes- mass meetings lacked the private quality of conversations like this. Talking with China was less like talking to his provinces and more like talking to-

He caught his lips curling up at a quip China made about the value of linen, and quickly forced them flat, flipping over on his bedroll and tugging the blanket over himself. "I'm going to sleep."

China sighed loudly. "Pulling away again?"

"Trying to sleep," North muttered. He didn't like the way the other country had said that. Like he was some kind of... wild animal that he was trying to pet. "I have a war to fight."

"We have a war to fight," China corrected. "I'm with you to the end. And cutting your eye out would only blind us both."

Of course he remembered that.

"I'm a revolutionary, Chaoxian." There was a rustle of fabric as China readjusted himself into a position North couldn't see. "I'm well used to those who would infiltrate our movements and stab us in the back. I understand your tendency to mistrust, but if we trusted none of our comrades, neither of us would have made it through our revolutions."

That was almost exactly what his Premier had said to him.

North sat up aggressively. China was sitting, too, hands in his lap. He had switched on his flashlight to conserve the lamp, and it painted his face in black shadows and bright light that glinted off the gold stars on his face.

"So you can promise that you'll never betray me?" the Korean challenged. "That I'll never end up with your knife in my back?" Or in his face.

He didn't like how vulnerable the words sounded, even as agitated as they were. They revealed too much. He tied his eye patch back on.

"No." China smiled as he said it. "I can't do that."

North snorted in disgust, roughly standing, intent on stomping out of the room without a word. It had been stupid to think he could let China sleep in here. He could barely rest around those he trusted, let alone someone he couldn't.

China was unbothered by his display. "We're both Communists. Our friendship isn't based off of profit like that of capitalists, where I'll promise to support you so long as you keep lining my pockets. If you ever strayed from your path, you would become my enemy. And I'd expect the same from you."

North stopped in place, gritting his teeth.

"But you're not the type to be dissuaded easily, and- believe it or not- neither am I."

North believed it. From the conversations they had shared, he could tell that China believed in what he was saying when he talked about uplifting his country. And he wouldn't have been able to unite his people and free them if that belief wasn't firm.

He compared the image of his brother that night in the woods- eyes steady as they stared into his, relaxed as he told him he had no idea what his government was doing to their people- to that of China tonight and when they had talked on the mountain above Seoul. The Chinese country's eyes had been practically glowing as he spoke of becoming a red star in the East, fixated on someplace in the future.

"Yes," he reluctantly said to China in the here and now. "I got that impression."

China's face was unusually intense as he looked up at North. "Our friendship is based off of our mutual ideals. And so long as we both share those ideals, I'll support you, even at the risk of my life."

The Korean country reflexively wanted to reply again that talk was cheap, but didn't.

Because it wasn't just talk. China had stayed in Seoul to help not just North, but his people. He had dragged him from the city even

as bombs fell around them. He had stayed at Chorweon as the American army bore down on them, and even if that had been for his people, he had sent them here to help. He was *here,* fighting through mud and blood, instead of in his country, building towards the future he felt such enthusiasm for and it was clear he wanted so badly. On his National Day, instead of celebrating with his people, he was in a cramped bunker with someone that couldn't give him more than a persimmon.

And, conversely, his admittance that North couldn't expect him to never turn on him was oddly comforting. If he had stared him dead in the eye and assured him that he would never backstab him no matter what, that he would always be on North's side, then the Korean man wouldn't still be standing here. If he had promised that North could always trust him, he never would have been able to.

North fixed his eye on the tips of China's fingers, which were just poking out of his overlong sleeves. He couldn't see his fingerpads right now, but he knew they were flawed, patches burned smooth from where he had grabbed that burning wood to lift it off of Kyong-hyang in Seoul. Just like North's.

He sat back down, tugging the blanket over himself once more as he turned his back to the other Countryhuman. "Fine."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Fine," he repeated, closing his eye. He kept his eyepatch on.

"How nicely non-specific," China hummed. "But I assume that means you're not going to storm away." When North didn't respond, he added, "By the way, if I ever *do* feel like stabbing you, I'll make sure it's in the front. In the chest, maybe."

North huffed, then cleared his throat. "You could try."

"Are you smiling?" China's own smile was clear in his voice.

"No," the Korean denied.

"You are," his comrade crooned in delight. "I can hear it."

"I going to stab *you* tonight if you don't go to sleep," North growled, still not looking in his direction.

China laughed softly, and with a click, shut off the flashlight, plunging them into darkness.

[image]

Another chapter I have been waiting ages to write. Yippee! It will be known that while I always try to be as accurate and realistic as possible when it comes to technology used at the time, China's handheld radios do not apply. It's China. If he wants them to work a certain way, they will.

Refusal To Submit

1926

North had never seen a naked woman before. And as he stared down at the corpse, he got the sense that he still hadn't.

She was sprawled out in the village square, her long brown hair torn from its bun and splayed across the dirt like ragged wings. The bloody tatters of her choson-out littered the ground around her. She had been cut out of her clothes like North had once been, but far more messily. The evidence of the knife slashes littered her brown skin.

Her spine was twisted, and her legs bent. Blood soaked the ground around her almost black, most of it coming from her stomach. It gaped open, the skin sagging in, like something had been torn from it, beyond the streamers of pink intestines that festooned her. Blood smeared her thighs as well, had gushed from a place North was avoiding looking at.

But he couldn't make himself look away entirely. His eyes kept being drawn against his will back to her chest, and the character that was carved there.

'従.' He knew which reading it was supposed to have.

'OBEY.'

The kanji had been cut between her breasts while she was still alive. Her hands, curled into half-claws, bore the cuts from trying to grasp the blade, trying to stop it from carving her open, slicing her palms to ribbons in the process. North's fingers curled in over the pale blue scars that crossed his own palms.

Japan hadn't been the one to do this. If he had, the kanji wouldn't be so shaky, the strokes taking sudden angles where the blade had slipped across her breasts, exposing the pale yellow insides. His

hand would have been steady, mechanical, no matter how much she struggled to stop him.

The woman's mouth was open in a rictus scream, her dark, glazed eyes still wide even days after her death. Somehow the carrion birds perched on the burnt houses around the square hadn't taken them yet, even when they had clearly pecked at her innards. North glanced up at them, then hesitantly crouched, though he didn't want to be any closer to her.

He had touched old corpses before. While they never stuck around after they killed another Jap soldier or traitor, life in Korea was hard. At the beginning of the year, they had encountered a family of five that had frozen to death in a countryside ditch. They had likely been evicted, and were travelling to find a new home. They had curled up in a ditch for warmth and never woken up. The youngest would have only came up to his knee. North had worked with the others to move them somewhere more noticeable, not wanting to bury them in case they had family that should know what happened. The bodies had been heavy and hard, like blocks of ice instead of people.

There was also the guard that had tried to take his brother. He had sat in their shack for days before retrieval, the men outside wanting to punish North even more for killing their partner. South had been having nightmares about his eyes watching them, so North had to roll him into the corner. His limbs wouldn't bend, and he had left a human-shaped stain on the wooden floor.

And Kang Kyung-nam. North's 'something worse' had lasted for hours, enough time for the man's blood to start to jell, and his muscles to stiffen. His body could remember what it felt like to be smashed into his, like his inflexible limbs were grabbing at him.

And all those people at the vigil. Those wrapped in white cloths, those whose names he had learned, those he had carried for wives or mothers that couldn't. He had been weaker and smaller than them, but he knew it was his responsibility to muster all his strength to lift the beloved dead into his thin arms. It was the least he owed them.

Still, despite the familiarity, he found himself reluctant to touch the woman before him.

Her skin was cold, the autumn sunshine refusing to arm it. It barely felt like flesh. It had taken on a grey tone as it decayed, and the eyelids that North placed his fingers on were almost purple, webbed with dark, broken veins.

They wouldn't shut. She was too stiff, and they had started to sink down into her eye sockets.

She was just a corpse. It didn't matter. But still, when everything else was left exposed...

North grit his teeth, placing one hand carefully on her shoulder to hold her steady, and pinching one of her eyelids between his fingers. With a sticky peeling sound, he pulled it down until it touched her bruised lower lid, pressing it into place for half a minute, trying not to think about how her eyeball shifted under his touch. When he was done, he repeated the process with the other one.

It didn't work. As he watched, they slowly peeled back, exposing the dead glint of her eyes again.

All of a sudden the feeling of clammy skin under his fingers was too much. He scrambled back from the woman, wiping his hands compulsively on his cloak before shame flooded him.

She was his. He shouldn't feel unclean from touching her.

North inched forward, making himself slide his fingers between her stiff ones, pressing his scarred palm to her bloody one.

She had been murdered because of him, after all.

His eye went back to her chest, and the word gouged into it.

'OBEY.'

They hadn't been to this village. They had only just entered the region. The Kempeitei must have tracked them, not well enough to

find them, but well enough for Japan to order this message to be left.

Maybe that was why he had trouble touching her, beyond her nudity. Because he was responsible for this.

North shook his head, squeezing her hand tighter.

He was responsible for the others, too. He should have been able to stop his brother from executing Kang Kyung-nam. He should have been there to save everyone at the vigil. He *was* responsible.

But Japan was to blame. It had been him that had forced his brother to pull the trigger, it had been him that had Kang Kyung-nam arrested in the first place for the crime of trying to feed his family, and it had been him that had ordered this village destroyed. He may not have carved the words with his own hand like he had in South Jeolla, but *he* was to blame.

North bared his teeth, gripping the woman's hand so tight her bones creaked, making himself *feel* her. He should have been here. It was the least he could do.

"Korea?" SH's voice echoed through the empty streets of the village, and North jerked up, quickly letting go of the hand.

Ssi-bal, she didn't need to see this.

He glanced around for something to cover the dead woman and, finding nothing, tore off his own cloak, spreading the worn green fabric over the body just as SH, Sang, and North Chungcheong came around the corner of the village elder's house, their guns drawn and their faces cautious.

They looked relieved when they saw him standing there.

"Korea!" Sang cried. "Where were you?"

SH clicked her tongue. "'When you're scouting, you need to be swift and through, and return as soon as possible.'"

"The village is empty," North clipped, though he wouldn't have

accepted the excuse from them. "The Kempeitei are gone. But we still need to hurry. Round up the others, gather the provisions that you can, and let's move."

He strode away from the body, wanting to put distance between her and his female provinces.

"Where's your cloak?" North Chungcheong asked as he approached.

"I'll get a new one."

SH's eyes drifted over his shoulder to the puddle of military green fabric. The light in them dimmed.

"We saw bodies on the way in," she said quietly.

North had seen them, too. None of them had been like this.

"We keep moving," North said, then halted.

"Korea?"

His legs started moving again. "The men that did this should still be searching the area for us. We are going to find them first."

"Alright," North Chungcheong crowed as SH said with quiet viciousness, *"Good."*

"Are you sure that's safe?" Sang fretted, her eyes trailing around the half-burnt village. "What if they do this to another place as revenge? What if they start doing it more often?"

He knew she was thinking of that little village in South Jeolla last year.

"They will do it regardless," North said, heading down the main road. "We can at least make sure they pay for it."

He was relieved to see there was no guilt on South Hamgyong or North Chungcheong's faces, and only the ghost of it on South Gyeongsang's. They had listened to him last time.

Night-classes, killing police and kempei, or even just travelling around, influencing no one, harming no one. All were disobedience in Japan's eyes. All needed to be punished. And if they didn't fight back, if they didn't give Japan a human cost to the Occupation, then he would continue to punish their people for whatever he felt like.

That woman had fought. She hadn't clutched uselessly at the ground as she was tortured. She had grabbed at the blade, she had writhed and twisted and scratched with no thought as to whether it would make her pain worse. She had fought because she had to in order to be *free.* Not all of the blood under her nails and in her teeth had been hers. Her eyes hadn't been wide solely in terror and pain, but in fury and defiance as Japan's command to her country was carved into her chest.

'従. Follow, comply, OBEY.'

Korea would be doing none of that.

'Never again.'

—

1951

Chagang followed Korea through the empty streets of Pyongyang. Crimson and navy swirled around him in frustration, though his voice as he spoke with Pak Sun-do was even.

"Van Fleet said in his press release that he refuses to let his soldiers 'stagnate.' Between that and his earlier comments about hurting us more before the winter is over, we can expect combat to continue into winter."

Olive worry joined the brighter colours, drab and anxious. For all three years Chagang had been alive, winter had always done that to Korea. Free of the louder, sharper worries of the tactical retreat last year, it was more suffocating now.

"Can I ask how the talks are going?" Pak Sun-do had to hurry through the rubble to keep pace with his Countryhuman, though his legs were longer.

"The same way they have been," Korea answered.

They had asked for them to resume on the 20th last month. America and South had said nothing. Rhee had denied it unless the Chinese left Korea. Ridgway had taken his time replying. When he did, it was only to propose talks between their liaisons. They were now involved in talks about restarting the talks.

They had just turned down moving the neutral zone from Kaesong again. Chagang knew part of Korea's frustration came from the fact that they were going to give in soon. The location was too petty of a sticking factor. It was causing more delays than just moving would.

"They're going to postpone their resumption until at least the end of this month, when the snows come to the hills," Korea said, stepping over a chunk of rubble. "Our soldiers at the front are going to need supplies more urgently than ever. I need the Party to rouse as many civilians as possible to keep the eastern highway open. Bring in the other parties, too."

"The other parties?" Pak Sun-do asked, pausing in writing Korea's words down.

"The Chairman is going to call for greater cooperation with the friendly parties next month at the Plenary Meeting," Korea explained. "Get a head start on it. Include the People's Republican Party and the Toiling People's Party. We're all going to need to rally more firmly around the Worker's Party."

His snap of olive said what his words didn't.

'If we want to survive the winter.'

"Understood, Comrade Korea." Pak Sun-do jotted his words down in a small notebook.

"We might get a ceasefire before the winter is over," Korea said. "Van Fleet's statement wasn't popular, even in America."

Perhaps especially in America. Around ten thousand American soldiers' lives had been claimed since the peace talks started. Most

after their 'limited offensive' had began. And while it was far less than the KPA and PVA's casualties, Americans weren't used to loss. They thought killing Koreans should be easy. And they didn't like learning they had been lied to about their army not being involved. Or that Van Fleet had essentially said Korea was a training ground.

Chagang also didn't like that. Soldiers shouldn't die in training. And he didn't like that his country was a combat school for American soldiers to train in so that the survivors could eventually be sent to destroy more countries.

But he knew no matter how unpopular Van Fleet and Ridgway's determination to capture just one more hill was, it wouldn't end the war. They hadn't cared that Koreans wanted Socialism. They hadn't cared that they wanted Reunification. They didn't care that they didn't want to be considered target practice. South did not control the southern army, and American civilians did not control theirs.

Korea knew it, too. No golden glow of hope had surrounded his words. Only slate mixed with azure and indigo in stony resolution.

"But even if we do reach an armistice, we need to keep resources flowing," he continued as they passed onto Stalin Street, heading for the warehouse district and its underground buildings. "We will need to stabilize people's living situations as quickly as possible."

Chagang tilted his head, hearing a distant drone. "Plane," he reported.

Pak Sun-do glanced anxiously at the sky, but Korea only nodded, his boots silent on one of the few clear streets as he continued.

"Once the fighting ends, there are many who will start to blame us for the condition of the country, and not fixing it quickly enough. We need to make sure they're in the minority. I want the Party to be at the forefront of the rehabilitative efforts. You can involve the other friendly parties, but make sure the public knows it is a Worker's Party initiative."

Chagang could hear the drone coming closer. Only a single plane. They didn't have to worry about bombs then. It was only

surveillance.

"Do you think the fighting *will* end?" Pak Sun-do asked quietly. "Or will the Yankees just keep stretching it out?"

"You heard my Foundation Day broadcast," Korea said, and the man nodded. "It doesn't matter how long they want to drag this war out for. We can fight it for even longer."

Chagang lifted his head as the plane came into view, arcing around the east of Pyongyang, across the Taedong. It was bulky and silver, with four engines and propellers. Not a reconnaissance craft. A B-29 Superfortress heavy bomber. Not flying in a wing. Alone.

Something in him stilled.

"The Americans are getting impatient," Korea was saying. "The *world* is getting impatient. The longer this war lasts, the worse America looks. He wants it over. We're going to make sure-"

"Korea."

Something in Chagang's voice made his Countryhuman look back, irritation and olive flaring.

"What?" He followed his gaze as the plane curled in, heading for the nearby city center.

Pak Sun-do looked, too. His tan face paled, lime terror engulfing him.

Superfortresses did not fly alone. They were too valuable to travel without defense. And most of them were not so silver.

One variant was. The Silverplate. The kind that had flown alone over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The kind that had been modified to carry the nuclear bomb.

Chagang felt curiously numb as the words left his lips. "They're going to drop the atom bomb on us."

Korea barged past him, standing in the center of the street, staring

up at that single plane as it drew near.

And for a moment, all colour drained from him. The maroon, the grey, the scarlet and navy, the dark blue, the olive. It all vanished. Nothing was left.

He had been right. America wanted the war over.

And it was over.

Lime and sick yellow plumed over their capital as those still in it caught sight of the bomber. As they understood what it meant. Anti-aircraft gunfire rattled from the heights. But the B-29 was too high. It swept in, black despair blooming in the shadow of its wings.

The air fields had been struck again. Their own planes couldn't mobilize in time. There was nothing they could do.

As the whine of the plane grew louder, grew deafening, even from so high up, Korea's colours returned.

He stepped forward, and inky black and the blood red of raw fury flooded from him, lashing up at the sky as he screamed in defiance. The bomber was ri above them, but Chagang could see the hate and rage crash into it, trying desperately to hold it back from its mission. For a moment, he hoped they could defy reality to tear it from the sky.

But the emotions weren't tangible, and the B-29 tore through, propellers shredding them into a most of blood and ash. There was nothing they could do to stop it.

Korea turned, panting, his eye locking on his province and Pak Sun-do.

There was one thing Chagang could do. Even if it wouldn't stop the plane.

He charged, slamming into Korea, who tried to flinch back.

"What are you doing?!" he barked as Chagang muscled him away, dragging him down the street, away from the center of the city. "Let

me go! I need-"

"There is nothing we can do."

For the briefest second, Korea went slack in his arms, colours retreating again, replaced by the slate of resignation.

But then the red flared back, along with the yellow-lime-scarlet of panicked desperation, hammering directly into Chagang's skull. He reeled back, and his Countryhuman freed himself, not running towards the target zone, but away. He was the one gripping Chagang this time, and he grabbed the frozen Pak Sun-do by the arm, too, hauling the men after him, trying to get as far as possible before the bomb went off, trailing red and ink and *fear*.

As the drone of the plane reached its apex and the bomber reached its nadir high above, Korea dove into a side street, slamming them both into the hard ground, pinning them with his body. Chagang tried to struggle, tried to throw him off. *He* should be the one covering *him,* he should be the one protecting his country from the pain that was coming.

But Korea's usual strength was only bolstered by panic, and he latched on tightly to his province, forcing his head into his chest as he buried his face in his shoulder. Knowing there was no escaping, Chagang wrapped his arms around his Countryhuman from below, trying to shield him any way he could. He could hear Korea's teeth grate as he squeezed his eyes shut and dug his nails into his shoulder as the high-pitched whistle cut through the air, and they all braced themselves for nuclear fire to wash over them and their capital.

'BOOM.'

The explosion was deafening. It roared over Pyongyang like something alive, the monster that had destroyed Hungnam returning for another city as the bomb detonated in mid-air and the shockwave tore through streets and alleys. Shrapnel could be heard raining down blocks away, along with the creak and groan of shells of buildings giving way, and screams echoing from unseen throats.

And then silence.

There was no wave of fire. No sudden agonizing pain as Pyongyang was wiped off the map by a city-killer. And as Chagang opened his eyes, he found that while the blue sky was choked with black smoke and the smell of chemicals, there was no immense heat that could melt bones and leave them shadows of ash on the ground. There had been no great double flash of light.

He inhaled the burning acrid smoke and found it smelled familiar. He couldn't find his voice at first, and when he did, it was muffled by the ringing in his skull.

"A TNT bomb. It was a TNT bomb."

Korea's hold on Chagang and Pak Sun-do tightened enough to hurt. Then he suddenly released them, sliding off and back. Chagang sat up. His insides felt like they had all been liquefied by an atom bomb after all. The human man looked how he felt, his arms trembling as he forced himself up onto his knees, fear staining his handprints as he shook violently.

Korea looked stunned, his eye wide as he stared at Chagang, panting, nauseous yellow and lime green still swirling around him, dominating the inky black and red for a moment with no relief to cut it.

And Chagang didn't need his ability to tell that his Countryhuman, usually so skilled at masking that emotion in himself, was terrified.

Pak Sun-do spoke first, his voice jittering and leaking fear. "C-Comrade Korea. My wife. She's at... Permission to-"

"Go," Korea permitted, quickly masking his vulnerability. From the man, not Chagang.

Pak Sun-do didn't waste a second, scrambling to his shaking legs and staggering off half-dazed.

Korea stood, trying to regain his composure. But Chagang could see he was quivering, his heart beating so hard his entire body was shaking. Like his. And the yellow-lime refused to be smothered.

"It was a test run," Chagang realized, climbing to his feet. His own legs felt weak.

Korea gave him a long, distant look. Then he shook himself. "We need to go assess the blast zone." His voice was raw from screaming. "That bomb was larger than usual. Our people need to see us on the scene."

He went to stride away, but Chagang caught his wrist.

"Korea. You shouldn't have done that."

"Done what?" he asked, his colours saying that he knew.

"You shouldn't have protected me," Chagang told him. "I'm the one that should protect you."

"You're my province," Korea refuted.

The province nodded soberly. "Yes. Provinces are expendable. You are not."

He felt no despair at the words. It was what they were for. He didn't need his cousin's memories of the Occupation to know that if it came down to a province or Korea, the Countryhuman would have to choose himself. And they would have to choose him, too.

The idea had always been reassuring to Chagang. When so many in the world struggled to find a purpose, he had been formed with one. And he had become strong enough to fulfill it.

Korea could stand to lose a Provincehuman. They could not stand to lose their country.

Anger flared from his Countryhuman, piercing through the fear. But the yellow grew thicker, filled with the grey smoke of unease, like when Chagang had made his promise in Kanggye.

"You-"

His province interrupted him. "You need to choose your life over ours."

He could see Korea's unflinching, cold expression as he had told them that in North Pyongan's memories. He had always wondered what colours he would have shown then.

Right now it was more anger. More fear. It was stained with grey-yellow, ochre, and chartreuse.

And then slate grey.

"Move out," he ordered, thinking he was avoiding giving him an answer.

But Chagang had already received it. And as ashamed as he knew it made Korea feel, it comforted him.

America still had the real atom bomb in his arsenal after all.

—

North walked swiftly through the halls of Jonsung complex, brushing past the comrades that tried to call out to him. He had held it together through the aftermath of the TNT bomb, rescuing survivors and assessing damage. But he couldn't take it anymore.

He burst into he and the General's empty office, slamming and locking the door, sinking down against it.

He couldn't stop remembering that one dreadful moment as he stared up at the silver B-29 and realized Chagang was right. That they were all going to die, and that there was nothing he could do.

Ssi-bal, that sick helplessness was rising in him once more, filling his mouth, and for a moment he was scrabbling on the floor again, palms slick with blood as he tried uselessly to wrest the blade from his chest and the boot from his stomach.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to hit something, to turn his desk into kindling.

North leaped to his feet, storming towards it, then slammed his palms down on the surface, baring his teeth as he tucked his chin into his chest.

No. It was immature, like screaming at the plane had been. It accomplished nothing, *changed* nothing.

There had been nothing he could do.

A test run, Chagang had said. But North knew that wasn't true. The Yanks knew how to deliver death, they had practiced on their own deserts, on Pacific islands whose inhabitants had been rounded up and shipped away like livestock, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It had been a threat.

And as the month went on there were more. Not often, once or twice a week. One of the silver Superfortresses would split from the others and come in high and alone. And sometimes their planes would chase it away, but sometimes they couldn't. And on those occasions, it would open the doors of its bomb bay and the bomb would come falling out, plummeting towards Pyongyang and detonating above the city with a sound like the world ending. And every single time, up until the last second, North didn't know whether it was.

They accepted moving locations. The talks were moved to Panmunjom, a village some few ri east of Kaesong, but not yet restarted. Ridgway and Van Fleet wanted to buy time for their army to claim the heights they had been fighting for since the previous month.

They redoubled their efforts the day after the mock-nuke, blanketing the ridge in fire from their aircrafts, in artillery and rockets and machine gun fire. In bunker-busting bombs that collapsed tunnels and air raid shelters. In napalm that burned in the valleys and on North, Kangwon, and Gangwon's skin. The 6th and 12th Divisions, divisions that North and his General had visited just over a week earlier, were down to less than a thousand men per regiment before the real assault even began.

The enemy managed to send their tanks into the maze of mountain passes, and neither the tattered Fifth Corps or the PVA replacements could stop them. They crawled forward, and even though the 13th Division saw no surrenders, almost every single soldier fighting

until the very last, only retreating when there was no other choice, they were eventually overwhelmed, and the ridge fell.

They didn't crumble. They didn't lose morale and fall on their swords. They would regird, reorganize, and counterattack. They would pry any height they could out of the enemy's bloody fingers. Whether it took until winter or longer, they and the Chinese were still prepared to fight.

And it meant nothing because at any moment America could decide this was taking too long, and one of those hundreds of planes, one of those thousands of tons of bombs, would be an atom bomb. And everything they had fought for, everything they had won, would be gone.

They weren't test runs. They were promises. Where Japan had once carved his threats into North's villages and people, now America delivered them from above. The TNT practice runs carried the exact same message as that kanji carved between that woman's breasts long ago- if North didn't give America what he wanted in the talks, if he kept fighting, then his people would die screaming by the thousands.

And there was *nothing* he could do to stop it.

'Follow, comply, OBEY.'

But he would not. North hadn't left that prison shack by following. The Korean people hadn't won their freedom by complying. They hadn't stood against their enemy for this long by obeying.

They had done it all by *fighting.*

It didn't matter how many 'test runs' America sent. It didn't matter if he sent the real thing. He couldn't nuke all of Korea. And even if he did, so long as some people survived in their bunkers, they would carry on the fight. They would not let themselves be treated like Japan had treated them ever again.

North would not bow. When the talks began again, he would not roll over and give the Yankees the concessions they craved. And he

was not going to let Pak Hon-yong and his 'diplomacy' hold him back any longer.

Fighting with his comrades, visiting his people, remaining in Pyongyang politicking- they were all the same to America. So long as North refused to submit, they were disobedience. And he needed to be punished. He might as well take out a few more Yanks in return.

The next time his soldiers needed him at the front, he would go, talks be damned.

Nothing was *ever* going to stop Korea from fighting again.

—

Two weeks ago

South Chungcheong stared down at the *Chosun Ilbo,* her heart palpitating severely in her breast.

Unlike all other forms of communication, her jailors held no issue with providing her copies of the rags Rhee's stooges churned out. She need not have even asked. Usually they were skimmed, then torn to shreds to provide kindling for her ondol in preparation for the coming winter.

But her fingers had hesitated on this one, just over a week old, her eyes locked on the classifieds section. Paintings, masks, watches. Vases. Even in the midst of war, the peons were conducting commerce, selling artifacts looted from wealthy homes and old tombs unearthed by foreign destruction.

South Chungcheong tore her eyes from the ad, then tore it from the page before briskly folding the remaining newspaper in half. This she methodically ripped into long, thin strips with her sharp nails, shredding it until it resembled naught more than fine, pulpy hairs. She did not yet carry them to her ondol room. 'Twould require exposing herself to the eyes of her guards for them to unlock the door, and she was shaking far too much for that.

He had always been like this. What right did he have to ask

anything of her when he had not kept his promise? Did he not realize what sort of predicament he had put her in?

But of course he did. Those little signifiers in the language made certain he was fully aware. That only infuriated her more.

South Chungcheong paced around the kitchen in her prison cell of a manor.

He was audacious, irksome, dominating, and an idealist who slung around promises he had no way of knowing he could fulfill. He was the very epitome of a *male* and he always had been.

The province leaned over the sink, baring her teeth at the ceramic as she crumpled the ad in her hand.

And she was just as much a fool as all the others.

She pushed off the counter, marching to her parlour, selecting one of the dozens of embroidered cloths she had draped around the room. She snatched her jasu hoop from the suede chair and turned the wooden pegs, releasing the half-finished pattern of scarlet, ash, and snow koi flitting amongst fuchsia lotus flowers, replacing it with a finished piece.

She went to her window, hesitating with her fingers clenched in the gauzy fabric of the curtains.

The narrow gravel drive terminated at a wrought-iron gate she could not cross. Her eyes could spot one of her jailors loitering outside, the other no doubt planted before her door. Always she could hear them trading their unpleasant words, purporting what they would do to her if given allowance.

She held no fear of them. Not now that *she* had been given allowance. They were not who she was leery of.

America frequently walked the road beyond the gate, passing back and forth far too swiftly to have visited the market or done anything else of note. His covered gaze would strafe her windows like the fighter jets laying waste to the north.

South Chungcheong held her healed wrist in her hand, feeling the crack as the bones had snapped like tinder.

He did not deserve this from her.

The street was near empty as of present, populated solely by a few wives of the bourgeois in their Westernized clothes. Sleek blouses that dipped too low and tight skirts that rode too high. Just one part of the infections of the West that seeped into the countries they occupied, whether materially or spiritually. The infections that would be pumped into Korea if America and his puppet had their way.

She could still see that blush pink dress, those white Western furnishings, that gold-lined wallpaper, and four-poster bed. Those tiny bottles tucked into an expensive purse imported from across the sea. A microcosm of America in a country colonized by Japan, and a foolish Jap woman that wore it all so poorly, too weak-willed and wasted to take control of her life.

'Twould not be their women. 'Twould not be *her*.

'No matter what you do, how much you slave away, you will still be ***nothing*** *in their eyes.'*

She would not live that sort of life in her own country. Not again. Even if whatever this was was not truly necessary, even if it risked exposing her, she was *Korean.* She would not curb her actions in *her* homeland. She would not silence the click of her heels on the office floor to avoid luring in the wolves.

South Chungcheong let go of her wrist, and set her jasu hoop firmly on the windowsill, turning the pattern of red and gold mountain magnolias to face the autumn morning.

There. The first step was accomplished. Regardless of whether the message was received, she needs must create a chance for the second. And 'twould be far more dangerous than this, perhaps even serving no purpose, if the man no longer drew breath.

'If something terrible transpires, I will make sure it haunts you

forever,' she seethed internally, that cursed ad for an antique vase patterned with yellow flowers clutched tightly in lavender fist.

Her eyes scanned the street one last time, blood running cold as she caught sight of that familiar shadow sauntering down it.

South Chungcheong whisked the curtain closed.

The fake nuke runs are real, though I've increased their initial frequency as I feel America would. The US would send their planes in like they were doing a nuclear run, then drop regular TNT bombs. And they started on October 4th, after the talks to restart the talks had began. Can you imagine how terrifying that would be? Knowing that at any moment one of them could be real? They still do this. The US and South Korea fly planes with nuclear capability towards the border and practice invasions, only to veer away at the last second. And every single time the DPRK has no idea if this will be the real thing until that final second. But now instead of it being solely a show of force, it's a taunt. They want the DPRK on edge, they want them to be afraid that it could be the real thing. They want them to think it is and move to defend themselves. Because if they do, the US can call it an unprovoked act of war and bomb them again.

Anyway, I was thinking, and I came to the conclusion that North's dislike of nudity probably runs deeper than just a cultural thing. For his own body, I already knew he didn't like being naked because it makes him feel vulnerable. In the shack, he and South would almost never take their clothes off because the guards could look in or burst in at any time. So any time they did to change into their other set, it was done hastily and with a lot of anxiety. And North doesn't want anyone to see his scars or how skinny he is because then they would think he's weak (even if they wouldn't).
But then more than that, the only times he's seen other people naked have been bad. Because he's very much a 'I am not changing or bathing around other people' guy (reinforced by growing up with no privacy at all), he's never seen his fellow soldiers or provinces nude in the barracks or when they bathe. And he is not a sex-haver. So the only people he's seen naked

are either his own brother (and if he was looking then that means it was because South was beat up and needed his wounds cleaned) or corpses. Nudity does not have *any* positive connotations for him. But he is only subconsciously aware of this. I imagine modern day that this has faded a little with distance. But I think maybe when he sees Y/N naked for the first time, when he touches her he gets a flash of corpse flesh. Kindly think about that the next time you read that one chapter.

Signs of Change

Back on October 5th

On the last day of tank-hunting training, after the engineers had 'graduated' and redeployed to their regiments, South Pyongan jogged along the mountain path after a group of former tank crew heading to the vehicle that would return them to their own posts.

"Hey!" she called before she could come to her senses.

They turned, happy to see her again obviously.

"Comrade South Pyongan," one hailed. "Are you coming with us?"

"I might hitch a ride," she said, eyes picking out someone in the group. "But I have to talk to him for a minute first."

Oh Renjiro looked surprised. Which *wasn't* surprising since she'd been avoiding him ever since returning from that pretty boy country's National Day. She had to be strategic about it, y'know? Strike at the last second so she wouldn't have to see him again after.

"I'll make sure he gets to the truck in time," she promised, and the group carried on.

Once they were far enough ahead, she looked at the half-Jap, hands on her hips.

"You still want to know how they died?"

He blinked his slender eyes at her in surprise. "You would tell me?"

"No questions." South Pyongan brushed past him, setting off down the path at a casual pace so she wouldn't catch up to the others. "And we walk and talk. So yes or no- do you want to hear how they died?"

"Yes."

She told him. It was like peeling off one of her burn scabs and digging around in the squishy, wet, yellow substance underneath, but she did. And her voice didn't even break once.

But she didn't know how to finish. When she got to the part after Kim Se-woon breathing his last air into Pak Dae-ho, she just sort of… stopped. There was really only one last thing to say. The thing that had stopped her from telling her brother because he'd see through any words she used to what had really happened.

She'd been too weak to save them.

"But you got out okay?" Oh Renjiro asked when it was clear she wasn't going to keep talking.

He didn't sound accusing. He sounded… concerned, which just made her feel gross. At least if he'd said it was unfair she'd made it out and they hadn't, she would have an excuse to push him down the ridge.

"Yeah," she said flippantly. "North Pyongan got the tank hatch open from outside. I just got a concussion and a sick scar on my leg."

"That's good," the man said quietly.

South Pyongan sped up a little. General, she could just *hear* him thinking it.

'Why couldn't you get them out in time?'

She shook her head. She was *not* letting some… *guy* psychically guilt her when her psychic slurs hadn't worked on him.

The mountain pass opened up, the sunset light that flooded the gorge revealing a truck parked down below. The men ahead of them had already reached it, and were loading empty ammunition boxes alongside soldiers that emerged from supply caches hidden in the rocks.

Oh stopped, and South Pyongan reluctantly did, too.

"Trying to get out of work?" she asked, staying casual.

He looked at her seriously. "Thank you for telling me."

"Yeah," she said uncomfortably. "No problem. They were your crew, too. Or whatever. We should probably get down there."

She spun on a heel, but stopped when he said, "I know that shit can't have been easy for you."

A bunch of return quips to deny it ran through her head. But she realized it would be a little fucked up to say, 'Oh no, it was actually *really* easy.' If she said that about their people's deaths and Korea found out, whether she meant it or not, he'd be pissed.

She took too long thinking of something to say, which unfortunately gave Oh time to continue.

"It keeps me up at night thinking that I could've been able to help, that I should have *been* there. Even though I'm glad I wasn't…" His eyes slid away. "It must be worse for you. I'm not sure if you're allowed, as a Provincehuman and all, but if you ever need someone to talk to… I'm sure you can find out where I'm stationed."

She turned to face him again, baffled. "Why? You literally said you know I don't like you."

And why.

Oh shrugged. "It's not like you're the only one. And it's not like I don't get it. They ran those articles in the Korean People's Army magazine last week, about what you and the other provinces had to go through during the Occupation."

South Pyongan had had to send Hwang her little write-up on that again. The official one, the one that *didn't* involve being in prison because she'd smashed a farmer's brains out with a rock.

"I'm not ashamed of the blood in my veins or who my mother is,"

Oh said solemnly. “But I *am* Korean, too. And I understand hating Japan, and anything of his. And… we’re the same."

South Pyongan’s bristle died as he lifted his gaze to her.

“We both know what it’s like to make it out when people we care about didn’t. And we both have to carry that with us.”

The province avoided his eyes. “Yeah, you’ve reached the talking limit, buddy. Don’t expect anything like this to ever happen again.”

Ideally she’d never even have to *see* him again.

He dipped his head, starting to walk past her. But she caught his wrist, wrenching him back around, then quickly dropping it, realizing she’d acted without thinking again.

He stared at her expectantly. Ugh, now she *had* to say something. It would be mega lame to let him walk away knowing she’d chickened out.

“Hey, what you said about making it out when they didn’t,” she began awkwardly. “It wasn’t your fault. It’s the Yanks’. If you’re going to carry them with you, just… make sure you’re actually carrying them. Don’t let them drag behind you.”

Oh’s dark eyes shimmered. “I’ll try not to. And thank you.”

Seriously, how did Korea do it? She had to wonder if he’d been thinking about drowning himself in the river after he’d said that to her, like she was debating taking a sidestep off the ridge right now.

“Stay safe out there,” she said, turning to walk the other way.

“Aren’t you hitching a ride with us?”

If she had to sit in a truck bed with him for a few hours with this conversation between them, she’d crash the vehicle with everyone in it.

“Nah. I’m walking before the weather gets cold enough to freeze my ass off.” She waved, not looking back. “Go kill some Yankees for

me.”

“I will!” the half-Korean called back, saluting. Not that she’d looked back.

*‘Awkward convo **done.’*** And her voice hadn’t even broken twice.

South Pyongan didn’t walk. She got out of sight, then threw herself up the mountain, scrabbling up the steep cliffside, having to climb hand over hand in some places, until she stood on top of the ridge soaked in the blood red light of the setting sun. Then she ran.

The sparse grass up here was dead and dying, even where it hadn’t been bombed. It was colder, too, especially as the light faded from the horizon. The air cut at her lungs as she sprinted along the narrow spine of rock in the dark, gauging each footfall but not slowing in the slightest, dodging loose rocks so she wouldn’t go tumbling back down and break her neck.

Though she’d probably survive, even if she did.

She wasn’t dragging her tank crew around with her. She *was* carrying them. They were just… heavy. She wasn’t used to the weight. It was like using a muscle that hadn’t got much use before, like how she had a stitch in her side way too soon since she hadn’t done much long-distance running since atrophying in the POW camp.

South Pyongan ignored the stabbing in her side and the hollow hunger in her stomach, forcing herself to run faster, the wind slicing through the bandages on her face to cut her cheeks.

The only way to train a muscle was to use it, to push through the pain until it didn't hurt anymore. She’d run all the way back to Pyongyang, and only then would she look for a car to take her to Anju. She’d keep running until it was easy again and she’d keep carrying her crew until it was easy for real.

She would get stronger. Strong enough that she could make sure nothing like what had happened to her tank crew ever happened again.

—

“The surgery went well. So long as you make sure to keep it clean, you’ll make a full recovery.”

The man on the hospital cot stared numbly at the part of the sheets where his leg should have raised the fabric. It didn’t.

“Not a full recovery,” he said dully.

Kangwon’s wince didn’t show on his face. “We caught the infection before it progressed too far, and managed to successfully amputate. And we managed to save your other leg.”

“Who cares?” the soldier asked bluntly. “It’s useless anyways.”

Kangwon didn’t bother telling him he might regain function of it eventually. Sip Tal-sun had taken a bullet to the back that severed the fourth segment of the lumbar section of his spinal cord, paralyzing him from the waist down. While he might regain control of the limb that hadn’t became infected, it was doubtful. And when it came to the recovery process, the crushing of false hope could be more dangerous than the injury itself.

“It will provide balance,” he said to his patient, keeping his tone reassuring. “And even if you can’t feel it, once your upper half strengthens to compensate, it’ll be useful to you in getting around.”

“But I’ll never be able to walk again,” the soldier said, voice choked. “I’ll never be able to play football with my son or lie with my wife or carry my mother on my back. I won’t be able to return to the front or hold a job or do *anything* without someone helping me *ever again.”*

Kangwon could tell he was holding back tears, but desperately didn’t want to shed them in front of his doctor and Provincehuman. But he couldn’t give him privacy just yet.

“You won’t be able to do any of those things the way you did them before,” he admitted. “But you can learn to adapt. Others have.”

Too many. Amputations were supposed to be the last resort. But with the high rate of infection added to their lack of medical supplies, Kangwon had seen far too many severed limbs lately. Sip Tal-sun was lucky he still had one leg to work with.

"I wish you hadn't taken my leg," the man said quietly.

"I know. We wouldn't have if there was any other choice." Kangwon placed a hand on the bed next to him. "Do your exercises to stay limber, and when you've recovered from the surgery, I'll give you some more for strengthening your core and upper body. You won't be able to live your life the way you did. But I promise, as long as you devote yourself to recovering, you *will* be able to live it. Alright?"

"Alright," Sip Tal-sun said thickly.

Kangwon smiled, patting the thin cot. "Good. Remember to call for a nurse if you need anything. Don't try to be tough- if there's something wrong, we need to catch it right away."

The former soldier agreed, and Kangwon left his chart, slipping out into the hallway, where he let his smile drop, exhaling.

He'd stopped feeling anxious over surgeries a long time ago. Maybe as he'd held the surgical blade above Sip Tal-sun's blackening veins, he'd heard Korea's voice in his head, demanding to know why he hadn't been able to save Kim Mi-ju.

But he knew he'd done everything he could. And he knew he could save the paralyzed man. Once he'd made the first cut, he'd fallen back into rhythm, his hand steady as he focused on nothing but saving his life.

But mental recovery was always more difficult. Wounds could be patched up and forgotten, a disability could be adjusted to. But injuries to the mind and spirit couldn't be fixed with gauze and antiseptic. No matter how many gentle talks he had with Yun Jin-suk and her father, or Cho Sok-young or Oh Tae-min, Han Hyun-jin, or any of the other traumatized people his cousins and Korea sent his way, he would never be able to stitch up what had been done to

them. He could say something perfectly comforting and sensible- that it wasn't their fault that it happened, that there were other ways to serve their country, that they didn't need to walk without limping or be able to lift heavy things to be fulfilled in life, that they weren't tainted by what they'd been through. But if their minds and emotions wouldn't let them absorb it, then they wouldn't. His words could help, but only they could hold the needle.

And some of them didn't want to. It was like some patients wanted to wallow in the mire of their sorrow, and resisted any efforts to pull them out of it. Kangwon knew there were a few reasons for it. The healing process could be daunting, while for someone familiar with it, suffering was comforting, even if it was killing them. Trying to get better meant you had to acknowledge what had been done to you in the first place, and that you could never truly go back to who you'd been before. And that was too much for some people.

Kangwon could handle those types more easily. It wasn't that they didn't *want* to pull themselves out- they were just afraid to. All they needed was someone's hand to steady them.

The difficult ones were the ones that *didn't* want to recover, for one reason or another. Some didn't want to learn how to use a prosthetic leg or adapt to missing an arm or to live with the mental anguish of being assaulted, because if they did, it would be admitting they were broken. They didn't want to see themselves that way, and so they refused any efforts to heal. They stayed broken. And sometimes they broke worse. Even if they wanted to keep living, if they didn't accept that they were in the mire, they'd drown anyway.

SH's eyes as he'd counselled her to speak to her brother on October 1st flashed through his mind.

Those types could be okay if Kangwon managed to coax them into cracking. But it wasn't like he could force patients to talk to him. Once they'd recovered physically and were discharged from the hospital, he had no real authority over them, beyond the authority of being one of their provinces. He couldn't make them work through their emotions with him. He could only try to convince

them, and if they actually listened, hope that would be enough.

Others felt like they deserved it. Usually soldiers that had lost their squads. They were the only survivors, and that guilt ate at them. Because their comrades had died, it felt like a betrayal to live. It felt like even more of one to keep living, to get better, and even be happy. Kangwon knew why so many veterans of the war against Japan had wept tears when their People's Republic had been declared, and why there had been bitter mixed in with the sweet.

And some people almost seemed to take pleasure in suffering, and not in the way South Pyongan meant when she called him a masochist. It was like they were so convinced that life was over after what they'd gone through that they didn't want to be proven wrong by it continuing on. Their suffering wasn't comfortable, but they still wanted to cling to it because it gave them some sort of… Kangwon didn't know. Vindication, maybe. That they were broken, that they had suffered, that since they could never be the same, there was no point in trying. They resisted every bit of positive progress or joy because that would be moving on. And they didn't want to.

That's why it could be so difficult to talk to North Hamgyong. Sometimes Kangwon could see the exact moment his cousin realized he was enjoying himself too much, and he'd quickly turn cruel and dour again.

He thought Sip Tal-sun fell into that last category, too. Even if he didn't slip into the actual depressive state the province could sense hanging over him, he might develop that mindset. Kangwon had to do what he could to prevent that. He had to make him see that he could find ways to keep living his life, even if it was more challenging than he was used to, before he decided that he couldn't.

You couldn't make someone live that didn't want to.

And he had to do it before the ex-soldier was discharged, and while keeping up his sessions with all his other patients.

Kangwon exhaled as he walked through the halls, and suddenly

felt like he'd breathed his consciousness away. He swayed, trying to blink away the sudden scattering of black particles swarming before his eyes like flies.

"-won? Comrade Kangwon?"

The province shook himself as the static cleared to reveal An Il-rae had appeared in front of him, a stack of medical gowns in her arms.

"Are you alright?" she asked, frowning in concern.

"Yeah," Kangwon said after a moment. "Just a bit tired. You know how it is."

The nurse clicked her tongue "You and Yong-hwan, I swear. You both need to get more sleep."

Kangwon *did* get sleep. Unlike some people he knew (it was always Korea), he made sure to get at least five hours of sleep at night, even when he was on-call at the hospital. If he got woken up for an emergency, he'd make sure to take naps the next day.

"Yeah," he simply agreed, rubbing his arm.

An Il-rae's brown eyes caught the motion. "Should I tell Yong-Comrade Kim you won't be giving blood today?"

"No." He quickly shook his head. "That batch of soldiers just got brought in from the front."

Just over a week ago, the American army had finished seizing the last few hills in the west below the line they'd been trying to set up above the 38th Parallel. Now that they had it, they'd accepted the resumption of the talks.

Surprise surprise, changing the location to Panmunjom hadn't changed anything. As the UN was moving their truce talk camp to Munsan, the KPA and PVA were moving theirs to Kaesong. Both forward camps had their own neutral zones. And on October 12th, three enemy fighter jets had entered theirs and shot it up again.

And this time, they'd killed someone. Two boys had been playing on an empty road in broad daylight, thinking they were safe in the neutral zone. And on their way back from the north, the jets had stopped to strafe them. Twice. The younger boy, only two years old, had been hit by a .50-caliber machine gun slug, but luckily survived.

But his twelve-year old brother hadn't been so lucky.

Even after another investigation, it'd seemed like their accusations were going to get dismissed again, until Ridgway had came forward and admitted it was them. Well, not 'them.' He'd admitted it was American pilots, stressing that they'd violated orders to avoid the neutral zone.

Kangwon knew that sometimes soldiers acted against orders, like the comrades of theirs that had executed American POWs. But he'd had to dig too many bullets and shards of shrapnel out of children recently, and held too many cold, small bodies to feel understanding this time. If the enemy Command had actually *punished* their pilots after the last incident, maybe the ones now wouldn't have been so bold.

And that was *if* they really had been acting against orders. It seemed convenient that another incident happened just as the talks were about to start back up. Ridgway had shrank the Panmunjom neutral zone to a just over nine hundred-metre radius, and denied their suggestion of a joint committee to manage it, even dropping his own suggestion of joint policing. He'd also refused to reposition the puppet army troops that could've been responsible for attacking the PVA's military police back in August by widening the zone, and didn't want stop the planes from operating overhead, though they'd eventually won out at that one just before the real talks began again.

It sort of seemed to Kangwon that the American Command was doing everything possible to leave the situation open for another incident. He already knew Korea and the rest of their Supreme Command were swallowing their pride by not letting the murder of the boy interrupt the talks. If something else like that happened again, they'd have to pull back, or risk being seen as desperate.

And then there were the radio broadcasts. They'd already picked up again, but after the talks began in earnest on the 26th, they'd gotten way more frequent. From just after dawn to around evening. South's voice had to be getting sore.

Just like the newest shooting, the timing was too calculated to be coincidental.

"Comrade Kangwon?"

Kangwon blinked blearily, the freshly-painted teal and white corridors unfamiliar for a moment.

'Right. Hospital. Blood.'

"Our Chinese comrades suffered casualties when they lost the hills," he said, his tongue feeling like a chunk of lead in his mouth. "And we've taken a lot trying to recapture them. We need the blood."

"Alright," An Il-rae said, her thin brows furrowed. "Just make sure you get some rest after."

Kangwon nodded, the hallway swaying. He needed a break before he hooked himself up to the IV.

Luckily, unlike some of the patients (and relatives) he had to deal with, his brother *wasn't* adverse to healing. As Kangwon did his best not to stagger into their room, Gangwon was in the middle of adapting to his own disability.

"So here is every resource on our sign language I've managed to find," Hwang said, spreading a ream of papers and one thin book over the cot with enthusiasm. With the other hand he was scratching furiously in a notebook with a pencil. "As I'm sure you're aware, we only had one school for the deaf, and it's in Seoul- they actually just changed the name to the 'Seoul School for the Deaf,' I hear- and we're nowhere close to having a standardized sign language. However, due to influence from the Occupation, we *do* share a great commonality with Japanese sign language-"

"Hwang, your lips are moving too fast," Kangwon interrupted for

his brother as he closed the door. “How about you show him what you’ve written so far?”

Gangwon smiled gratefully at him from his spot on the edge of the cot.

“Ah yes, my apologies.” Hwang passed the notebook over.

The Southern Kangwon took a minute to read it, squinting at the characters.

Hwang coughed lightly into his fist. “Apologies for my handwriting as well.”

“Korea w-won’t like that it’s similar to Japanese,” Gangwon said fretfully as he finished reading.

“Almost certainly not,” Hwang agreed, taking the notebook back. “Which is why I’ve hunted down a few more organic sign languages that have developed around our country. They might be less broadly understood, but as the ‘language’ is young, this is the prime time for influencing it. And as an influential figure already, your use of it will go a long way towards what eventually gets standardized.”

Gangwon nodded nervously as he read the words, looking over at Kangwon as he started to remove his gloves.

“I still like talking better,” he said guiltily, at what was almost a normal volume. “I feel bad I’m making you comrades learn it just so I can understand you.”

Hwang waved a hand dismissively. “I’ve been interested in trying to learn anyhow. Hae is eager to start as well.”

Kangwon nodded, sitting next to his brother and reaching over for the notebook. “It’ll be useful for any deaf patients. Plus we’d have to learn anyway for Jeju.”

Hwang bobbed his head. “If she truly can’t speak- and from SH’s description, it does seem as if there’s damage to her vocal chords- then her impediment is more severe than yours. It’s simple to have

someone accompany you to mass meetings or on-the-spot guidance and take a transcript, or to adapt a hearing aid for you. But it will lower Jeju's authority if she has to have someone speak for her, which she would, even with sign language. And we don't yet have the equipment to repair vocal chords."

"M-Maybe we shouldn't say all that to her," Gangwon delicately suggested when he was done reading.

Hwang said quickly, "Obviously. But I didn't intend to be disparaging. I only meant to agree with Kangwon. Jeju's inability to talk must be frustrating. We'd have to learn sign language regardless so she would feel comfortable at home, at the very least."

Kangwon smiled to himself as he rubbed his hands together, trying to get rid of the pruney feeling the medical gloves always left his fingers with.

Even though Hwang could be a little accidentally callous sometimes, he was glad their maybe-mute cousin would have him. She had to be feeling even more isolated than their other locked up family members, since she couldn't even talk to herself. Plus she'd have memories of the Jeollas' twin connection. It probably hurt to have memories of that kind of understanding, only for you to be unable to even tell someone how your day was.

But Hwang was a quick learner and good teacher, so he'd probably be having conversations in sign language with her in a month or less. And he got how important being understood was.

"Mm." Gangwon looked down at his lap. "I hope we can see her soon."

"As do I," Hwang said quietly.

"We will," Kangwon assured them. "The talks are going again. I'm sure we'll get a ceasefire by winter."

"I hope you're r-right," his brother murmured.

'Me too.'

“I am,” he said out loud, flopping down onto the cot with a groan, making sure he didn’t crumple Hwang’s papers.

“Are you feeling alright?” he asked as he gathered them together to put on Gangwon’s side table. “You look a bit peaked.”

“I’m alright.” Kangwon stared up at the cement ceiling, black particles crowding his vision again. “Just tired.”

His keen cousin saw through him. “That’s what Gangwon said as well. I assume you’ve been giving just as much blood as him?”

Through the swarm, his brother gave him a sheepish look. “He caught me changing my arm wraps.”

Kangwon rubbed his. There were burns under all his bandages, but under the ones wound around the crooks of his elbows, they were joined by track marks. A lot of them.

“Yeah,” he said, closing his eyes since the particles refused to go away. “Need…”

‘A lot of it,’ he tried to say. But he didn’t need to waste the energy. Hwang would get it.

He did, and didn’t bother talking them out of it, even if he didn’t approve. Just like Kangwon wasn’t trying to talk him or the others out of their ration scheme, though he definitely didn't approve.

“I can donate some of my own tomorrow,” their glasses-wearing cousin volunteered. “I’ll send messages to the others as well. While we’re not on the front, we should be donating as much as we can.”

“Mmmmmm,” Kangwon hummed, feeling himself sliding into a nap. He was too tired to tell them to get him up later, so he just tapped Gangwon’s hand.

“Do you w-want to get some real sleep?” his brother asked. “I can go to Hospital One for you.”

Kangwon’s eyes shot open. “No. Just wake me up.”

Gangwon frowned at him, but didn't say anything. Even though he'd been able to go to the civilian hospital without him before, so long as all four of their guards went with him. Kangwon knew the only reason he hadn't asked why he hadn't been allowed to recently was because he knew it was a war matter.

"Certainly much too risky," Hwang agreed, then quieted as Kangwon tipped his head back to blink at him.

He felt bad not telling his brother the reason he wasn't allowed out of the military hospital anymore (not counting trips to just beyond the door, where he had to wrap a scarf around his head twice, and wear muffs over his ear slits). But he got why Korea said not to. Him feeling guilty over them wanting to learn sign language kind of just proved the point. Kangwon knew he probably would've felt the same way.

He let his eyes close again, sinking into a hazy half-sleep as his brother and Hwang discussed sign language, already starting to work on the alphabet.

Once he woke up, he'd go check on the soldier in Room 25, and see how his napalm burns were healing. Then he'd visit the artilleryman whose back had been hit by white phosphorus and make sure the nurses had cleaned it right. He trusted them, but white phosphorus could be so harmful he wouldn't feel reassured until he checked himself. He should probably ask Korea if the wound on his back from last year was alright, too, and see if he was lying when he said 'yes.' Then he'd have to head over to City Hospital One and do his rounds there. The little girl that'd taken shrapnel from one of those huge TNT bombs last week worried him. The holes in her stomach were healing well, but she kept waking up crying from nightmares where hot metal was burning through her from the inside. It could just be PTSD from the injuries, but sometimes the subconscious knew something was wrong with the body before a doctor ever could. And punctured stomachs were prone to infection. After that he'd return to the military hospital to give blood… No, he'd talk to Sip Tal-sun again. He needed to be thinking and speaking clear if he was going to keep him from sinking into depression. He'd talk to him, *then* give blood. And he should fit dinner into that somewhere. Before his donation, so he'd

at least be able to stay conscious until after it was done.

But he needed to write the hygiene measures to distribute to the villages and divisions at some point, too. He and his cousins' empathetic fevers had broken midway through August, which meant the smallpox epidemic had finally been contained enough to stop affecting them. But now winter was coming, along with the ailments that came with it. And he didn't exactly trust that America wouldn't try something like that again. It'd be more difficult to spread an epidemic without access to the north, but there *were* puppet guerrillas that managed to sneak in that could easily bring contaminated chicken feathers again, or something like them.

It was already snowing in the hills. He'd need to get the informationals done soon. He'd write them while he ate dinner, proofread them when he woke up tomorrow so he'd know he was making sense, then send them to the Ministry of Health before noon.

He'd almost forgotten about his own wounds. He'd need to clean and rebandage them all, and boil the cloth again. He'd let the hospital staff do the second part for him, but it wasn't like he could offload his cleaning. He'd do that…

Actually, he was pretty sure he was starting to forget what time was. And he was starting to think maybe he should move his dinner to sooner.

The door opening jolted him from his almost-sleep, and he opened his eyes blearily to see someone standing in the doorway.

"Korea," he slurred as Gangwon followed Hwang's gaze to their Countryhuman.

"You had better not be sleeping on the job," Korea said as a greeting, shutting the door hard.

"Just a… break," Kangwon said with an effort, struggling up.

"Kangwon's been working all day," Gangwon defended him, not hearing Korea, but understanding what he was like. "He had a

surgery this morning, too."

Korea's eye flicked to him.

"Just a gunshot wound," Kangwon clarified. "He'll live."

"He had better." Korea turned his glare on Gangwon and Hwang. "And what are you two doing? Shouldn't you be at the University?"

"I'll return after," Hwang said hastily. "I was merely bringing Gangwon the materials I scrounged up on sign language. It's my fault for pulling him away from his duties."

Korea examined the stack of papers, eye narrowed, than announced, "That's acceptable. We don't have much time to spend learning right now. The sooner we start, the better. Then you can finally be fully useful again."

Kangwon raised a brow disapprovingly, though he knew it was the 'fully' part they were supposed to focus on.

Gangwon had winced, but wasn't hurt enough not to smile. "You won't have an excuse to yell at me anymore if you learn sign language."

"I'll still do it," Korea dismissed, then directed to Hwang, "You received the book I sent you?"

"The one from the Seoul School for-" Hwang cut himself off at his Look. "Ah, yes. I received it."

"Good." Korea levelled a glare at the two brothers, daring them to say something.

They didn't, but Kangwon sent Gangwon a small smirk when his head swung the other way.

"And can we question what *you're* doing here?" Hwang asked. "Or is that privilege solely reserved for you?"

Korea scrunched his face at him. "I came to make sure Kangwon hadn't forgotten about the hygiene directives."

But the look he sent him said that wasn't all.

"I haven't forgotten." Kangwon stood up, blinking away another swarm of particles. "We can go talk about some of my ideas, if you want."

Korea nodded, but before they could leave, Gangwon said, "W-Wait. Is South c-c-calling for me again?"

Korea shot a glare over his shoulder at Kangwon, who shook his head. He hadn't told his brother, but he wasn't surprised he'd figured it out.

"Yes," Korea clipped, turning back so he could read his lips.

Gangwon's lips thinned. "He's trying to use me to s-sabotage the talks, isn't he?"

"Yes," Korea said reluctantly. "When he isn't trying to Command you over the radio, America has him accusing us of abducting you."

With their vote from months ago in mind, Kangwon pointed out, "South *could* say no. It's not like America was pointing a gun at him to make him Command us when we were in the POW camp. He chose to."

"Because he knows what America will do if he doesn't obey him!" Korea snapped.

"You wouldn't accept that excuse from one of us," Hwang chimed in, earning his own death glare.

"The point is," their Countryhuman continued stonily. "While we don't know if the enemy is aware you're with us or only bluffing, they are using your absence to try and upset the peace talks. Kim Chong-won is heavily hinting that they can't be carried out when the condition of a southern province is unknown."

Gangwon looked lost, but Hwang had been scribbling a transcript of Korea's words almost as fast as he could say them. He passed the notebook over to him. The green-skinned province's brows furrowed as he read the words on the page.

“We could release a short reel of him,” Hwang suggested, tapping his chin. “He could tell the world he’s here willingly, and describe what sort of conditions America kept him in under the US Military Government.”

“No,” Korea dismissed almost immediately. “If they don’t actually know he’s here, I don’t want to change that. And they would only accuse me of using Commands on him to force him to say what I wanted.”

His jaw feathered. He'd never been able to disguise how disgusted the idea of the Commands made him, even when Kangwon could tell he was trying to mentally justify his brother using them.

“And Gangwon wouldn’t exactly do well on camera.” The province put a hand on his brother’s shoulder, rubbing it comfortingly. “With how nervous he is, it probably *would* seem like we kidnapped him.”

Hwang bobbed his head. “Ah yes. Very true. Though I wonder if he could be made to act more confident. Not *saying* what you want, but *acting* it.” His eyes flicked to Korea.

“No.” His tone made it clear that still wasn’t going to happen.

“I w-wouldn’t mind you Commanding me if it would help,” Gangwon said after reading the notebook again.

“Trust me,” Kangwon cut in before Korea could go off on him. “You don’t want to get Commanded.”

He’d felt like his brother when the war first started. He thought he wouldn’t’ve really cared if Korea ever did Command him. He’d only steered his cousins away from the topic because he knew it made some of them uneasy, and Korea even more uncomfortable.

But after experiencing the feeling of South’s words slithering into his brain and holding his body hostage… The word he’d used to describe the Commands with SH was the best one- violating.

“And I said I don’t want them having confirmation that you’re here,” Korea said, relaxing as the topic turned away from the Commands.

"B-But what if America tries to pull away from the talks again because of me?" Gangwon fretted, chewing on a nail.

"It wouldn't be because of you," Kangwon soothed, pulling his hand away from his mouth. "It would be because he's already looking for a excuse."

"But this *would* be a compelling one." Hwang pushed his glasses up. "Unlike the petty reasons he's pulled back before, this would have weight with the international community. With the amount of propaganda against us, they would easily believe we would torture Gangwon. And even if they didn't, it does make logical sense that both sides should possess all of their Provincehumans before terms are reached."

Korea bristled. "So you think we should just hand him over?"

Hwang quickly shook his head. "No, of course not. But I could easily see America demanding proof that Gangwon is alive and well before assenting to an armistice. And in his hands."

Gangwon frowned as he watched the words appear on the paper.

"The other countries might try to override him on that," Kangwon said. "It's not like they're particularly invested in our safety. And didn't the Australians take a lot of losses against the PVA in the fight for those hills?"

"Exactly," Hwang replied, hand pretty much blurring as he wrote. "And even right-wing American newspapers are talking about the casualty counts that have made it through press censorship. If they overlook something as genuinely objectionable as us having possession of a southern Provincehuman, it makes them not only look like subpar defenders to colonial or reactionary governments that depend on their support, but also desperate."

Just like they'd look desperate if they overlooked another incident like the boys.

As Gangwon read what Hwang had written, the glasses-wearer looked to Korea.

"I think the only way out of this would be to take Gangwon to the United Nations and have him give a statement directly. We can't prove you didn't give him Commands beforehand, and if you're truly adverse to utilizing them at all, then doing something like Commanding him to tell the truth in front of a council is off the table. But they might be more apt to believe us if they see him in person, even with his nerves."

Kangwon nodded thoughtfully. "One of us could go with him, but give him a few minutes alone with the UN or some neutral country. That way he could prove we aren't holding him against his will."

Hwang stroked his chin. "I don't know if leaving him alone with another country would be wise. I would stick to an open room discussion."

"And what happens when one of the countries or their representatives in that room detains him for America?" Korea snapped.

"A neutral country, Korea," Kangwon pointed out. "Not someone working with him."

"There *are* no neutral countries," his Countryhuman growled. "If they aren't standing up against this this war, then they are *for* it. I won't give one of them the chance to deliver him back to America to be locked up again."

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Hwang asked. "They haven't threatened to call off the talks over the matter yet, but it's only a question of time."

"I'll go if you want me to."

The room went silent as Korea stopped in his pacing. Kangwon looked at his brother with wide eyes.

Gangwon clutched the notebook tightly in his bandaged hand, staring up at Korea. His brows were furrowed, but his jaw was set.

"I'll go," he repeated, the words only wavering slightly. "If me being here gets in the way of ending the war, you can send me back

to South. And- And America."

The paper crinkled as his grip tightened. But he didn't take the words back.

"Nope," Kangwon said immediately. "No way."

"Kang, I'm not going to get in the way of a ceasefire just because I'm scared." His brother took his wrist, careful not to grip the burns too tight. "We talked about this when we voted to accept one."

That was before they'd seen how far America was willing to go to disrupt the talks.

"You'd do the same thing," his brother said.

"Yeah, and you'd try to stop me."

"And I'd know I shouldn't."

Heart pounding, Kangwon asked, "What if America puts you in solitary again?"

Gangwon's grip tightened slightly, his eyes dipping for a second. Then he looked back up.

"How many of our people does R-Rhee have locked up right now? It's not just our comrades in the camps- they have civilians in there, too. And there's even more in the regular prisons."

It was true. Counting the Chinese, their estimates said there were at least ninety thousand people in the enemy camps, probably more. And more getting locked up for being accused of being leftists or breaking laws to try and survive when the puppet government abandoned them.

"How many of them could be in isolation right now? How many of them are going to be pulled out and executed soon, like- like Bong-nam?" Gangwon looked down at the hand clutching the notebook. "They're waiting for Korea to free them, l-like I was. I can't stop him from doing that just because I'm afraid. That's why…"

He looked past Kangwon to their Countryhuman, still rooted in front of the door.

“I’ll go if you want me to.”

Kangwon turned to Korea in desperation, unsure exactly what he wanted from him. He knew his brother was right. But still…

Korea stared intently at Gangwon for a long moment, then gave a short, sharp shake of his head.

“No. You’re staying here.”

Kangwon let out a relived sigh.

“K-Korea,” Gangwon said gently, sounding more like they’d used to than Kangwon had ever heard. “You know it’s the right thing to do.”

Korea’s eye flashed. “No, it isn’t!”

He stalked across the small room, shoving past Kangwon to grab his brother’s lab coat, yanking him towards him.

“You are *mine,”* he growled into his startled face. “And I am not turning you over to the enemy so they can make you useless to me permanently, not when you’re finally making progress. America is *not* going to take another of my provinces.”

Gangwon’s expression had went from flushed to hurt to pleased to concerned in just a few seconds.

“Korea, if I get in the way of ending the war-“

“What do you think America is going to do if he gets his hands on you again?” Korea demanded, giving him a shake and swatting Kangwon away when he tried to stop him. "He is going to force South to Command you into spreading lies about us. He will make you say that we’re executing children or that I’m torturing Kangwon and the others or that I told you I have no intention of making peace and that I’ll break any armistice as soon as it’s made. Anything to give him an excuse to break off the talks again. And if

you resist the Commands like South Hamgyong did, he'll just say that you're 'brainwashed' after being with us for so long. And that is *if* he doesn't just claim that you said all that without proof and people believe it anyway."

Korea's eye narrowed as his grip on Gangwon's coat tightened. *"That* is what would draw the war out longer."

Gangwon hesitated, looking up over at Kangwon, then Hwang, then back up at their Countryhuman. Then he reached up, wrapping his hands around Korea's wrists, but not trying to pry him off.

"Ok-kay," he said quietly. "If that's what you think's for the best."

Korea twitched back from the contact. "It is. I will not lose another province."

"It would only be for a few months, until you and South worked something out, right?" Kangwon asked.

He didn't want Korea to change his mind, but he knew if it came down to it, he might have to. If America did get proof that Gangwon was here, he really might stop the talks over it.

And Gangwon was right. They couldn't let that happen.

"I will not lose another province for *any* length of time," Korea clipped, not looking at him as he turned away.

"It's for the best, and not simply from an emotional standpoint," Hwang chimed in. "Anything Gangwon has seen in his time here could be used against us."

"Kang's been keeping me away from any state secrets," Gangwon assured him.

"Even something mundane could be used against us in ways we can't foresee."

Hwang caught Kangwon's eye. His lips drew in slightly, and the other province realized what he meant.

“Kangwon.” Korea jerked his head at the door. “I still need to talk to you.”

“Korea!” Gangwon called as they stepped into the hall, probably louder than he’d meant. “Th-Thank you!”

Their Countryhuman gave a *“Tch”* that he couldn’t hear, slamming the door.

Kangwon followed him a few feet down the hall. They didn’t have to go very far, considering the ‘half-deaf’ thing.

“It’s about Comrade Mao, isn’t it?” he said casually, in case anyone else in the rooms lining the corridor could hear. “You’re worried Gangwon might’ve figured out who he is, and that South might Command it out of him."

Korea didn’t deny it. “He started calling for him again after America’s trial failed. It’s too coincidental.”

‘Just like everything else.’

Kangwon blew out a puff of air. “Yeah. So either we don’t give Gangwon back, and he gets to break off the talks, or we do, and he gets to go to war with China. That’s just what he wants,” he said, seeing Korea’s look. “Gangwon shouldn’t know about Comrade Mao.”

“Are you sure?” Korea demanded.

Kangwon thought carefully.

China had visited the military hospital a few times- to see Kim Mi-ju before she’d passed, to visit one of their soldiers that’d taken a bullet for a PVA soldier, and seemingly just to talk to Kangwon on his break. But he avoided Gangwon. They’d only been in the same room maybe three times- on the Premier’s birthday, at the banquet for the Chinese soldiers on their National Day, and once when Kangwon and Gangwon had visited the civilian hospital and interrupted him in the middle of performing card tricks for the injured children.

But he'd been masked and gloved every time, just like the Liaos on the few occasions Gangwon had seen them.

"I'm sure," he told Korea with confidence. "He definitely wonders why Comrade Mao and the others are always covered up, but he shouldn't know."

He knew even if his brother did know it was China, he'd follow their usual discretion and not mention it. And he couldn't exactly ask if he knew without making him suspicious. But it was honestly sort of an unbelievable thing to guess. Even after Kangwon had glimpsed his white eyes on the way back from the POW camp (and by now he was pretty sure China had let him see on purpose), he'd been trying to think of any other possibilities for what he'd seen- cataracts, a genetic defect, one of CCCP's oblasts sent to help. Even that was more believable than that a Countryhuman that had never even met them in person would come all the way to Korea himself to fight. And they'd even refused to tell Gangwon about the trial back in August, so he wouldn't have even the possibility that China might be here in his head.

Korea didn't look reassured, but he said, "Good. Comrade Mao Zhilong is coming here to donate blood tonight. Make sure Gangwon is occupied while you take it."

Kangwon blinked. "Is it for our people or his?"

Korea grimaced. "He says it's for 'whoever needs it.'"

"Does he know about its properties?"

Kangwon hadn't been able to find out whether the trick with their blood worked on the Chinese or not. Their nurses had been responsible for using it- he'd only handed it over.

"I don't know and I don't care," Korea said shortly. "Have the bags you take from him delivered to his medics."

It was hard to tell if Korea was being generous or a chauvinist again. It was probably a little bit of both.

"Alright," the province agreed. "But maybe we should tell him,

just in case he doesn't know."

Korea hesitated, then shook his head. "No. We don't spread that around unless we have to."

Kangwon sighed, but acquiesced. "I should get back to work now. I'll get those hygiene informationals done… tonight."

He could wait until the middle of the night to take his blood. It was one of the benefits of being able to do it himself.

He could just stick the IV in his left arm and use his dominant hand to write the outline, but he had a pretty good read on his own body, and was fairly certain he wasn't going to be able to stay conscious after for longer than was needed to drag himself to he and his brother's cot and collapse.

"I'll be by tonight to donate blood as well," Korea said. "Inform Comrade Kim Yong-hwan."

Not him, of course.

Trying not to feel hurt, Kangwon told him, "She has a surgery scheduled later."

Another amputation. A soldier at the front hadn't told anyone about the cut he'd got, not wanting to be taken off the line. Now his foot would be taken off at the ankle.

"I'll be available all night. When she's done she knows where to find me."

Despite the exhaustion and worry filling him, Kangwon's lips lifted a little. "Still trying to avoid the bunker?"

"No," Korea muttered.

"Mm."

His Countryhuman hadn't slept there more than twice after China's National Day. And both those times had been because SH refused to let him walk back to the city as bombing raids were

being carried out.

“Don’t ‘Mm’ me,” Korea grumbled, turning to leave.

“Tell Comrade Kim to clean your burns while she’s there,” Kangwon reminded him.

“I won’t.”

Shaking his head, his province went to go.

“Kangwon.”

He looked back. Korea had stopped in the center of the white and teal hall, his face serious. He turned to face him, palms suddenly sweaty.

“Yeah?”

“I have no intentions of turning Gangwon over to the enemy.” His voice was suddenly as cold as the coming winter. “But if it must be done to end the war, and there is no other choice, I will. And you will let it happen.”

Kangwon’s fingers dug anxiously into his burned palms. But he still said, “Yes, Korea.”

His brother was right. Ending the war was more important than anything. And he knew the guilt of their people being kept locked up and murdered for even longer just so he could stay free would weigh on him, even if it wasn’t his fault.

It would weigh on North Kangwon, too, after all.

His country gave him a terse nod, his eye flicking over the bandages that wrapped every inch of exposed skin in a once-over. “And starting today I’m raising your and Gangwon’s rations back to an active soldier’s.”

Kangwon resisted the urge to put a hand to his torso, and the ribs that stuck out there. “You don’t have to do that, Korea. We’re fine.”

Even if he was hungry all the time, they didn't have the resources to justify that. And at least they were getting their full rations, unlike their cousins.

"Non-negotiable," Korea said bluntly. "If you want to keep giving blood, you need more calories. I won't have you getting weak and losing more of our people."

Kangwon flinched internally, though he knew he'd kind of asked for it by implying his Countryhuman was doing it out of concern. It was unfair, but he was also fully aware that was how Korea worked.

"Okay," he said.

Korea was already walking away, off to work himself to the brink of exhaustion on even less rations than Kangwon.

"And thank you," he called after him. "Even if you do have to give Gangwon up, thanks for not intending to."

Korea didn't respond, quickly rounding the corner out of sight.

Kangwon knew if it came to keeping his brother or ending the war, he'd choose the second one. And he was honestly glad his brother had suggested turning him over. Not just said he'd be willing to like he had at the vote, but volunteered when the possibility was real. It meant he was healing from what America had done to him, and made his heart glow with warm pride.

He would give Gangwon up if they needed to.

But he *really* didn't want to.

Ridgway's punishment to the American pilots that strafed Kaesong before was a reprimand. And when asked, he said he couldn't confirm if the reprimanded pilot was still being allowed to fly over Korea. Which means he was. There is no record of him mentioning what happened to the pilots that gunned down the two children. I think we can also assume what that means.

Comrades I sliced the tip of my finger off making chebureki. It

gushed blood for thirty minutes and I was in the middle of frying them so I couldn't stop cooking. I had to wrap a tissue around it and keep going. My chebureki became biohazards. Never cut towards yourself with a knife. Also cooking tip learned from aunt- caramelize the onions before adding them to the meat mix. Very tasty flavour. Cooking tip from me- avoid adding copious amounts of your blood. It doesn't taste any different, but you can't share them with people. Well, you could. But I consider that ethically dubious and so did not.

Ice Cold

South slumped over the broadcasting booth panel, not looking as he flipped the switch off. The mess of dials and buttons had made his head spin the first time he'd seen it, but he'd spent so much time cramped up in the booth lately that he'd figured some of them out, not needing the radio crew to do it for him anymore.

Idly, he moved the volume slider up and down with a finger, too worn out to get up.

He'd been calling for Gangwon almost every single day for the last three months, though America let him take a day off when his burns hurt too much. Sometimes South said they were just to give his voice a break. He felt kind of bad lying to his friend about that, but he didn't want to ask if a sore throat was a good enough reason to stop looking for the province. If it wasn't, then America would be too suspicious for him to use the excuse after. And it was admittedly kind of lame.

'North wouldn't let a sore throat stop him.'

"Sir?" one of the broadcasters behind him said politely. "Please stop fiddling with the broadcasting equipment."

South quickly stopped spinning the dial he'd been spinning, straightening up, cheeks warm.

"Right. Sorry."

The man handed him a glass of water. It looked cool and refreshing, with the ice America provided clinking together as South took it. He'd never really had ice water before meeting him. *Real* ice water, not shards of ice smashed from a bucket that he had to suck on to dissolve, numbing his mouth in an already frigid winter. The Provisional Government had been really generous to him in Chongqing, but it wasn't like they were wealthy enough to

import a refrigerator, let alone an ice maker. South had discovered that he liked ice water (when he wasn't already freezing). He felt like it soothed his throat more than warm.

Still, as the refreshingly cold liquid washed down his throat, rejuvenating his tongue and spreading pleasantly chill fingers in his stomach, his mouth remained dry. It wanted something else.

His hands shook, aching to feel the cool glass of a bottle in their fingers. But in his head he could see a wooden ladle and splintered bucket, and taste the warm, slightly foul flavour of water that had been sitting out for a week, barely more than a mouthful.

South shook his head, curling his fingers in so they'd stop quivering.

'What kind of idiot wants bucket water?'

He'd been glad when he stopped having to drink like that once he'd received his punishment from Japan. A flask was way better. It was one of the many benefits he'd been given for behaving that still hadn't made up for losing his brother.

Maybe he just wanted to hear those words again.

'I saved you the last sip.'

South gritted his teeth. *'Soon.'*

'Are you sure about that? After what that American judge said...'

'America won't let it get in the way of the talks.'

'Right.'

How did a voice in his head manage to sound so skeptical? It made South want to keep arguing. It wasn't like they even needed the talks anyways, but he wanted to convince it he was right about America. But that would be a little...

"Sir?" the broadcaster said politely again. "We need to return to our regular broadcasts."

South jolted. "Sorry, I was just..."

He was *not* saying 'Arguing with the voice in my head.'

Handing over the glass, he sheepishly slid out of the booth.

God, maybe having to wear his voice out every day was worth it for the little bits of social interaction he got from the broadcasters. With all the time he spent locked up in the manor, he was starting to forget how to interact with people.

'Not that you ever knew how.'

'Shut it.'

His guards had been tolerable lately, enough that he almost didn't mind Smith's emerald eyes, as icy as the water he'd drank, piercing into him like he expected him to take off running on their return to the manor.

Him and Wesson were still a little overbearing, and... Yeah, intimidating. But he figured it was good for bodyguards to be intimidating. And Ku Cheol-moo and Seok Ki-cheol were sort of rough. But they mostly just played cards on the stoop and glowered at anyone that looked at South for too long in public. Which... did sort of suck. He *wanted* people to look at him. He was the Korean Countryhuman, so they *should* look at him. They should look at him the same way they looked at America.

But he knew all four of the men were just under orders to keep him safe, and any one of those people they glared at could be a Communist disguised as a peasant or a merchant, just waiting to strike.

He'd pretty much gotten over that they answered to America. It was better than them answering to Rhee. And it wasn't like he was smart enough to have them answer to *him.* He'd screwed up every

time- forgetting to Command the provinces right when sending them after South Hamgyong, giving Kangwon so many chances to mislead him in the camp, letting his doubts about America fester for so long. Sneaking away to visit North.

*'If you go back, he's going to use it as an excuse to stretch this war out until he owns **all** of us.'*

That had been the worst mistake. He knew how persuasive his brother was, how his words wormed inside your skull. And if it hadn't been for America, he would have gone crawling back to him, then been brainwashed like him and the provinces.

'Everywhere your army has pulled back from we've found mass graves, hundreds or thousands executed.'

South shook his head as they turned down the street.

North's army were the butchers. Them and the Chinese. The American general had said so.

Even if South questioned the timing.

'South when have I ever lied to you?'

'When it counted.'

Pain struck his heart as he stopped outside the gate to his manor.

But America had never lied to him.

"Is America home?" he asked Wesson, the less intimidating American guard.

"How am I supposed to know where *Mr.* America is?" he replied coolly. "I was watching you all day. Sir."

"Right." South chuckled awkwardly. "Well, I'm... going to go see if he is."

He inched away, waiting for one of the men to stop him. They didn't, so he walked next door to America's, confirming with the gate guard that his friend wasn't there.

"Can I sit outside and wait for him?"

"Fine." The man opened the iron gate for him. "But no going inside."

South nodded. He didn't have the same confidence as America to just barge into an empty house and put his feet (with shoes on) up on someone else's couch anyway.

He stood by the front door, wrapping his arms around himself as the cold cut through the coat he was wearing. It was the long, thick trench coat patterned with cream and grey plaid that his friend had got him last year, made by Ralph Lauren, whoever that was. But South had a suspicion it was more for American winters than Korean ones. Or maybe just more for fashion than not freezing to death. It was mid-November and his teeth were chattering like yutnori sticks in an old man's hand.

He should probably just go home to his nice warm ondol and wait for America at the window. But he knew the moment he got the fire going, he'd give in to his craving for the applejack on his nightstand, and just want to lie on the heated floor until the pain stopped pulsing through him.

That stupid gash hadn't gone away. It hadn't gotten worse (he'd know, he checked it obsessively for cracks every chance he got), but it also hadn't gotten better. It was there, gross and unnatural, unchanging, even as the other burns ebbed as land in the south slowly healed, and new ones appeared as America's army captured more hills. Or whatever they were doing at the front now.

The gate creaking open made him look up hopefully. But it was only Grace, escorted by her security team of five. It made South a little jealous. Why did America give her one more than him? Was he more concerned about her safety than his?

But she *was* a woman, and not like one of the commie broads-

'Korea, run!'

-but all soft and smooth, like women were supposed to be. South could maybe defend himself if he got attacked, but she definitely couldn't.

Her white boots crunched on the frost that covered the dirt walkway, the hem of her long cream coat- with a more defined silhouette than his- brushing the fur that lined their tops. Her wavy blonde locks peeked out from the star-spangled hair scarf that bound them, and her eyes were covered with a pair of black sunglasses, more delicate than America's, clearly meant for a girl.

'What is it with Americans and sunglasses?' But they looked good. South wondered if he should get a pair. But that would kind of be copying America, wouldn't it?

Belatedly, South realized he should probably offer to help Grace with the... paper bags? she was struggling to hold in her arms. But she'd already almost reached the door.

'Oops.' In his defense, she had five bodyguards and none of them could offer to carry what looked to be her groceries? Then again, he guessed they had to be ready to use the guns at their hips.

"Hey," he said when she'd almost reached him.

He'd thought she'd seen him, but she must have been looking down or something because she startled, fumbling her bags. One fell out of her arms and South lunged for it, trying to catch it before it hit the ground. Grace flinched, stumbling back as she raised her remaining groceriesto cover her face.

South didn't notice, too busy not catching the bag in time. Potatoes went rolling across the yard.

"Sorry," he said hastily, scrambling to grab them, cheeks flushed not just from the cold now.

He tried to make up for his failure by gathering the potatoes as quickly as possible, shoving them back into the bag. The bottom bulged worryingly.

"Here you go." He popped up, offering it back to Grace.

She stared at it like she'd never seen it before.

South realized his mistakes and withdrew the bag, saying in English this time, "Or, no. I can hold this while you get the door."

Grace stared at him again. Her eyes were just visible past his reflection in her glasses, blown wide open.

"I can... take the others for you, too?"

She made no move to respond to his offer. But she was shaking in the cold, so he reached out to take them anyway, stopping when she flinched back.

Jeez, he was just trying to help. She was acting like he had back when the Provisional Government had first rescued him, jumping at every sound and motion.

Okay, maybe he was still a little like that. But he was *definitely* better than he'd used to be.

"Sorry," he said, not really sure what he was apologizing for. It was fine, though. This wasn't like apologizing to the provinces or anything. Grace hadn't done anything to not deserve an apology, except for sort of ignoring him.

"I-It's okay," she said, unfreezing. "You can hold them. Sorry, it's just c-cold. Sorry."

South took all three bags, struggling to get his arms around them.

"You know, if you got a basket, you could carry all this stuff on your head," he advised as she rummaged in her pocket for the key

to the house. "I see the peasant women do it all the time. Then you wouldn't have to hold so much weight, and you wouldn't have to worry about the bottoms falling out."

Seriously, several pounds of potatoes in a paper bag was just asking to lose them. And if she dropped them in the market, they'd be snatched up by homeless people before she could even bend to get them back.

"You're right," she said, pulling a key from her pocket. "Sorry, I wasn't even thinking. Am-merica just has the distribution guys giving me paper bags, so I use them."

She fumbled with the lock while South stood there, arms aching as he struggled to hold the bags. He definitely had to get to work on his calisthenics again. Starting... tomorrow.

"Is this all from your rations distributor?" South asked, trying to make small talk.

"No," Grace said quietly, not looking at him. "I got most of it at market."

His eyes widened. "This must have cost a fortune."

A bag of potatoes, a bag of what looked like radishes, turnips, and a few other root vegetables, and a bag of rice, pasta, and canned meat. The last two had probably come from America's supply guy, but the rest alone must be worth thousands of won. Prices had only gotten higher now that it was pretty much winter.

"I don't know." Grace jiggled the key in the lock unsuccessfully. "I don't know how your money like, works. America just gave me enough."

There was a jangle as the key slid from her hand, hitting the ground.

"Sorry," she hastily apologized, bending to get it.

"I've got it." South leaned down (mistake), and she jerked back while he struggled not to lose the potatoes again.

"S-Sorry," she stammered, cringing into the door. "I d-didn't mean- I'm sorry."

South kind of got why America got annoyed when he apologized so much now.

"It's okay," he said, giving up on getting the key and turning to their guards instead. "Can one of you actually be useful and get the door for her?"

He winced. That sounded a little harsh. But they'd just been standing around watching while they struggled, and the way Grace had been doing everything possible to avoid looking at him since she'd broken out of her staring was putting him on edge.

His guards didn't move, but one of Grace's stepped forward with a resigned expression, stooping to grab the key, smoothly inserting it into the lock and opening the door in under five seconds. There was something superior in his expression as he dropped the key back into the woman's hand.

'You don't have to be so rude about it.' South was going to suggest that America started hiring nicer people.

"Th-Thank you," Grace stuttered, shakily shoving the key back into her pocket. "Sorry."

"It's alright," South assured her.

Behind the sunglasses, he could see her eyes stray to their guards, then back to him.

"Do you... want to come inside?"

South blinked, surprised by the offer. The American woman had always been distant, never talking to him or even really looking at him, even before today. She only had eyes for America.

But it wasn't like he had anything against her. Maybe she'd be more interested in talking to him when the other Countryhuman wasn't around to suck up the attention, like America's old not-girlfriend had been. Maybe she'd actually take off those sunglasses and look at him. And it *was* cold out.

He opened his mouth, but America's door guard cut him off. "No one but Miss Hartman can enter while Mr. America is away. You'll have to wait outside, sir."

South looked to Grace, wondering if maybe she'd fight him on that.

But she only smiled. "Oh, sorry. I didn't know that meant his friends, too. Sorry."

She took the bags from South, disappearing inside before he could say anything. He winced as he heard the audible crash of her dropping another bag.

It was a little annoying he couldn't wait inside with her, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Grace had called him America's friend! And obviously he was. The other country wouldn't be here if he wasn't South's friend. He said it all the time.

But it felt good to hear it from someone else. To have someone- someone that knew America really well- prove that he wasn't his lesser prize or nothing or just his 'investment.'

'Take that, North.'

Pleased, he turned to wait for his friend again, and found someone looking at him.

Across the street, in front of the manor Jeju was being kept in, was a man. He was maybe middle-aged, with a shaved head. And he was tall. His shoulders stretched his good tweed suit like

America's did.

South felt a thrill of pleasure from the way his eyes widened as they met his. *That* was how people should look at him.

He nodded, keeping cool, and the man quickly dipped his head, then strolled off down the street with a notebook in hand.

He didn't feel the cold as much for the next few minutes, but it rushed back in when he heard the crackle of the radio, and an American voice from the guard house.

"-brutally murdered six thousand two hundred and seventy American prisoners of war, seven thousand South Koreans, and one hundred and thirty Allied forces for a total of thirteen thousand four hundred."

"Turn it up," Smith called, and the man in the guardhouse complied.

"Such stunning acts of violence could only be enacted by the Communist regimes which control North Korea and Red China, backed by their masters in Moscow," the American broadcaster decried in a strident voice. *"President Truman himself has declared that such actions are the most uncivilized thing to happen in this century. General Ridgway has confirmed Judge Advocate Hanley's latest estimate, and reconfirmed his support in seeing South Korea free of the brutal tyrants behind these atrocities."*

"Good," one of Grace's security team grunted. "They should all hang."

"Shh," Smith hushed sharply.

South didn't get why he wanted to listen to this again. It'd been being broadcast over the radio for the past two days, every few hours. He didn't even have a radio in his house, but he could hear the American mobile broadcasters blaring it down by the harbour when he went back and forth from the station.

He wished he could just make a recording to call for Gangwon.

But they'd experimented with Gyeonggi, and Commands didn't work over recordings. It had to be a live broadcast.

"In the reveal of these brutal actions lies the answer to why the Reds have been dragging their heels on the peace talks," the broadcaster continued, barely taking a breath. *"They fear the justice coming to them once their crimes come fully to light. But it also raises questions- can we truly make peace with the sort of enemy that guns down unarmed sons of America? Can we truly trust the talk of peace from those to whom the Geneva Convention is nothing but a piece of paper? Could you look North Korea in the eye and shake his hand, knowing that GIs you ate beside, marched beside, **fought** beside might be lying dead in a field with their bellies full of rice and wine because of that hand?"*

"I'd sooner shoot both his eyes out," another guard joked as the broadcast wound down, and switched over to a man announcing some singer.

South shifted uncomfortably as the woman's husky voice filled the cold air, before she was turned down.

"Wouldn't want to make him watch you blow Red China's brains out first?" another asked, leaning against America's manor as he lit a cigarette.

Even after the trial, a lot of America's soldiers seemed convinced that the Red Chinese Countryhuman was in Korea. Smith and Wesson almost never talked when they knew South was listening, but he'd overheard them discussing it before.

The man exhaled a smoke ring alongside a cloud of steam. "Hanley said it's his boys that've done most of the killing."

"Ridgway said it was the Norks," a third said.

"Fuck 'em all, I say," another growled, eyes flashing. "What I wouldn't give to make sure that Nork get what's coming to him. Hanging's too quick for him. He needs to *scream* first."

The hot, uncomfortable feeling in South's stomach made him speak. "That's my brother you're talking about."

The man shrugged. "So? If my brother was a murdering commie, I'd kill him, too."

"North wouldn't have done any of that stuff himself," South defended.

At least not the story about a thousand people being taken from Pyongyang to the Amnok and fed rice and wine before they were executed. North would never waste food like that.

"Doesn't matter," the first man grunted. "This whole mess is because of him. Every dead soldier is on *his* hands."

"So we got to cut 'em off and stick 'em where the sun don't shine," the most aggressive man finished.

South opened his mouth, then closed it, wrapping his arms around himself as they kept talking about all the stuff they wanted to do to his brother.

He knew it was North's fault. And honestly the executed prisoners probably were, too, whether the Chinese were responsible for most of them or not.

'Do you think I would allow that?' North had asked at the Raktong.

South had been going to say he didn't know. But he did now. He remembered him rolling that Japanese corpse into the corner, his expression cold and dispassionate. He'd heard that broadcast on his Foundation Day.

North would. He could easily see him ordering the deaths of American soldiers, or Rhee's. He could see him doing it with his own hands. He'd killed thousands of them already. His brother wouldn't care about things like war crimes or the Geneva Convention. He hated them, just like he'd hated the Japanese. So they had to die.

It was stupid to come here. He'd already gotten his answer.

"One good thing'll come of this," the last of Grace's guards said. "The boys at the front should stop wavering. They were getting antsy over the ceasefire not being signed yet."

"I don't think we need your cutting political analysis," Smith cut in coldly.

"Right," the man said swiftly. "My bad."

South was about to leave when the gate swung open, and America sauntered in.

"Southie!" he called when he saw him, beaming. "There's my kid. What's up?"

"It's nothing," South said.

His friend clicked his tongue. "I know that look. Something's on that little mind of yours. Come on in, we'll have a chat. My girl make it home safe?"

The guard his question was directed at saluted, his voice smooth and professional again. "Yes sir. No problems, sir."

"Good. That's why I pay you so much." America clapped him on the shoulder, then steered South into the house.

"Welcome home, daddy-o," Grace called as she stepped out of the kitchen. She was smiling wide and her voice was bouncy in a way it hadn't been when talking to South. "I'm so sorry, but getting the potatoes took a lot longer than I thought so they aren't mashed yet and I just put the roast in the oven but-"

She cut her stream of words off when she saw South there, darting back into the kitchen.

'Okay. Ouch.'

"It's no problem, babe," America said as they walked by the doorway. "I'm gonna have a drink with Southie first anyhow."

"Is she okay?" South asked quietly as they entered the parlour.

"Why wouldn't she be?" His friend went to the cabinet, pulling out a bottle of Jack Daniels and two glasses.

"It looked like she had a bruise on her face."

The woman hadn't been wearing her sunglasses as she poked her head out, and South thought he had seen a dark patch around her eye.

America snorted. "Oh, that. Yeah, Gracie's been experimenting with her looks lately. Lots of black eye shadow and white face powder. I think it makes her look a little like a vamp, but hey, at least she's wearing it. Here ya go, kid."

South caught the drink he slid to him, and America flopped down next to him on the couch, draping his legs over his.

"So," he started. "Whatcha want to talk about?"

South almost took a drink to avoid answering him before remembering that America knew that trick. "It... really is nothing."

"Is it about the POW massacres?"

It was kind of scary how good he was at guessing what he was thinking.

"Yeah," South admitted, then said quickly, "I'm not about to accuse you of lying about them or anything. I know what North's people are capable of."

He didn't think North was lying about Taejon. Not on purpose. Even if he would kill a bunch of unarmed prisoners or order it done, he didn't think he'd done that then. He didn't want to think that his

brother could plead like that, to tell him so desperately he hadn't been responsible for it, and be lying.

But North's soldiers could lie to *him.*

"That's a relief, kid." America feigned wiping sweat from his brow. "I'd be worried all your drinking was giving you short-term memory loss if you'd forgot that little chat we had."

South flushed, embarrassed at the reminder. "I really don't... drink that much."

"At least not enough to degrade your brain cells. Yet," his friend said cheerfully. "But if you're not about to accuse me of being the snake in the garden again, then what is it?"

"I was just..." South took a deep breath. "Do you think any of your people could be lying to *you?"*

America tipped his head at him, making him take another drink to soothe his nerves. Then he laughed, slapping his thigh and jostling South.

"That's a good one, kid," he said when he'd calmed himself, wiping a fake tear away. "Trust me- none of my guys could lie to me and get away with it. I've got eyes like an eagle and a nose for sniffing out truth like a hound dog sniffs out runaway slaves." He paused. "Metaphorically speaking."

South saw Rhee looking him in the eyes and promising to get people off of the Hangang before blowing it. He wished he had senses like those.

"But c'mon, tell ole America why you think my boys are lying to me." The other country patted his thigh invitingly, still with his legs draped over South's.

He didn't seem disappointed South was asking, so he cautiously ventured, "The numbers keep changing."

After his talk with America-

'You would know my guys were in on the offensive if you paid any damn attention to your army.'

-he'd been trying to be a little more aware of what was going on with the war. He still wasn't allowed to listen to the radio so the Communists couldn't influence him, but papers like the *Chosun Ilbo* and the English *The Korea Times* were fine.

He'd wavered on that resolution after opening the paper to see the headline *'REDS KILLED 5500 GI CAPTIVES,'* and dropped it altogether after reading all the articles in the days that followed. The news was depressing. If it didn't affect him, there wasn't really any point in knowing about it. Even if it did, it wasn't like he could change it.

But before he'd resolved to never pick up any magazine that wasn't a Sears catalogue or something like it again, he'd watched the number rise to the six thousand two hundred seventy figure for the Americans, and watched the Allied number fall by more than a hundred. And the number of Rhee's soldiers had came out of nowhere. Plus Ridgway and America's Judge Advocate (South wasn't quite sure what that was, but from context clues he thought he had something to do with charging North...'s army and the Chinese for their crimes) had different stories about who'd been responsible for most of the executions.

He eyed America carefully, but his friend was still unmoved by the questioning.

"So there *is* a brain knocking around up in there." He sat forward to knuckle South's head. "I'm kidding, kid, I'm kidding. I know you're cooking with gas at all times. But here's the thing-" He flopped back down. "Casualty tolls, they're tricky, y'know? Hell, *I'm* not even sure where they get their numbers from." Seeing South's look, he added, "I know enough to know when they're in the ballpark, though. Anyway, they're constantly being re-evaluated and crap. You get new information, you change the number."

South wondered what new information Hanley could've got in a day to raise the number by almost a thousand.

"Shouldn't they wait until they have the full story to release anything then?"

America shrugged. "I can't really blame 'em. You find out your Doughboys've been gunned down in a rice field and you're gonna wanna spit brimstone, not break out the abacus. My guys were off, not liars."

South rubbed his arm, finishing his drink. "Did you know Hanley was going to make that announcement?"

"A'course."

"And you... couldn't have asked him to wait?"

They'd been close to a ceasefire again. The Reds had officially stopped asking for the line to be drawn at the 38th Parallel, and even accepted it as the current battlefront with no changes. Before all this, the only sticking point had been Kaesong.

South peeked over at America and realized he'd said the wrong thing again.

His friend was looking at him, unsmiling. "You think we should have waited to tell the world about how thousands of my men were taken prisoner and marched *unarmed* out to be shot dead?"

If South wanted a ceasefire, he would. It was awful that had happened to them, but it wasn't like it could be changed. And if it got in the way of the armistice, that just meant there would be more time for Nor- the Communists to execute more people.

He knew he shouldn't say that, though.

"These are good *American* men, South. Men whose only crime was trying to help *you."* America sat up abruptly. "And you think we should keep quiet just to make peace with the bastards that

murdered them? Whose side are you on?"

He stopped as South stammered, watching him through his impenetrable lenses as his voice lowered.

"Or do you still think I'm looking for an excuse to go to war with Red China?"

"No," South finally got out. "No, I promise. I know you don't want war with him. And- And I think it's a good thing, actually. Not that your soldiers got killed. But that Hanley told people."

America tilted his head the other way, aviators still locked on him. "Yeah?" he said softly.

"Yeah." Trying to swallow without making it obvious, South said, "Even if it gets in the way of a ceasefire, that's good, right? Because a ceasefire isn't what's best for me."

It made him feel gross to agree with all the opinion pieces he'd read in the newspapers, mostly because he knew Rhee agreed, too.

But his reasons were different. He wasn't agreeing with Rhee- he was agreeing with his friend.

"This stuff just proves North's Communists are crazy," he said, rubbing his arm. "So I'm not really comfortable with the idea of talking out Reunification with them."

He knew he'd have to be involved. North would get pissy if he wasn't. And when he thought about being in a room full of commies just waiting for his guard to slip...

No matter what he'd done to the Americans, he knew his brother wouldn't hurt him. But if his soldiers could lie to him about Taejon, they could lie to him about what happened to South.

And there was that recording. Sometimes South could feel that wire spool wrapped around his neck like the noose they wanted to hang his brother with.

North had no right to judge him, not after this. So what if South had ordered prisoners to be executed? So had he.

But he knew his brother wouldn't see it that way. He'd say there was a difference between killing America's soldiers and his civilians. But there wasn't. Because so long as they were fighting, so long as they were Communists, they *weren't* civilians. They were ducks.

He knew his brother wouldn't hurt him, even if he found out about that, or about Jeju or Seoul. He *couldn't.*

But South didn't want to risk it.

"Winter's almost here," he said to America. "We just have to wait a few more months, and then he'll have no choice but to give up, right? Then we can Reunify without the Reds interfering."

And before North could learn that his hands weren't the only ones that were bloody.

America examined him for long enough to make him sweat. Then a smile spread slowly across his face.

"Right. You hit the nail on the head, kid."

South relaxed, relieved.

He didn't need to feel bad about the people that might die up in the north during the cold months. America was right- there were probably only commies left up there. And they deserved it. It wasn't his fault- it was North's, for refusing to give up, for starting this war in the first place. South's hands were bloody, but his brother's were drenched.

"I was just worried." He rubbed his arm again, looking away. "I know you don't want war with China, but... maybe Hanley does. I was worried maybe he was making up numbers to trick you, or that maybe you didn't know he was going to tell everyone that."

"Nope," America said, back to his usual upbeat self. "Hanley told folks because he thought they ought to know what they're really up against. No tricks. Well, aside from the commies trying to say we're lying. And those tricky estimates. Y'know, I'm glad you brought this up now, kid, 'cuz once we get the rest of this country back, you're going to watch those numbers pogo. And I bet they'll land a lot higher than six thousand."

His lips flattened, along with his tone. "And I'll make sure they pay for every one of them."

A chill ran down South's spine as he thought about the graphic threats those guards had been saying as they talked about his brother.

"About that..." He swallowed. "I don't care what happens to the Red Chinese or the Northerners, but do you think you could... stop anyone from hurting North?"

He knew the things those men wanted to happen to him wouldn't. Countryhumans couldn't get sentenced to death or anything. In the past, yeah, but not now. But he could still be locked up or even beaten.

South knew his brother wouldn't go out peacefully. Even when all his 'comrades' turned on him after things got too tough this winter, he'd keep fighting. He'd have to be taken out in combat. Combat that South obviously couldn't be near. It would just be his brother and a bunch of angry American soldiers.

"I know he's killed a lot of your men," he said, resisting the inane urge to apologize for his actions. "But... he's my brother."

'Good one, South. That'll convince the jury.'

America considered his request, tapping a finger on his chin. "Sure. I think I can stop the vengeful masses from getting their blood price."

South let out a sigh of relief too soon. His friend's face slackened

as he turned to him again.

"But he does need to be punished."

His heart sank. "You mean-?"

"He's a criminal, South," America said flatly. "It doesn't matter if he didn't pull the trigger himself. He authorized it."

'Blow the bridge, shoot the ducks, burn the city.'

*'Shutupshutupshut**up.'***

His friend leaned forward, his aviators gleaming darkly. "And North Korea needs to be punished."

South looked down. "Japan punished me."

"That's different, kid." A hand gripped his chin, making him look up. "You were punished for something North did. This time, *he'll* be being punished for *his* actions. Think of it as making up for getting you whipped."

The Korean flinched, and he nodded sympathetically. "I know that crap messed you up. Isn't it a little unfair that happened to you while he got off scot-free?"

It was. He'd killed that man. He'd blown his brains out on the cement floor and became a killer like his brother so they wouldn't get punished. Even after North still had to be, South should've escaped his. But he'd been hurt again because his brother left him. He'd been punished for North's actions.

'Just like always.'

"Okay," he said quietly. "Just... please don't hurt him too bad."

America raised his eyebrows. "You make it sound like I'm going to torture him or something. I just mean we're going to have a little fight, work things out man-to-man, y'know?"

Releasing South's chin, he swooped his drink up from the table. "I'm not a monster, Southie. I wouldn't do anything that'll keep you up at night after you merge."

Ice water ran down South's spine. He... hadn't thought about that. Good thing it was just a fight.

"I'll just make sure he knows for sure that what he did is wrong," his friend continued chipperly. "And once he realizes, it'll make things go smoother once I squish you together."

Right. North had to realize his beliefs were wrong, otherwise they'd be messed up once they were Korea. This was necessary, really. And since South couldn't stop it, there was no reason to keep thinking about it. It would happen, they'd Reunify, and Korea could pretend these two years had never happened.

"Thank you," he said, then took another drink to remove the rasp from his throat. He hadn't even seen America refill it.

"Anything for you, Southie," his friend said. "See? Isn't it easy to clear the air when we're open and honest and not playing tag around a couch?"

Coughing in embarrassment, South agreed that it was.

America nodded, satisfied. "Tell you what- why don't I bring over some roast and taters once Grace is finished with them? We can watch another talkie."

"I'd like that."

"Good. Make sure you keep your clothes on when you get home, then." America laughed, then placed a hand on his shoulder. "And kid? Thanks for trying to look out for me, I mean it. I'm not dumb enough for my guys to get one over on me even if they wanted to, but if I was, then maybe you would've just saved my bacon."

'Bacon...' That, along with the rich smell of cooking meet starting

to seep down the hall, flooded South's mouth with saliva.

"No problem," he said, a little wetly. "I mean, you look out for me all the time, and I can't really do anything for you..."

America waved a hand. "Don't worry about it, kid. You'll do plenty for me in the future."

As South finished his drink, he tried to focus on nothing but the smooth liquid sliding down his throat and the clink of ice against his teeth.

It was good that everyone knew that the Communists were bloodthirsty, just like he knew North was. A ceasefire with them would be unfair to all the people they'd killed, and dangerous for South. A few months. Just a few months and then-

His brother would be fine. He'd be pissed that he lost the war, but fine. America wouldn't do anything awful to him. He had a violent streak, but he wasn't Japan. And even if he did, his brother could take it. He was strong. He always had been.

'Whose side are you on?' America had asked.

South wasn't really on any side. He didn't like Rhee or the commies and he did like his brother and America. Choosing between Rhee's people and Kim Il-sung's people meant he had to be against one of them, and he didn't want to be. Like he'd told Kangwon, he wasn't *against* anyone. He was just doing what he had to.

If he had to pick a side, it was his brother's, the brother he knew before he'd changed. Not the one that gave bloodthirsty speeches and led armies and killed people, and who South was a little... Not the one that had 'more important things,' but the one who had stroked South's forehead when he was sick or sad, the one that took his punishments for him and gave him the last sip of water, the one that had always tried to protect him from Japan, even when it was his fault they were getting hurt in the first place, the one that Reunifying with would've been as easy as sliding into a well-loved

futon. The brother that *never* would have left him, would have rather died instead.

The brother South could still get back, if only America won.

It was what was best for their country, even if North couldn't see that now. Japan had never been able to teach him his lesson, but maybe America could. He'd taught Jeju after all. And then his brother would see that this was for the best, that he'd done it all for him, for *them.*

South drained the last of his glass, the alcohol going down like guilt.

Water might be better for quenching your thirst. But when it came to doubts, nothing washed them away like ice cold liquor.

I'll author's note elaborate on the executed prisoners situation in the next chapter. For now...

Truman's 'most uncivilized thing to happen this century, if true' comment is insane to me. This is 1951. I think something more uncivilized might have happened this century. Just recently in fact. Can't quite put my finger on it, though. Ohhhh right. The Holocaust! The Rape of Nanjing! The Kanto Carnage! The Congo genocide! Hiroshima and Nagasaki! Depending on your definition of century, the Wounded Knee Massacre and California genocide! The current war you are fighting that has burnt down almost every single building in Korea, displaced millions, and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, most of which your army is responsible for! I almost forgot! Even if Ridgway's largest prediction was right (spoiler, it was not), I wonder why the murder of 8000 Americans (not even as one massacre, but *altogether)* would be seen as the most uncivilized thing to happen this century, when the murder of tens to hundreds of thousands (millions altogether) of other people is just fine and part of war. Can you guess why? That's white, I mean right- because they're not white Americans! So

they're worthless! But it's also crazy because even when it comes to Americans, far more died as Japanese POWs. There was literally a policy from Command to execute prisoners instead of lose them. There were Americans tortured by Unit 731, some allegedly dissected while alive. And Truman *knew* that since they had granted amnesty to the scientists that did it. Oh, but the execution of only 365 proven American POWs after their army mates committed multiple massacres of innocent civilians and burned their country to the ground, who shouldn't even *be* in Korea is the most uncivilized thing to happen this century.

I erased a sentence here that was stained by the darkness in my heart. I could just say nothing and you would never know, but Communists should be open with their faults. I will simply say again that American soldiers are worse than Nazis.

Ache No More (And No Less)

North narrowly dodged the fist thrown at his face, ducking and lunging, trying to get his arms around his opponent's waist to take them down.

She spun away on light feet before lifting one in a high kick, aiming for his ribs. North whirled, catching her leg in his hands. But before he could wrench it aside she tore it from his grasp, using the second of an opening to strike again with her hands, catching him in the center of the chest with two pointed strikes.

North grunted as he took the hits, refusing to stagger even as he felt the scabs over the old scar burst. He snatched at her arms, catching one in a viselike grip and yanking her close before working her, struggling and snarling, into a firm hold, her back to his chest and his arms pinning hers to her sides.

"Surrender?" he growled.

"Dream on!" South Pyongan spat back, lashing out with her foot and taking him in the ankle.

North grit his teeth at the sharp pain, but only tightened his grip, feeling her ribs creak under the pressure.

"Good evening, comrades," Hwang said as he emerged from the trees around the bunker.

He blinked as South Pyongan suddenly flew across the clearing, smashing into the ground next to him.

"I take it Ridgway is still holding to his story?" he said mildly, looking to North, who was grimacing at the ankle his province had just kicked again.

"What do you think?" he asked scathingly, then threw himself after South Pyongan, who had only just started to get up from the

ground, dazed.

"I think that's an 'indeed.'" Hwang edged around them as they grappled to join the small group of people watching the show from the back of the GAZ.

"You would be right," China said from his place cross-legged on the roof. "And now your Countryhuman has decided your lovely blue comrade has to die for the enemy's crimes."

"I didn't start this," North shot at him, interrupted by South Pyongan managing to twist his arm until he was forced to retreat from their grapple.

He hadn't. His province had launched an attack on him almost the second they got out of the GAZ. He just hadn't done anything to stop her.

"And you're not gonna finish it either," she crowed, leaping at him.

North blocked each of her hits with his forearms. She was attacking too fast for him to get his own off, but he was too familiar with her movements to let it phase him. Eventually she would get overconfident and leave herself exposed. He focused on absorbing the blows and not being driven back into the trees.

"Has the enemy produced any proof for their six thousand claim?" Hwang asked, accepting the bowl of hot millet porridge passed his way.

"No," North spat, blocking another strike for his face. South Pyongan always aimed like she was trying to break a nose he didn't have. "They still only have 'proof' for three hundred and sixty five. But he's holding that we *could* be responsible for up to six thousand."

"In total," China informed, swallowing a mouthful of rice porridge. "They've combined the rest of the UN forces with the American figure."

Hwang clicked his tongue. "Does three hundred and sixty five sound about right, Korea?"

"Not talking about this."

South Pyongan staggered as North blocked one of her hits and shoved her back. Seizing the opportunity, he launched his own assault of rapid strikes, forcing her to switch to the defensive.

In truth, three hundred and sixty five could be right. North was only aware of small incidences of American POWS being executed, groups of twenty or so, like at Taejon, with the largest being just under eighty. But in the chaos of the tactical retreat, he knew some soldiers had decided it was better to act against orders to eliminate the prisoners they were transporting than let them fall back into enemy hands.

But he knew the count was nowhere near a thousand, let alone six, or the eight thousand number that America's representative had been blustering about at the UN General Assembly at the beginning of the month.

No one in Paris had paid attention to it. Even the more ardent supporters of America were tired of his inflated casualty counts. So the very next day, that damn Hanley had gathered every correspondent in the south and given them his five thousand five hundred number, before Ridgway had raised it again the next. Four days later on the 20th, he was saying it was 'possible' six thousand prisoners had been executed, but they only had proof for over three hundred, far too small a number to have been the result of an order from North's Command.

It didn't matter. The damage had been done. The American troops on the front, who had no access to news that wasn't that damned radio network of America's spreading across the south like a virus, were frothing with rage again at the idea of their fellow soldiers being murdered in cold blood, directing their ire at their own Command over the ceasefire delays back on North and China's people.

Ridgway had said outright that the announcement had nothing to do with the ceasefire talks. But North knew that was a lie. Hanley hadn't told those reporters out of some sense of moral obligation, because they should know of the 'wanton murders,' but so they'd

stop looking unreasonable for wanting Kaesong.

He grit his teeth, pressing his attack on South Pyongan, forcing her to block faster.

They had been so close. *Again.* They'd almost had a line agreed on until Ridgway had to suddenly demand that he wanted Kaesong, which was north of the front. It was only a small city, one barely standing after everything it had been through, surrounded by mostly plains. It held no military value. Yet the Americans had been firm on possessing it.

North had known something new was coming. After China's radio had announced that if the enemy dropped their demand for the city they would be willing to have an armistice in only a few hours, with a full cessation of hostilities, America had needed to do something to make them seem even less reasonable than him. And he had settled on accusing them of executing prisoners of war.

As if his soldiers hadn't watched as Rhee's murdered thousands outside of Taejon. As if his soldiers hadn't gunned down hundreds of innocent civilians at Nogun-ri and hung patriots outside of Pyongyang schools like macabre got-gam. As if his soldiers hadn't ravaged Sincheon.

North struck harder, driving South Pyongan back towards the treeline, not giving her a chance to find an opening.

"Hey, *Hwang-"* She only just got her leg up in time to block a blow to her solar plexus. "Why don't we *not* talk about war stuff while I'm fighting him? Wah!"

North took advantage of her distraction to lunge, finally getting his arms around her and slamming her to the ground where they rolled around, lashing out with arms and legs.

"I'm sure you can cope." Hwang adjusted his glasses primly. "You seem to handle me well enough when you assault me as I'm engrossed in a book."

South Pyongan didn't answer, her mouth too occupied with North's

hand gripping her face.

"At least we got them to give up on Kaesong," SH said, her legs hanging over the truck bed. "We have a ceasefire line. That's progress."

North Hamgyong grunted from the passenger seat. "Until they make up some other shit to throw at us."

"Korea," his sister said sweetly. "Can you beat him next?"

"Beat me yourself," the other Hamgyong grumbled.

"Don't tempt me."

South Pyongan got a knee into North's stomach, managing to push him off her. She didn't scramble away, but lunged after him, pinning him to the ground.

North grit his teeth as her knees squeezed around his torso, the right one grinding into his burn gash, sending a hot shock of pain through the surface burns and a sick pressure into the dead tissue beneath.

His body screamed at him to get her off, make the pain stop no matter what, but he fought the instinct back. She didn't know the wound was there, and he didn't want to hurt her.

"They're still calling for your cousin, aren't they?" Liaotung asked from next to SH.

"They haven't said they'll break off talks over him yet," the Korean province said, dabbing delicately at her mouth as she set her bowl aside.

"But their current claims do provide a springboard for that," Hwang pointed out. "By establishing that our army has killed POWS, they've primed the public and international community to believe we would torture Gangwon."

South Pyongan held tight with her knees as easily as she did when riding horses as North struggled under her. "Why would killing a

bunch of Yanks mean we'd kill our own guy? There's a difference between offing some dude who's been going around murdering our people and offing a province. And we can literally pull out the orders this guy-" She held up North's wrists in her hand like a trophy fish. "Sent out last year telling everyone not to get trigger-happy with prisoners."

North Hamgyong scoffed. "Like they'd believe that."

"They wouldn't," Hwang confirmed.

"You see, comrade," China said, pulling his spoon from his mouth. "While those in our antagonists who armies who go around executing prisoners and killing military police in our neutral zone are rogue elements whose actions have no bearing on their Command, every single one of our soldiers is incapable of doing any thinking for themselves. Any unpleasant actions taken, even if in far smaller numbers than our enemy's, must come directly from above. And why wouldn't we do something like go around executing people for no reason? We are lower than barbarians after all."

He smiled as he used the words Dean Acheson had at the UN meetings.

"You know, you piss me off when you say crap like that, but that pisses me off *way* more." South Pyongan yelped as North finally bucked her off him, relief flooding his body as the pressure went with her.

"In the end I suppose we're just lucky they aren't blaming us for all ten thousand eight hundred and thirty-six of their missing in action soldiers," Hwang said as North drove his cousin's face into the ground, trying to pin her wrists behind her back as she struggled.

North Hamgyong *'tch'*ed. "Just say ten or eleven thousand, Four-Eyes."

"Specificity matters," Hwang sniffed. "But with the amount of prisoners that died last winter, they could easily inflate the numbers even more."

North's soldiers had only executed at most a few hundred prisoners during the first stage of the war, but far more had died in the camps. They had strict handling conditions, but there was nothing they could do about the starvation or sickness. The United Nations had already been accusing them of starving prisoners, even when they did their best to make sure they at least got sorghum paste to eat. But between the drought last summer, the harsh winter, the constant damage to their supply lines, and the burning of their fields and food stores as the enemy retreated from the north, it was hard to keep them fed.

It made North's blood boil, barely noticing as South Pyongan freed herself from his grip by smashing her head back into his chin.

He knew thousands of he and China's people had died in America's camps, too. Kangwon's reports of the dysentery outbreak in the holding camp alone made that clear. Yet the UN found no fault with America, even with his unlimited resources and free supply lines. North couldn't even feed his own people right now, yet he was expected to feed the soldiers that had *made* it that way, that had descended upon his country like a swarm of locusts, devouring everything with their guns and bombs and gaping maws.

South Pyongan leaped to her feet, trying to kick him in the side of the head, but he tackled her before she could, getting her back on the hard ground. She tried to shove her legs up between them to kick him away, but he pinned her ankles with his. Before he could capture her arms, she dug her hand into his side. Thankfully it wasn't the one with the gash, but her fingers still plunged into a burn, sending a flash of white light across North's vision.

He snarled as she rained blows over his flanks until he seized one of her wrists, bending it back. Something clicked under his grip and his province let out a pained gasp. He didn't fall for it, sliding his grip to her elbow and slamming her arm into her own chest, repeating the motion with the other one.

South Pyongan twisted her torso violently, but when she lunged up to escape, North grabbed her head with his hand, slamming her temple into the ground, using her moment of dazed confusion to force her onto her stomach, his knees coming down on her back as

he wrenched her arms around, pinning them by her shoulder blades as she writhed and bucked under him.

He wished his soldiers *had* killed eight thousand Yankee POWs. He wished they had killed every single one of those almost eleven thousand MIA men. Each one was one more hand that couldn't fire a gun at his comrades, one more foot that couldn't hold a boy down as he struggled, one more part that couldn't be used to violate his women, one more mouth that didn't need to be fed. North wished he could go into every single one of their camps and-

"Surrender!"

North immediately relinquished his grip at the gasp, sliding off of South Pyongan and getting to his feet with an effort. He held back a wince as a throb of pain went through his leg. At some point during their wild tussling, his province had struck his hip, making the usual ache there worse.

North Hamgyong made a pleased sound as South Pyongan rolled over onto her back, holding her limp wrist up.

"You broke my wrist!" she cried, her other arm draped over her eyes. "I'm never going to be able to punch you again!"

North crossed his arms, unimpressed. "That's not even your dominant hand. And *I'm* not the one that snapped it to the side."

His province peeked at him, clicking her tongue. "Come on, it's been so long since I did that. It didn't freak you out at all?"

"No. Put it back into place before I do. And stop doing that."

South Pyongan sat up, relocating her double-jointed wrist, wincing as she shook it out. "I couldn't help it. I saw my chance."

"And you failed."

His province popped up, and since she didn't immediately jump him again, it meant that she'd worked out the restlessness he'd sensed buzzing under her skin these past few months. It had only been building since October, but any real issues should be averted now

that she was stretching casually, relaxed like she'd just had a massage instead of being pummeled into the ground.

Not North. He could still feel that restless churning feeling, the prickling under his skin only made worse by America's latest stunt.

There was only one good piece of news, aside from the line finally being settled on.

America's air superiority had been broken.

With the building of three new air fields on this side of the Amnok, North and China's pilots- and their secret Soviet comrades- were finally able to regain control of the skies between Pyongyang and the river. The enemy had tried to destroy them, but after raining destruction over Namsi and Taechon, they had been met with squadrons of MiG-15bs above Samchom. They'd been outnumbered, but had managed to shoot down three B-29 Superfortresses and badly damage another five, easily outmaneuvering the swarms of F-86s and F-84Es the enemy had sent to escort them, while only losing one fighter in return.

They weren't able to bring death to the American army in the same way their air force did to them- they needed the bulk of the MiGs to protect the route from Manchuria, and the valuable hydroelectric dams on the Amnok. And the few Soviet squadrons were forbidden from flying over enemy-held territory where their presence could be discovered if they were gunned down. They weren't going to lay waste to the enemy's supply lines like they'd been doing to them, or bomb their supply caches and carpet bomb their headquarters.

But they could destroy their expensive aircraft. And America recognized that. Ever since that air battle, none of the B-29s had appeared in the sky at day. Their flights were restricted solely to the dark. And there hadn't been any fake nuclear runs since then.

But there was grim news attached to the good.

The enemy had realized that even with their overwhelming air superiority, it hadn't been enough to destroy North and China's armies. And now that they had a challenge, it *definitely* wouldn't be.

Their people were too dedicated to winning the war- no matter how many bridges they blew out, they would be fixed by the next day; no matter how many rail lines they cut, they would soon be repaired; no matter how many homes they destroyed and people they killed, it only fuelled the determination of those left to *win.*

The only way to crush their supply lines for good was to get their boots back on the ground. Which they could only do once the KPA and PVA were even more weakened.

North knew Hwang was right. Even after the Joint Chiefs across the sea had overruled Ridgway on Kaesong, there would be a new sticking point, always another spanner to throw in the works. If it wasn't the POW accusations, it would be Gangwon, and if it wasn't him, it would be something else.

"Who's next?" he asked coldly, scanning the provinces of his that were there.

Hwang quickly ducked into the truck bed to hide, and SH said, "Korea, maybe we *shouldn't* be tearing each other's burns open. I think Kangwon might disapprove."

"Oh yeah, he's going to slam his head into the wall," South Pyongan said cheerfully. "I'm leaking in like, ten different places. I'll go round two with you tomorrow, though. But tonight? Porridge."

She jumped into the truck, taking the cold bowl and shovelling it down. North had allowed her and North Hamgyong to build a small outdoor kitchen outside the bunker to lighten the load on the army cooks, on the strict condition that they make sure the smoke didn't give away their location.

It was just a simple stone and clay buttumak hearth and agungi, with space for two cast iron pots. Theirs had been salvaged from the wreck of their house (North did not consider it looting- if his people had needed them, they were welcome to them), so he had grudgingly allowed his provinces to pool their meagre wages and hunt down new ones. He had refused to help, not wanting them to find out that his monthly salary was already gone only a few days into the month.

"Maybe you should eat, too?" SH suggested hopefully.

"Who's next?" North repeated, pinning North Hamgyong with his glare.

His province snorted. "No fucking way. I see that look in your eye. I'm not letting you bust my ass up like that loser."

"I'm winning next time," South Pyongan mumbled through a mouthful of soupy grain.

"No talking with your mouth full," North reprimanded. "And no you aren't."

He scanned his provinces again, but none of them gave in. He would have to wait until Chagang and the others returned in China's Jeep. In an hour.

He couldn't wait. If he waited he would just return to every lie America had ever said about them and how to combat it. And when he was again forced to acknowledge that they had none of the money and sway needed to do that, and his people would always be savage barbarians in the eyes of the foreigners when it was them that had committed the true atrocities, it would make him want to grind his teeth to stubs.

He flexed his fists, needing to move, to fight.

"I suppose I can volunteer."

North's neck cracked as he jerked his head towards the front of the GAZ.

China had slid off of the vehicle, and was arching his back in a stretch.

"China, get back on the roof," Liaoxi sighed. "Brawling with our comrade would be most uncouth."

"Do it," Liaotung enthused as she leaned out of the truck bed. "I want to watch."

"Me too," South Pyongan said excitedly, mouth full.

"So?" China asked, smiling at North. "What do you say? Am I good enough for you?"

North opened his mouth, then shut it, eye flicking over his comrade before narrowing. "Yes."

"Korea," SH said warningly.

"Aiya," China hummed. "I'm not sure I like that expression. Maybe I should change my mind."

"Too late." North walked to the center of the clearing before turning back around. "We're fighting."

And not telling his General about it after.

"Alright. I hope you're not a sore loser."

North grit his teeth, blocking out a memory that would just make his prickling worse. "Keep your clothes on."

China tossed his padded outer jacket at Liaotung, leaving him in his white undershirt, which he rolled the long sleeves up on. "I doubt you want me wrestling you with my props on my person."

North thought of all the knives he'd seen him pull out of his jacket sleeves, and grudgingly decided he was right.

"Empty your boots, too."

China smiled slyly. "Only if you empty yours."

They both pulled short blades out of their footwear, tossing them towards the GAZ.

"Hey," said South Pyongan. "Why were you fighting me with a knife in your boot?"

North didn't answer, keeping his expression blank as he fixed his eye on China, both of them getting into fighting stances.

Truthfully, he was... excited was the wrong word. He was eager to face the other man in hand-to-hand combat, though he hadn't expected to get the chance in a way that didn't permanently ruin the relationship between their countries.

He wasn't just looking for an excuse to hit him. He had been watching China in every battle they had been in, and he was an admittedly skilled fighter. North wanted to make sure he was better. Just in case that promise to become enemies if one of them (China) left their path ever came to pass.

"Tear his head off, Korea!" South Pyongan cried as the two Countryhumans started to circle each other. "Aim for the face!"

At Liaoxi's reproachful look, she muttered, "Or have a nice clean fight or something."

North paid her no attention, focused solely on his opponent as they moved around each other, sizing each other up.

China had several centimetres on him, and likely weighed more, if only because he'd been eating all his rations. North had more raw muscle, but he hadn't forgotten that his comrade's slender frame belied his strength.

Thinking of that night on Bukhan Mountain and the awkward situation he'd allowed China to put him in by limiting himself, he warned, "When my provinces and I fight, we don't hold back. The only rule is no maiming."

"Korea," SH sighed despairingly, face buried in her hands.

"Don't worry, meimei," China called, his eyes not leaving North. "I'll be alright. His bark is worse than his *bite.* Trust me."

He smirked, making North grimace.

"Wait," South Pyongan said suspiciously. "What's up with that tone?"

China opened his mouth and North moved, lunging forward with a chop aimed at his neck. The other man pivoted, slipping away, and the Korean quickly jumped back, assuming a defensive posture. But

China didn't pursue him, he only returned to his ready stance as they circled each other again.

His steps were smooth and fluid. All of his wounds were healed by now, unlike North's. His burns throbbed, and that old ache radiated through his hip. He was making sure to keep his steps steady, but he could still see China's gaze drift to his left leg.

As he struck, North almost twisted to defend it, before pivoting at the last second as he realized China was aiming for his right instead. He just managed to dodge, sliding out of the way, alert for a follow-up.

China smiled as they returned to circling.

North's eye flicked to his right, and a second later he lunged, aiming directly for that spot. China smoothly pivoted away from his reverse psychology.

For the next few minutes they prowled around each other, testing their defenses and reflexes, trying to land a blow, but never following up when it didn't land.

North usually never struck where he was looking. But since China knew that, it meant he knew he would strike where he wasn't looking. And the same went for him. As the other country dodged an attack that had been launched towards where North wasn't targeting, only to go for where he was at the last moment, the Korean confirmed that China had been watching him just as closely. Likely more so, knowing him.

North had grown used to predicting his comrade's moves on the battlefield. He had to be able to envisage where China was going to be so he could go where he wasn't. But China had done the same, always making sure he occupied his blind spot too firmly for the enemy to hit it. They were both too familiar with the other's movements, able to anticipate every blow before it was launched, and every bit of subterfuge running through the other's mind. Who drew first blood would be down to whoever was fast enough.

Their tests grew more frequent, until the moment one of them

turned aside from a strike, they were launching their own, trying to catch the other in the tail end of their attempt.

North should be growing frustrated by not being able to make contact, but he was too focused to be. It was rare that he actually received a strategic challenge during a fight. Battlefield grappling was wild and chaotic, with no time to think about anything but killing your opponent as quickly as possible. And while he and his provinces had even more familiarity with each other's tactics than he and China, most of their sparring was spontaneous. One moment you were collecting firewood and the next you were on the ground with someone on top of you.

And North outclassed them all with his sheer ferocity. Even with all of Chagang and North Hamgyong's height and muscle mass, the only one that could still occasionally best him was South Pyongan.

He could tell China was enjoying himself, t- was enjoying himself. The other man's teeth flashed as North whirled around after his latest charge, forcing him to abort his attempt at bull rushing him before spinning aside again.

They dodged and weaved around each other, every hit a near-miss and every step a chance for the deadlock to be broken. North felt the whoosh of air as he jerked back, China's jab almost grazing his striped cheek.

"Are you two fighting or dancing?" South Pyongan heckled from the truck.

"You're one to talk," North shot back.

He could see China calculating his level of distraction as he said the words, before ultimately deciding not to move.

Smart. North had purposefully let his eye stray to bait him. That move had worked on his provinces before. And it had always worked on South.

His brother had been the one to make them start wrestling in the first place, but he had never been good at it. The only thing that

had ever spared him from an immediate takedown was how he could predict North's movements better than anyone had ever been able to. And even then, he could read him back just as easily. Most of their sessions had only lasted as long as they had because North had been trying to teach him to fight back.

Eventually he had relented. No matter how many times he chided his brother for allowing himself to be distracted or to not look at where he was aiming, it had never sank in. North had decided it was fine if he couldn't defend himself- he would just always make sure he was there to do it for him.

In the end, it seemed his brother still hadn't learned. On that night by the 38th Parallel, he had been looking where he was aiming- North's eyes.

And he hadn't been able to predict it.

North grit his teeth, and China suddenly rushed him, launching a flurry of rapid blows. Caught off-guard, the Korean couldn't dodge in time, throwing himself forward instead, getting his forearms up to catch his strikes as he had South Pyongan's, all thoughts driven from his mind as he concentrated on making sure none of them landed.

China was fast, his pointed hands practically blurs of red as he struck. It was all North could do to hold him back.

Block block block block- *There!*

China withdrew his arm a millisecond too slow, and as he struck out again, North caught his hand, twisting. The other man tore free, but before he could leap back or attack again, the Korean swung his fist for his side.

His comrade contorted his spine to avoid the full force of the hit, only to be met by North's other hand jabbing into his ribs on his left.

A thrill went through him at getting first contact, but he had no time to savour it as China immediately struck again, throwing

himself at him. North planted his feet to avoid being knocked over, but instead of hitting him full on, the other country slid to the side at the last moment. The Korean whirled, only to find empty space before pain bloomed in his right underarm.

He caught a flash of a sly smile as he spun to meet China, who had used his months of practice at it to slide into his blind spot. Pleased that he wasn't afraid to act like a real enemy would, North seized his hands, forcing the Chinese man into a real grapple.

They shuffled around the center of the clearing, gripping each other's hands as they tried to overpower the other. South Pyongan and Liaotung were cheering and hooting, but the two Countryhumans stayed focused on each other. North could see the cords on the Chinese man's neck straining as he tried to force him back. Blood bloomed on the bandages around his hands as red fingers dug into the burns under them, making his own tendons strain even harder, pressure filling his temples in an attempt to block out the pain signals being sent up his arms.

Gritting his teeth, North used his full strength to muscle China aside, trying to get him into a reverse chokehold. He almost succeeded, getting him bent over under his arm, but the other man was so damn *wriggly* that he slipped free, ducking behind and wrapping his arms around him.

North grimaced as he was pressed up to his chest, one arm locking around his ribs and the other over his throat, the vertical version of the hold he'd put him in on Bukhan Mountain. It was easy to force down the feeling of wild panic at being restrained this time as he had full license to do whatever he had to to free himself.

"Surrender?" China purred mockingly into his 'ear.'

"Never!" North growled, settling on a maneuver South Pyongan frequently used on him.

Ssi-bal, this was going to hurt.

He dug blunt nails into the arm around his throat, mustering his core strength as he kicked both legs into the air, knees to his chest

before he straightened them, his weight making China stagger back a step. But he was strong enough to avoid falling, and North was able to complete the motion, getting his legs over his head, breaking China's hold and every single scab on his abdomen. He could feel fluid burst from the gash as sickening agony stabbed into his bones and his spine screamed at curving in a way it wasn't supposed to.

North almost gasped in relief as his knees met the support of China's shoulders, and he was able to lock his thighs around his neck and straighten up, excruciating backwards somersault leaving him kneeling atop the other country to South Pyongan's elated "Whoop!"

"I can't imagine that felt good," China choked out as he staggered under his weight, incongruously laughing.

It definitely hadn't. But hearing the genuine surprise in his delight did.

If China was a real enemy, North would have tightened his grip and used his thighs to snap his neck. Instead he swung backwards until he was staring at the earth, his legs still firmly locked around his opponent's head as he tried to drag him down to the ground. China bent back, grabbing onto his knees to try and pry him loose before suddenly going limp.

North's goal was accomplished, just not in the way he wanted. What should have been a controlled takedown that ended with him properly choking China out with his legs saw him suddenly slamming head-first into the ground, his grip disengaging as he went sprawling on his back. Quick as a snake China flipped around, getting on top of him, reaching for his hands. Head still spinning, North wrapped his arms around his torso and his legs around his waist, lunging up to bury his face in his chest and pull him into a death-roll, both of them tumbling around on the cold dirt while the Korean tried to ignore the strikes that jabbed into his sides and shoulder blades whenever China got the chance.

He'd almost expected the other country to go easy on him for fear of making his burns worse, but North was thrilled to find he'd been wrong. None of China's blows were softened, each landing with the

force he would've used on an enemy, which allowed the Korean county to do the same, driving his fist into his side over and over, until China rolled them again and drove his knee into his inner thigh, sending a burst of pins and needles and pain down North's entire leg.

Unable to move it, he was forced to stay on his back as China tried to trap his working leg with his own. North dug the fingers of one hand into his slender waist and drove the other in a wedge shape into his liver, forcing a satisfying *"Urk!"* sound out of China's mouth.

Suddenly North saw stars as the man smashed his forehead down into his own and they both went reeling, China falling back as he rolled to the side. Before North could recover, the other man's knee drove into his kidneys, his hand gripping the back of his neck. But he was clearly still disoriented from the headbutt as a sharp twist of his spine was enough for North to throw him off.

The Korean pounced on him, straddling his waist.

"Korea, play nice!" SH called as she saw his intent.

Her words didn't stop North from punching the man under him in the face.

He *did* soften this blow, and made no effort to counter China turning away from it so that he only struck a glancing hit off his jaw. It still felt good.

He bared his teeth and China laughed, wrapping his legs around his abdomen and sending him to the ground again.

They wrestled like this until the sun had sunk below the treeline, only streaks of red managing to make it through the trunks to illuminate their brawl. Rolling, grappling, striking each other's pressure points, each trying maybe not as hard as they could have to pin the other.

North's strength was countered by China's speed and flexibility, and China's calculated strikes were countered by North's fierce fighting style and ability to take blows. It was clear they were evenly

matched, and at a stalemate, just like the war engulfing his country. But unlike that stalemate, this one wasn't entirely unpleasant.

North grunted as he was slammed to the ground again, China coming down on him once more, straddling his thighs this time as his ankles locked around North's, stopping him from kicking him off. The Korean read something new in the way his eyes narrowed, and tried to get his arms up. But China seized them, crushing his wrists together as he pinned them over his head.

And for the first time, his free hand met the burn gash, pinpointing the spot where it touched the scar on his chest. North arched his back, teeth creaking as he fought back a pained yelp.

The hand that wasn't pinning his wrists suddenly seized his left leg, fingers wrapping around the back of his thigh as China's thumb jabbed hard into the seam between it and his pelvis.

A twinge shot through North's entire body, electrifying him as it felt like a nerve scraped over a spur of bone.

He was unable to hold back his snarl this time, his vision flashing as the pain sent a rush of renewed vigour through him. He surged up, knocking China back and jumping on top of him, both of them tussling violently in a mess of limbs until he finally came out on top, slamming the other country's back into the ground, knocking the breath from him as he trapped his arms at his sides with his thighs and locked his ankles into place with the same move he'd used on him.

China writhed and twisted ineffectually before gasping, "Surrender!"

North didn't let him go, pressing down on his shoulders. "I *know*... what letting someone wins looks like," he panted, irked.

China laughed breathily. "Consider it... a favour. Otherwise we'll be here... all night. And if I won, your pride... would mean that we had to fight again tomorrow. And until you won."

North's eye narrowed. "And... *when* I won?"

China's eye gleamed as his lips curved up. "My pride would dictate I

had to do the same thing. It would be... a vicious cycle, comrade. This way we both walk away satisfied."

"Korea, please get off of our comrade," SH called.

They had rolled almost into the trees on the far side of the clearing, and were talking too low for the others to hear.

North bore down harder on China for a moment, eye narrowed. Then he released him, climbing off. Neither of them stood up, still catching their breath.

"Ura!" South Pyongan cheered. "Let's go, Korea! Who's the superior country? That's right- Korea! Korea number one!"

Liaoxi cleared her throat, and she quickly said, "I mean, both of our countries did great, yeah?"

"I'd say so," China said, starting to stand.

Not wanting him to get up first, North shot up, wincing at the ache in his hip, along with the other myriad pains.

SH saw, and arched a brow. *'And what have we learned about picking fights when we're covered in burns?'*

'You're next,' North conveyed with a squint.

"Aiya," China said, feeling his own pains as the adrenaline ebbed, rubbing his forehead. "You have a hard head, comrade."

"'Course he does," North Hamgyong grunted, pushing off the GAZ and heading to the bunker door. "Shit's dense as concrete."

"At least it isn't made of steel," North sniped back as headlights shone through the trees, and the Jeep pulled in next to his own vehicle.

"Korea!" Hae shot out of the back bench and rocketed towards him, only stopped by the hand held out against her forehead. "Wegotalltheeastfieldsdonealltthewinterwheatan'rapeseedsplantedan'aheven

Her excited expression morphed to big wide eyes full of concern as she noticed how dishevelled he was.

North attempted to straighten his collar. "Comrade China and I were engaging in on-the-spot combat practice."

Hae squinted suspiciously at the Chinese man.

"I assure you he gave as good as he got, Little Tiger," China said, tucking his rumpled, filthy undershirt back into the waistband of his pants.

Hae turned her squint to North. "Did you win?"

"Yes." If China was going to let him win, he was going to rub it in.

"Hmmm." Hae thought, then nodded decisively, breaking out in a beam again. "A' course you did! Ura Korea!"

"Go get North Pyongan to warm up your rations," he ordered. "Give me your report on the planting after."

Hae nodded happily, skipping over to her cousin as he passed the Jeep keys to China.

"Thank you for letting us borrow your vehicle," he said politely.

"That's nice to hear." China sent North a pointed look. "Though I suppose it is more of our vehicle by now."

North scrunched his face.

North Pyongan looked to Liaoxi as he started towards the stove with Hae, as if wondering if she would stay with them. But the Chinese province didn't look his way, jumping lightly from the GAZ and following her sister into the bunker now that the show was over. North's province looked dejected as he went to heat their porridge.

North wasn't sure if China had decided to keep his promise that he wouldn't have to worry about their provinces'... *feelings* towards each other early, or if the Chinese woman had simply come to her

senses. He didn't care to ask. He was satisfied regardless. He would have preferred if his province was the one to pull away, but at least one of them had.

"And you said you don't enjoy fighting."

North flicked his eye to China as he brushed dirt from his tunic. "I don't."

"Mm." China smiled. "Regardless, it was an engaging one. We'll have to do it again sometime, comrade."

"As long as you're prepared to lose."

North was already analyzing their fight, trying to see what he could have done better, aside from several instances where he could have attempted to finish China off, but hadn't. If he had, their fight would have ended sooner.

Most of his actions had been perfectly executed, and only failed due to China's agility. His one note was that he needed to get better at combatting the man's ability to sneak into his blind spot.

Even though he hadn't truly won, North was pleased by the outcome. He was certain now that he could beat China in a real fight. He had thought he could before, but the way the Chinese Countryhuman had restrained him on Bukhan Mountain kept sticking in his mind, even though he'd been holding back. But if he had been evenly matched with China now, when he was covered in burns and... not in peak physical condition, then he could definitely beat him in perfect health. China might be fast, but so long as he caught him once, North could eliminate him.

If their countries ever became enemies, and he had to fulfill that promise, he could.

"Are you thinking about killing me?"

Snapping out of his thoughts, North said, "No." He spun on a heel. "I'm going to take a bath."

It was the entire reason he'd come to the bunker so early. Now the

combat had delayed him, and he was too battered to walk back.

He could. But without time to rest, his Premier would definitely know he'd been brawling. And if he asked with who, North would have to admit he'd given in to his urge to rough up their ally.

Which meant he was going to have to sleep in the bunker, which was precisely what he had been trying to avoid.

"Do you need someone to wash your back?" China asked innocently.

North gave him a wordless glare over his shoulder, then called, "South Hwanghae. If you're anywhere *near* that stove when I come back, you'll be digging latrines."

She squeaked, jumping back from the flames North Pyongan was feeding.

North collected his bathing kit from his room, grimacing at the collection of radio parts and wires in the corner, before setting off into the woods.

The wooden tub was just far enough away that it couldn't be seen from the bunker, nestled between tree trunks and under the shadow of Jangsan for as much privacy as possible.

North had woken up early this morning to collect water from the river to boil, so all he had to do was use his matches and kindling to light the stove under the tub, and wait. The basin was small, just wide enough to fit one person and tall enough to reach their chest when they sat in it. But it still took a good hour for it to reach the roiling boil Kangwon had dictated in his hygiene measures.

The scent of cooking grain filtered through the trees alongside his provinces' chatter. North felt around in the frozen leaf litter until he found a small stone, placing it in his mouth to suck on, unbothered by the grit of dirt and taste of loam.

When the water was finally boiling, he removed his clothes and bandages, carefully folding them and placing them on a nearby rock, stepping in without waiting for it to cool. The scalding water made all his hairs stand on end and sent stinging shivers through

his skin, but he didn't hesitate to submerge his entire body in it.

North swiftly and meticulously scrubbed himself down, brushing his hands roughly over the burns to dislodge the fabric fibres and dirt he knew were caked into them. The steam that rose from the bubbling water smelled like soup.

North swirled the rock in his mouth as he struggled to reach his back, making sure it was as clean as his front. He wasn't going to let them get infected, especially now that he had decided to return to the front if needed.

He knew he should let Kangwon clean them properly again, at least with just water, but... He would visit Kim Yong-hwan soon, like she had nagged him to do when she took blood.

He rubbed the small patch of skin that the nurse had managed to find amongst the burns, thinking of China's instructions to give his blood to whoever needed it. Did he know?

North did. And it was strange to think his blood might be circulating in a Chinese soldier's veins. It was... discomfiting.

When he was clean, he climbed out of the bathtub, hurriedly wiping himself down with a small towel and dressing in his uniform, displeased by the feeling of dirty clothes on his clean skin. He would have to wash it tomorrow, especially now that the water-thinned blood leaking from his body was soaking it. Maybe he should get SH to track down a laundry basin.

But he didn't like the idea of having so many amenities at the bunker. It made it feel too... permanent.

North washed his bandages in the same water, knowing that if he could see it, it would be solid brown by the time he was done, just as filthy as before it was boiled.

Once he was done, he brushed his teeth, then tipped over the tub, careful to keep his boots away from the flood of bloody water, using some of it to douse the fire before returning to the clearing to hang his wet bandages in a tree.

Chagang and SH stood outside the bunker door, their quiet words filling the air with clouds of steam.

His female province smiled when she saw him. "Hae fell asleep waiting for you to get back."

"Wake her up after your shift," North ordered Chagang. "Tell her to wake me up after."

He would have preferred to take the next watch and stand it until dawn, but he knew from experience that when Hae went to sleep with something to tell him, she would keep waking up through the night until she did.

Ssi-bal. He was going to have to sleep in his room.

"Where's China?"

"He left a few minutes ago," SH reported. "He went that way."

She pointed in the opposite direction from where North had come from.

He had time to lock his door.

Without another word, he brushed past his provinces, only answering their 'goodnights' before he darted into the bunker, then into his room.

But as he shut the door, he paused, suddenly unnerved.

The hot water had soothed the minor pains in his body, the bruises and aches that South Pyongan and China had left. But something else was gone, too. Something that's absence was as noticeable as a new injury would be.

North lifted his left leg, then put his full weight down on it, repeating the motion before walking in circles around the small room. Then jogging. Then jumping up and down on it before feeling like an idiot and acknowledging that it was true.

The ache in his hip from the fight was gone. And so was the old

ache, the one that had lingered in his bones every day, and plagued him for every winter since 1918.

North braced his back against the cold steel of the door, lifting the leg as high as he could, waiting for the dull pain. Nothing.

It had never got in the way. It hadn't hindered his mobility or made him limp noticeably. It had been just another ache in his tapestry of them. But it *had* been there.

And now it was gone.

He crushed the flicker of hope he'd felt, smoothing his expression. It was likely only a momentary relief. It would be back tomorrow, and likely worse.

But it wasn't there tonight.

North removed his newly-requisitioned winter uniform, placing it neatly in the corner. He would wear his summer one to spare the thick jacket from further stains since he had to sleep without bandages while they dried.

He pulled his pants off, leaving him in just his military-issue shorts, drab green so they could be hung on a laundry line without attracting enemy fire. He pulled down the corner of them, squinting at the seam of his pelvis in the light of the lantern.

He poked skeptically at it, expecting the action to bring the ache back. It didn't. The skin was a bit tender, and he could see the dark purple bruise forming on his blue skin from China's thumb, but that was all.

"Tch."

Behind him, the door- which he'd forgotten to lock in his disbelief over his leg- creaked open.

North shot into the air, diving into his bedroll, covering his body as quickly as possible with the thick olive fabric.

"You know," China said mildly, shutting the door behind him. "I've

had women react less dramatically at being walked in on changing."

"So you walk in on women changing often?" North asked scathingly, hidden up to his chin in the bed roll, heart pounding.

China paused, considering. "Aiya. There's nothing I can say to that that sounds good, is there?"

"No." North worked an arm free to point at the door. "Get out. And *knock* next time."

Ignoring him, China said, "I don't see the point. We're both men." He suddenly looked keenly at North. "You *are* a man, yes?"

'You just manhandled me enough to know the answer is yes.'

Not wanting to dignify him with answer, North bit his tongue on that. "Just because I let you sleep in here *once,* doesn't mean you can just move in."

He gestured at China's things neatly lining the far wall, unmoved from the last time the Korean had slept here.

"Doesn't it?" China sat down on his bedroll, pulling his transceiver from his bag and starting to fiddle with it. "I promise I won't peek."

North remained firmly in his roll.

China didn't have to worry about changing. He was dressed in the thick winter coat and pants that he never took off, already delivered from his requisitions officer before snow had even fallen on the mountains. It was honestly surprising that he'd willingly removed the jacket earlier.

But North was shirtless and covered in open burns that were going to start staining the inside of his bedroll soon.

He eyed the lantern. He was used to changing in the dark.

Then he imagined China lurking a step behind him, unseen, and shuddered. No.

He briefly considered dragging his clothes into the bag to try and change inside it. But he knew it would be immature of him, and the other country would be inwardly snickering the entire time.

It was stupid for him to be so reluctant to be shirtless in front of him. They *were* both men. And he wasn't one of North's people, so he didn't have the same concerns.

But there were similar ones.

North grit his teeth, sliding a finger down his rough torso to the gash, feeling the liquid pooling in it. He didn't want to go to the trouble of cleaning his bedroll when he just had.

Reluctantly, he pulled himself from safety, staring down China as he did. The other man's eyes didn't move from what he was doing-screwing a panel back onto the transceiver with the knife from his boot.

North quickly grabbed his summer uniform from the head of his bedroll, careful to keep his chest angled away from China. Darting frequent looks at him, he hustled into the far corner.

He glanced back at his long underwear. He knew he should put them on soon to combat the frigid air of the bunker. China was certainly already wearing his. But the way the tight long-sleeved shirt and pants constricted his legs and arms was unpleasant on the best of days, and when he thought about pulling the thick cotton over his open burns, and how the fluids would make the fabric cling to his skin...

He kept his shorts on, quickly throwing on his light summer pants. More at ease with at least them as a barrier, he took a brief moment to examine his torso (after sneaking another look at China).

He curled his lip at what he saw. No longer a patchwork, he was almost a solid mass of mottled red, orange, and black. He looked like one of the many napalm victims from the twenty-six villages that had stood north of Suwon before the beginning of this year, his skin crinkled, scorched into ridges and valleys like the land it represented. The burns had even spread over the tops of his feet,

small spots of watery red staining his grey woollen socks.

But there still weren't any on the bottom, or his face. Small victories.

His teeth grit at the word, his fingers turning to claws over the gash.

Suddenly he stiffened and spun around, a *'thud'* echoing around the room as his open palm struck China's chest, sending him backwards.

"Are we going again so soon?" he asked, unbothered.

"What were you doing?" North didn't wait for an answer, realizing his chest was exposed, he snatched his uniform shirts up, throwing them on and buttoning them snugly up to his chin.

"Just checking if you were secretly a woman," the other man said innocently. "That would make for an interesting story. But alas."

North pressed his lips together, aggressively shutting off the lamp.

As China's face had appeared in the corner of his vision, he had seen his eyes fixed on his chest. But he knew he hadn't been checking for... those. He had either been looking at the burn gash or his scar.

Had he seen them before? When they had crossed the Chongchon River, the Chinese had removed their outerwear so they wouldn't freeze. But North had tolerated the stiff fabric of his undershirt, only removing his pants and tunic. And he hadn't once taken it off, even during their long campaigns or their digging at Chorweon, unless he was alone in a medical tent.

North didn't think he had. No one had seen his scar but his provinces, his General, and the occasional comrade during the Occupation, when he had no choice. And no one had seen the burn except for Kangwon and Kim Yong-hwan.

China didn't say anything, but the knowledge that he had seen North's 'souvenir' burned worse than his charred skin.

At least he had caught him looking. The idea of him silently watching him, judging him for being unable to stop such a mark from being inflicted on him, without the Korean even knowing, made him burn worse. At least this way he knew he thought he was weak.

He thought of the long, pale scars trailing into China's waistband.

And at least he couldn't think it without being a hypocrite.

North slid into his bedroll, feeling his scar twinge, not from the hits it had taken or the burns that obscured parts of the pink band, but deeper. Something that could never be soothed.

He rested his hand on his chest, fingers pressing against the raised edges.

A reminder. No matter what America threw at them next, he would overcome it. No matter what he had to ignore for the sake of greater peace, like that murdered boy, he would make sure that he survived to make the foreigner pay for it. No matter how much firepower he threw at them to try and make them kneel, North wouldn't.

Korea didn't beg.

He heard a small noise and stiffened, snatching his hand from his scar.

"Get away from me."

"I'm not near you," China's voice said from closer than before.

North pulled his arm from his roll, reaching out. It flopped across a warm body, his hand clearing his chest.

"Get away from me," he repeated.

"You're the one that moved, not me."

North could still feel his right shoulder touching the wall, where he firmly pressed himself the few times he'd had to be in here with

China.

"Get. *Away."*

Giving up his innocent voice, China switched to something whiny, "But it's *cold."*

His bitching about the heat had ended around the beginning of September and immediately been replaced by whining about the cold again, despite the fact that Hae had predicted this winter wouldn't be anywhere near as frigid as the last. North didn't know which was worse, but both were intolerable.

"What does that have to do with me?" he demanded, shoving him with his shoulder. "Get back on your side of the room."

"We can't cuddle?"

North growled low in his throat.

"Fine," China sighed, and he could hear the deliberate sounds of him inching his entire bedroll away. "I'll just freeze then. When you have to deliver my frozen body to my Comrade Peng, tell him I said not to hold it against you."

"It was *your* choice to sleep in here," North reminded him irritably. "You *could* be at your Mobile Headquarters."

It wasn't like they would be much warmer. But at least Peng Dehuai probably permitted a heater.

"And I suppose I'll pay the price for it," China sighed heavily.

North ignored him, closing his eye and making sure his eyepatch was firmly in place.

The room was silent. Mostly. North could hear a sound like clattering bones as China's teeth chattered together, filling the small space.

He wished he could just write him off as being overdramatic, but he knew from last year that the other man truly didn't handle the cold

well. His composure was the act, not the shivering.

North huffed, freezing air washing over his upper half as he sat up, removing his tunic. "Here."

He could feel an investigative tug on the fabric before the hand was withdrawn.

"I don't want your jacket." China's voice was suddenly normal again.

"Take it," North said irritably. "I'm sick of listening to your teeth."

"I'll take your winter one, if you're really not going to wear it."

"It's damp." And he didn't want China to see all the stains the next morning. "Take this one."

"I don't want it."

Aggravated, North growled, "You can't moan about the cold then turn me down when I try to fix it."

"I'm not that cold," China denied. "I was only pretending."

North curled his lip, hearing the tremble in his words. "Fine. Freeze. I don't care. But I will punch your teeth out before I listen to them chattering all night."

He shrugged his tunic back on, sliding back into the warmth of the bag.

China's teeth didn't chatter, but in the silence he could hear the fabric of his roll rustling, the slightest noise as his comrade shivered inside it.

Grimacing, North reached back for his pack, pulling something out. He heard the impact as the balled up fabric hit China, hopefully in the face.

"Ah, your scarf," he said after a moment, sounding pleased.

North had finally put his foot down for him to return the grey and

white striped fabric (now with dark red stains on it that couldn't quite be washed out) when his comrade started to wear his ushanka again. China hadn't complied, so he had waited until he was sleeping one night and yanked it off him, then pretended to be asleep once he woke up.

"Keep it," he grunted. At least the labour of the woman that made it would go to better use. He didn't often wear scarves.

"I thought you didn't want me to have this."

'As if that wasn't what you were angling for this entire time.'

"You stole it from me before," North grumbled, though he had remembered by now (with great embarrassment) that that wasn't true. "Now I'm giving it to you. Just wear it."

"Thank you."

He could hear China winding the fabric around his neck and snuggling down into his bedroll.

"And if you are *anywhere* near me when I wake up, I'm strangling you with it."

"Noted."

North knew there would be no waking up, since he wasn't sleeping. His head knew China wasn't going to hurt him, not unless they one day became enemies. But his body still wasn't convinced. The few times they'd shared this room, he had lain awake, waiting for his comrade to drift off. Then lain awake longer, every muscle tense for the sound of the other country getting up to take advantage of his vulnerability. He had preferred having the locked door between them.

China's remaining slight shivers slowly died away as his breathing evened, muffled in a way that meant he had North's- his scarf wrapped around his face. North snorted lightly, keeping his own eye open to avoid the weariness plucking at the edges of his mind.

He truly didn't find it that cold. He had thick walls to keep out the

wind, good clothes with sturdy stitching, even if they were for summer, and a military-quality bedroll. If he had to, he could go start another fire in the hearth outside and squat by it, or go for a jog down to the river.

There had been nothing like that in the shack. On windy nights the gusts cut through the gaps in the boards like Japanese blades, stripping the skin from their exposed faces, arms, and legs, even under the thin blanket. Ice welled up from the boards beneath them and into their thin futon, so that even the slightest shift from the warmth your body had created would make you stifle a gasp. The only way to make his brother stop shaking for even a moment was to force him to accept his shirt, wrap them both in the blanket with their legs pulled up to their chests and intertwined, and bury him half under him. Every part of North had been frozen, except for the hands slid up the back of South's shirts, and the inside of his chest when he finally managed to get his brother to sleep.

It had gotten easier in that last year, when they had been given the extra blanket and shirts. North could swaddle his brother in three of them, and even keep one for himself. Though at that point he hadn't needed it. He hadn't felt the bite of the cold as deeply.

He hadn't felt much of anything.

Was South warm? Did he have an ondol room in that large manor? A stove at least? Thick warm clothes to keep the cold away when North couldn't? Was it also still not enough when his body was aching to be curled up with his brother, cold knees knocking together?

One last winter. America wouldn't give up, but once his politicians saw that starvation and bombing were never going to bring Korea to its knees, they would overrule his generals, like they had with Ridgway over Kaesong. They would sign the ceasefire. There would be more hurdles after that, but North could handle them, and tear Korea's Reunification from their bloody claws.

One last winter. Then he could hold his brother again.

The next morning, as North broke from his guard posture outside

the bunker and went to muster his provinces, the ache was still gone from his hip. And it never came back.

Author's note elaboration on the POW thing in the next chapter, since it's better for it.

I was watching a lot of grappling videos for this chapter because I've mostly only seen battlefield grappling, not friendly, and... That's a very homoerotic hobby, isn't it? I was looking for specific moves but most of them were 'guy straddles man's hips, uses the power of his thighs to get him on the ground, then embraces him strongly.' One woman was literally just... on top of this other woman. Like between her legs just holding her. It almost looked tender before you saw the other woman's eyes were bulging out of her head. Anyway, that's... not what North and China are doing. They're doing something different. I don't think men in the army ever have a right to be homophobic when they're doing things like that. I think marrying a man might be less gay than grappling.

I think someone should have bit the bullet, so to speak, and jumped Netanyahu at the UN. Fully torn his jugular out with their teeth? Would Israel still exist? Yes, so long as America does. But wouldn't the hot spray of iron be satisfying? Wouldn't it feel good to be the first person to ever actually do something positive at the UN ever? Come on world representatives, you know you want to~
Also remember that the DPRK is frequently blocked from speaking, but the head of a state committing genocide that is also a wanted criminal can get up in front of them and wave his silly little diagrams around as he justifies ethnic cleansing with no problem.

Grito de Corea

TW: Racism directed at black and Hispanic people, Puerto Ricans especially. Slurs aren't being screamed in people's faces (though they are being said internally), but dehumanizing language is used, if you need to be prepared for that.

The Eighth Army Headquarters in Seoul were never empty. Always there were toadies hustling around inside the huge red-brick building (repaired after the nasty scorching it'd taken after Southie's foray into arson) while officers conferred and couriers hustled past with messages for the Signal Corps. Military police patrolled the grounds and stood guard around the perimeter, almost as many as at the base camp at Munsan. There were always folks comin' and goin', fighting the commies in their own special way, whatever that was.

But this was getting fucking ridiculous.

America had to ease off the gas as his vehicle neared the barred iron gate set in the brick wall that surrounded the requisitioned Jap military building so none of the reporters rushing him would end up smeared over his bumper.

The newshawks spent all day circling the place like vultures, shouting at his boys as they crossed the yard and shoving microphones in the sentries' faces as they babbled their questions, just waiting for one of them to slip up and feed 'em a steaming pile of carrion. It was even worse than at the base camp since it was easier to stroll through Seoul than into the neutral zone.

Every UN officer was under strict orders not to feed the scavengers, but it didn't stop them from swarming each vehicle that arrived or left, trying to catch them out.

"Mr. America, is it true the fighting at the front has petered out?"

"Mr. America, do you think we'll have a ceasefire soon?"

“Mr. America, what would you say to those who think the United Nations Command is dragging these negotiations out unduly?”

America let the questions slide off him like water, but couldn’t ignore them completely. The rest of the brass could get away with stonewalling the press, but if he did it, it would just spawn a dozen little paragraphs speculating on his facial expression.

“Sorry, folks!” he called out the window with an apologetic grin. “You know the policy. You wouldn’t want me to get in trouble with the UN, now would you?”

One man with too much hair on his cheeks and not enough on his chin shouted, “Then is it true that the press embargo is the United Nations’ decision?”

America sent him a wink. “Mum’s the word.”

It wasn’t, but despite all the birdy’s complaints about freedom of the press, he knew the organization was relieved he’d tightened security around Korea, since he had to make a follow-up statement on pretty much every statement America’s guys did. His feathers were just ruffled because all the complaints about it went to *his* desk.

The American tapped his fingers impatiently on the wheel as his vehicle slowly inched forward, the crowd parting reluctantly. At least he’d brought the Jeep over the Packard.

God, what he wouldn’t give to be behind the wheel of his Caddy. The shiny black exterior might’ve made some of these story-sniffers think twice about crowding so close. But he should probably hold off on having it shipped over.

‘Don’t want to give the flies anything else to swarm.’

And of course, if they *did* get their greasy fingerprints over it, like they were doing to the sides of his Jeep, he’d have to kill ‘em.

“Mr. America!” A younger man with a cowlick jumped in front of his vehicle like he was angling to meet the Lord. “Do you have anything to add to your statement from yesterday?”

“Just that once the Reds stop playing tough and sign this armistice, there will be a reckoning for every American life claimed in Korea,” the country said firmly, then added, “And Allied,” not wanting to give the Euros- and others- in the swarm anything to nitpick.

The man finally got out of his way, and America continued forward, smiling and waving even as he refused to answer any questions, amicably smoothing over the press embargo the way he’d smoothed over Ridgway and Van Fleet’s inability to do math at the press conference yesterday.

He fucking *hated* the press.

Don’t get him wrong- he loved the freedom of it. Hell, America was pretty much the only country that actually had it. If it wasn’t for the commies and their propaganda, he wouldn’t have to have this blackout right now.

But he hated reporters. Always in your face, looking for some scandal or scoop. Some of them could be useful, the ones that knew the truth wasn't always what people needed to hear. But even some of those could be dammed irritating.

He remembered the time some dirt-digger had lurked outside his plantation house in Virginia for a month straight during the Great Depression, trying to corner him or the help every single time they stepped out his front gate, looking for some dirt to smear his name with.

America had actually been a little amused, staying in the state longer than planned just to see how long the man would keep it up for. But it morphed to annoyance after he had to fire one of his cooks for leaking last week's menu. The guy had acted so triumphant, like it was some great crime America was importing caviar and lobster. So? He could afford it. It wasn’t his fault the little people couldn’t. *He* hadn’t been the one to crash the stock market.

(*Some* of the newspapers back home could stand to chew on the fact that the thing that had pulled them out of the Great Depression

was the economic opportunity World War II had presented them. Because America would bet if he'd let the economy continue to slide like it had been before *this* war, they'd be bitching at him even louder.)

Anyway, sure, he could see getting all indignant over a wealthy human, even if he didn't agree with it. If they still had money after 1929, that meant they'd worked for it. If some people spent less time bitching about how empty their pockets were and more time pulling up their bootstraps, they'd be wealthy, too. Maybe not lobster wealthy, but oyster wealthy at least. But he did get it. It was natural for the little fella to envy the guy who had more.

But America was their Countryhuman. Their wealth was his wealth. So long as he was doing fine, that meant *America* was doing fine. If he'd had to start eating water pie and dandelion salad with everyone else, *that* would be when folks should start to worry.

The reporter had seen the sense of that when he sat him down to talk things over. Honestly, America was prepared to offer him a few hundred dollars to just drop the whole thing.

But then the man had made one mistake- he got greedy. He'd demanded a ridiculous amount of greenbacks before America could get a word off. And hey, he was reasonable. Humans were naturally greedy, and he didn't expect them to fight their nature.

But he couldn't let him get away with thinking he could blackmail the United States of America.

It wasn't like he'd had him killed or anything. The story wasn't *that* important. He'd just shrugged and let him go to the press with it. It made a splash, caused a few fish to frenzy, then was out of the papers in a month, just like he'd known it would be. Honestly the only reason he'd even offered the guy cash was because he was impressed by his determination. Not everyone was willing to sleep outside his gate in the rain.

But he'd had to be taught a lesson. As his Countryhuman, America had the right to demand anything from *him,* not the other way around.

And he needed to be punished for compromising that cook. God, he missed her. She made the best Goddamn cornbread he'd ever had. No one ran a kitchen like a coloured woman in her fifties.

Thinking of that fuelled his urge to just slam the gas and watch the vultures go scrambling. If a few ended going over his hood because they weren't fast enough, that really wasn't his fault.

He didn't, though. He just grinned brightly, red stripes on his knuckles white around the wheel, until he finally got close enough to the gate for the military police to finally move their asses and start to clear people away to open it.

But before they could, a voice rose over the clamour, shouting in accented English, "General America! We need to speak with you!"

America kept facing forward, but peered out the side of his aviators, using the old 'Don't make eye contact with the loons' method to see a group of men forcing their way through the swarm.

Unlike the reporters with their sky blue UN helmets, lanyards, and thick winter coats, these were dressed in military uniforms. *American* military uniforms.

There were twelve of 'em- five spics, four blacks, and three good ole boys. All of them looked to be privates, and their leader seemed to be from the first category, with a clean-shaven face and a head of dark curls that would've put a cherub to shame if they weren't close-cropped. He looked well put together, but had one of those skin tones that made you think of dirt.

With his 'conversation you don't want to have around reporters' senses tingling, America stared impatiently at the military police that were supposed to be opening the damn gate. But for some completely unknowable reason they'd paused, like their Countryhuman might actually want to speak to a group of soldiers that were definitely not supposed to be here right now.

"General America!"

'Goddammit.'

America turned to his open window, slinging an arm out it. “What seems to be the problem, gentlemen?”

The reporters drew back, their squawking finally settling down as they watched the interaction with avaricious eyes, expecting some crumb of a story.

The soldier at the front stopped a few inches away from him, his eyes serious and his jaw set. The face of a man about to do something he shouldn’t, America would say.

“We want to know why there hasn’t been a ceasefire.”

Wishing people would at least get new questions, the country quirked a lip. Not a laugh, that would be insensitive with recent events. But a little bit of wryness.

“That’s what *I’d* like to know, too. I’m afraid you’d have to ask the Reds. But fair warning, they might not be so keen on a friendly chat.” His lips pressed thin. “They didn’t exactly ‘chat’ with our POWs.”

“And we haven’t exactly chatted with theirs,” the Mexican-type shot back. “Yet they seem ready to lay down their arms and end this war. It's *you* that doesn't seem ready to do that. Sir.”

America took a moment to look closer at the man. “Name and rank, soldier?”

He brought his hand up to his forehead in a sharp salute. “Private Adolfo Rivera-Campos, sir. Enlisted 65th Infantry Regiment attached to the 3rd Infantry Division, transferred to guard prisoner of war handling zones, sir.”

America could tell the difference between the people of his more southern lands about as well as he could the gooks and Red Chinese. But he knew the 65th Regiment was the Puerto Rican regiment.

He got the other men's IDs, too. The negro soldiers were all from the same regiment- the 24th, though after its dissolution, they’d all been transferred to different units.

America wasn't sad to see the 24th go. They'd struck their blows against the Indians and the Filipinos and Japs, but they also had a long history of disobedience. Even though he'd made sure their commanding officer was always white, it wasn't enough to stop them from misbehaving. Once again, he wasn't going to hold it against them for following their natures. It was just that war wasn't the place to do it.

In the end, it wasn't wise to keep too many of 'em around each other. It was why America had never had much personal truck with slavery. You get a bunch of little people together, same skin, same background, same job, and it could start to get dangerous, especially when you were letting them live on your estate or giving them firearms. Ideas could start to spread. In a few years he intended to ditch segregated units completely.

The white men were unremarkable. Two of them were also assigned to POW-handling duty, and the other was from a frontline unit a mile or so east.

America gave a low whistle. "That's quite a group. Seems a little strange your officers would send you all the way to Headquarters. What's your mission, soldiers?"

Rivera's hands clenched, his body giving away his nerves, even if his round face didn't. "There is no mission, sir. We came here on our own to speak to you."

America paused for a long moment, giving them time to sweat. "I'm sorry, private. I think I heard you wrong. Did you just tell me you came here without a commanding officer's orders?" He lowered his voice, just slightly. "Because that sounds a little like dereliction of duty."

"It is, sir," Rivera confirmed.

"Do any of you folks know what the punishment for that is?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"A fine or court martialling, sir," one of the black soldiers said stiffly from behind his honcho. "And in wartime, the death

penalty."

America gave his words time to sink into the hush. By now all of the reporters had fallen silent, realizing that something was going on.

Then he laughed, waving his hand. "Come on now. You ran off to see your Countryhuman, not join the commies in killing our guys. I'd make sure they didn't give you the electric chair." He sobered, looking at them more seriously. "Though with the kind of accusation you just made, I can't promise they wouldn't do more than court martial you. When you go around slinging the enemy's propaganda like that, well… It can make a man sound like an enemy agent."

And he could see they all knew what *that* meant.

Not death. They weren't like the Rosenbergs, who he was going to see hang if it cost him money. They were just small-fry. But they could still look forward to discharge from the military, loss of their benefits, imprisonment, and blacklisting. Complete ostracization could more than ruin a man's life. And his family's.

"Tell you what," America said congenially once the little group had time to accept the severity of that. "I'm a reasonable guy, so I'm going to give you something the Reds wouldn't- a second chance. Get on back to your posts by the end of the day, and I'll write your commanding officers up a notice to pardon you, just this once."

He could see a few of the reporters nodding. And no reason why they shouldn't. It was a generous offer.

The motley crew looked uncertainly at each other. Then three of them stepped away, the two POW-handling whites and a black, avoiding eye contact as they disappeared into the crowd.

"Don't let him intimidate you!" Rivera ordered. But they were already gone.

Still, America was displeased to see that nine remained. That was enough for two bowling teams and a spare.

The country looked back to the Puerto Rican. “Clock’s ticking.”

His eyes hardened as he looked back at him. “We aren’t leaving.”

A few of the men behind him shifted nervously, but didn’t move.

‘Always something.’

“Alright then,” America said, smiling. “If it’s so important, then why don’t you come on in?”

He waved for his military police to open the gates. They hesitated, then did.

“This is a rare chance,” America said casually as the group flanked his car into the Headquarters. “Usually reporters need an invitation. And their escorts aren’t usually the United States of America.”

He parked the Jeep on the gravel drive, then leapt from the vehicle, taking a stretch. One of the black men was taller than him by a few inches, but he was also younger (obviously) and built like a beanpole. And the Countryhuman more than loomed over Rivera.

“Come on inside,” he invited, starting for the doors fronting the multi-story building.

“We'd rather talk here.”

America gauged the distance between them and the crowd, then put his hands in his pockets. “Alright. So you’re upset there’s not been much progress on the ceasefire front. But I think you’re a little confused- it’s not *our* side that’s delaying them. It’s the Reds.”

“That’s-!”

Rivera reached back with a hand, quieting the remaining white soldier. “The Reds said they’d give us an armistice right away if we gave up asking for their city. A city that we had no right to ask for in the first place.”

No right? America controlled the skies, even with those toys of

CCCP's. He outnumbered the commies eight to one. He had the atom bomb. He had *every* right to take whatever he wanted.

"That city belonged to us before," he pointed out chipperly, and something flashed across the Puerto Rican's dark eyes that he didn't like. "It's on our side of the Parallel. I'd say it's the Reds that have no right to expect to keep it."

"It *never* belonged to us," the man said, his hands turning to fists. "And you're the one that kept rejecting the Koreans wanting to set the line at the 38th Parallel."

America arched a brow. "First of all, I'm not responsible for every single thing around here. We're a democracy, unlike our friends to the north."

"Democracy?" Rivera bristled. "Is that what you called it when you invaded and annexed my country? When you took our language and turned us into a sugar plantation?"

Pissed at how little gratitude some people had, but better at maintaining his civility, America held up his hands. "If it weren't for me, you folks would still be slaving away under the Spaniards. But are we here to hash out tired events or the current ones? Because I'm afraid I don't have time for both."

He checked his watch, and the Puerto Rican took a deep breath, allowing America to get back to his points.

"Second of all, I decided that General Ridgway was being unreasonable by asking for Kaesong. That's why he got overruled."

It had been useful for a second, while other things were cooking. But much like water pie, people weren't exactly clamouring for it. Once the pumpkin pie was ready- just in time for Thanksgiving- they'd taken it off the table. America had finally answered Truman's calls, and the man had finally shown sense by consulting with him about it instead of sneaking around behind his back.

And why shouldn't he? As much as America ragged on him for being Prez Pinko, he did want victory in Korea. Even if his idea of it

was wearing them down at the current line until they signed over their country, and America's was going back north to burn the Red tendrils, then going even farther to cut the evil out at the root. For now they were aligned over refusing to bow to the commies. So long as the cretins still felt like they had the right to make demands, they weren't ready for an armistice.

And Truman had said a few things that interested him. Things that had him telling Britain to send his Prime Minister- Winston Churchill, back in office, just liked he'd wanted- to pay a little visit to Washington soon.

"But you're still refusing to sign," Rivera accused.

"*And* you immediately turned around and started accusing them of executing people, and all but saying they were going to regret it!" one of the other island boys cried. "How is that supposed to make them want to make peace?"

America's expression shuttered. "Are you saying you *want* to make peace with the savages that murdered our men?"

"We've killed far more'a them!" the white man cried in a heavy Texas drawl, his freckles stark against his pallid skin.

"Now wait just a cotton-pickin' minute- No offense intended to present company- but *our* boys haven't executed a single POW," America said firmly. "That's the commies' truck."

Cords bulged on the man's neck, spots of red high on his cheeks. He glanced over at the reporters that would be pressed to the fence if the military police weren't holding them back, then sagged.

"We've still killed more of them," he said quietly, and America knew he'd have to keep tabs on him after this. A soldier that grew a conscience after the fact was a loose end.

"Do you think that killin' Communist soldiers in combat is the same as them executin' *thousands* of ours?" he demanded, summoning fire to his voice. "Good, honest men that just wanted to defend their country, *your* brothers-in-arms, are never going to go

home and see their families again because of *them."*

These people were just like South. He knew damn well that if the kid still wanted a ceasefire, he'd be perfectly fine with brushing America's soldiers under the rug. It didn't matter that they only had proof for a few hundred because they *knew* thousands had died in the camps, and tens of thousands on the field. It didn't matter whether they were unarmed or not- *American men* had been killed by a bunch of savage gooks, far more than should've. It was an affront to the natural order, and more importantly an affront to *him.*

"The 65th Regiment fought to the last minute against the Chinese at the Chosin Resevoir," he continued, incensed. "They *died* fighting for their country and you're going to disrespect them by pretending it doesn't matter?"

"It isn't *our* country!" Rivera snapped. "We are Puerto Rican, *not* American."

Ungrateful. Just like the blacks that complained about how their ancestors were treated or how they were treated. So what if their lives could be better? Because of the slave trade they had access to shit people in Africa could only *dream* of. Water, hospitals, *democracy.* If it wasn't for America, they would be swinging in the trees with the monkeys or shining some Spaniard's boots. Instead they were in the greatest country in the world.

"I can't say you're *acting* very American right now," America observed. "But I hate to break it to you- you are."

He smirked internally as the man's jaw feathered, the feeling roiling in his stomach soothed by the fact that no matter how much they bitched and moaned, no matter how ungrateful they were for everything he did for them, they were *his.* And that would never change.

"I *am* an American," an older black man spoke up, his voice rough as the New Orleans streets it sounded like he came from. "Before I'm anythin' else I am *American.* But why are we fighting for our country in Korea?" He put a callused hand on his chest. "When the Japs bombed Pearl Harbour, I enlisted right away. If you sent me

against a hundred Japans I would fight without question and I'd give my damn life for *you.* But these folks ain't done nothin' to us! Let the Koreans sort out their own problems and let us go *home."*

"Even if they killed eight thousand prisoners, even if they executed a hundred thousand, they would still be alive if we weren't here," the beanpole said, his eyes shining with pathetic tears. "If this had all ended the first time the commies said we should stop fighting, my brother would still be alive!"

Rivera nodded, his eyes hard. "My countrymen wouldn't be dead if we weren't here fighting the white man's war, the rich man's war. *Your* war.

"Please." He took a step towards America, and the ice melted to show the desperation behind his eyes. "We've agreed on the line. The fighting at the front's almost stopped. Stop it for *good.* Tell Van Fleet and Ridgway to go to hell and sign an armistice. All the negotiating crap can come after.

"No one else has to die."

America stared at him, at all of them, face falling blank. They were looking at him with such pleading sincerity.

Tension coiled in the pit of his stomach.

'Cowards.'

Didn't they know? Didn't they see? This wasn't about *them,* it wasn't about Korea. It wasn't even entirely about America.

It was about the world.

If they didn't stop Communism here it would spread like smallpox, like the plague. This little 'intervention' only proved it. Just like these men who should've had nothing in common, it would make the little countries think they did, would give them ideas. Those ideas would spread, make them think they had a right to be defiant, that America didn't have the right to do what he wanted.

But he did. There was a natural order in the world and he had

earned his place in it. He had earned his wealth and influence and power and he would earn his destiny, too. It was what he deserved.

And Korea could jeopardize all of that.

"No."

The word came out flat. He didn't bother dulling it with a smile or prettying it up with any other useless words. These men were too far gone. There wasn't any arguing with drones.

Something passed between the soldiers, like they had known what his answer would be.

Of course they did. They thought America was some great evil, the villain of this show instead of the hero, because that was what their masters *told* them to think.

Resignation flickered across Rivera's face, and maybe fear, too. Definitely fear.

Then his expression froze back over. "Then we're done."

"We're not dying for you anymore!" spat another spic.

The Texan man's eyes gleamed with that deadly cocktail of guilt and grief. "And we ain't killin' for you either."

"The people here just want to live their lives," Rivera said, puffed up like a bullfrog, emboldened by his little buddies, like America couldn't destroy his life with a phone call. "They have hopes, dreams, *families* like us. And you sent us here to snuff them all out just so you can colonize Korea like you did Puerto Rico."

He jabbed a finger at him, and if there weren't eyes, America would have broken it. Well we won't do it anymore. I'm not going home to my mamá in a box, and I'm not sending some Korean or Chinese home to theirs that way, either, just so *you* can have one more sugar plantation. No matter how much you pay me."

His lips pressed together as he drew himself up to look America in the covered eyes.

“None of our lives have a cost.”

“You realize what you’re saying, don’t you?” America asked flatly.

“I do,” Rivera said with confidence. The men behind him now showed no hint of hesitance as they confirmed that they did, too.

“Then don't say I didn't warn you.” Baring his teeth in a grin, America declared with the bite of a guillotine, “As the Commander Supreme of the US Army, for the counts of dereliction of duty and suspected espionage, you are hereby dishonourably discharged. Effective immediately.”

He snapped his fingers and the trio of military police that had been watching from the door since the beginning marched over, rounding the men up and marching them for the building. They’d be detained there to avoid them saying anything they shouldn’t to the crowd of press.

Rivera tore himself away from the man restraining his arms, shouting back at America, his voice echoing around the yard, “You can silence us, but you can’t change the fact that you’re sacrificing my people, Koreans, *and* Americans to line your own pockets! I'm leaving Korea with less honour than I came here with, and it's still more honour than you've *ever* had!”

The military police officer slammed the butt of his gun into his back, knocking him to his knees before dragging him roughly away.

America stood rooted, watching the traitors disappear into the red-brick building, rage bubbling inside his guts.

How had he done it?

He knew his boys in the commie camps were being brainwashed. The ones they’d freed on the way north had said the Norks fed them enough bull about ‘class solidarity’ and ‘internationalism,’ and the ones released last winter said it had only grown worse with the Chinese. The only reason they *didn’t* execute his men by the thousands was so they could fill their brain with nonsense, trick them into thinking *they* were the heroes. He knew right now, as he

stood there, thousands of his Doughboys were being brainwashed into being anti-American, to come home hating the greatest country in the world, the country that gave them *everything*.

But how had CCCP gotten to the ones here? The holding camps? There shouldn't have been any chance to talk to the prisoners. They were in and out now, and even back when they'd been backed up, a guard talking through the fence too often would have been noticed. And not all of them had been guards. How did someone on the front get brainwashed?

America's teeth grit together as an unpleasant thought threaded roots through his mind.

Was CCCP farther along with brainwashing than he'd thought? Some kind of signal or something in the air? Those MiGs had been roaming farther than usual lately, and he just *knew* every single one of 'em had a Ruskie in the cockpit. No Oriental could fly a plane with such skill. Were they spreading some sort of chemical over his troops to turn them against him?

That would be ironic, all things considered. But America couldn't find any humour in it.

He couldn't let CCCP beat him at finding a way into people's skulls. If he did then anyone could become a Communist, *anyone* could be turned against America. Not just your average redneck or ungrateful coloured schmuck, but men of standing, men with wealth and influence and power. Men that *mattered*.

He had to step up the work the Psychological Strategy Board was doing in the POW camps and he had to do it *now*. He was the only person that could be trusted to hold the power to change minds, America was the *only* country that could be trusted to decide what people should think.

He could start with the vultures that had just heard what that uppity spic said. He knew he could wave the situation away, and even if he didn't, the story would be in and out of the papers in a month, just how it had always been and just like it always *would* be, so long as he beat CCCP at his own game.

And then he could move on to the Soviet's pawns. They'd still be court martialled and imprisoned, but he could spare them from what would come after by finding out what CCCP had done to them, and forcing them to come to their senses. He would undo their brainwashing and make them love America again.

He would save them.

—

High in the mountains north of Kanggye, a Korean woman slogged laboriously through the moonlit snow. Her thick skirts were wet, but her feet were warm, courtesy of the boots delivered to her by Chinese soldiers at the winter's start. In one hand was the small mittened hand of a boy. The other was empty, and ached for it.

Her eyes strained as they panned the thinner snow under the trees, occasionally stooping to scuffle through it, searching for the slightest glimpse of colour, an unwithered plant or an animal frozen underneath, as she had been doing all day. As the widow of a soldier, and mother of a child, she received rations. But her son was growing, and needed every bit of food she could get him. So she checked the hollows of trees, feeling around with frozen fingers for a stash of nuts left by a chipmunk or squirrel.

Overhead, a low drone sounded. She spared it a glance, another chill running along her spine, colder than the ice and snow sheathing the conifers around her.

There had been more friendly planes in the skies these days. But this one was American, and not one of ones that took the route through the mountains to spy on the Chinese across the river.

Its silhouette was featureless against the backdrop of stars, but she knew it was one of the bloated silver monstrosities that always showed up during blitzes.

She doubted it could see her in the shadows down below, but still she tugged her son farther under the cover of the trees. She could hear more droning overhead, and knew it had smaller, sleeker craft escorting it. The type with yellow markings on their wings that

made her think of poisonous insects. They would sometimes use their fast guns to sweep over people caught in the open. Her last foraging mission had found one of them, buried under the snow, riddled with slugs. She would have to report this plane to the local People's Committee, just as she'd reported the corpse.

"Look, mom!" her son suddenly cried. "A bomb!"

The woman spun, instinctively pulling him behind her, her mind whirling as she thought of dull eyes and flushed skin and *'There's nothing we can do, she's too far gone.'*

'Nothimpleasedon'ttakehimandnot-'

The explosion was dull, almost weak, as the strange orb that had fallen from the plane burst in mid-air. There wasn't a flash of light or burst of flame like she'd seen over Kanggye before. It just vanished.

She waited with bated breath, remembering the way the bombs would sometimes wait to explode, luring rescuers in. But after a long moment, she let out a sigh of relief.

A leaflet bomb. The Americans dropped them all the time, saying that the Chinese were trying to take over Korea or that the People's Government was wicked.

She had never read them, just like she had never taken the surrender tickets they dropped to encourage their soldiers to turn themselves in. Even though they were for the army, she knew some people in the same situation as her pocketed them, just in case. Not her. If the Americans reached Chagang province again, she would send her son to China and stay to protect the small grave in the cemetery.

She knew who had brought her extra rations and building materials, and who had murdered her husband and burned her home to the ground, forcing her out into the unforgiving cold with her son and daughter.

Suddenly her son's hand was tugged from her grasp as he ran

forward.

"Did you see that?" he asked excitedly. "I could see it against the moon- it looked like something came out!"

Before she could answer, he charged off into the woods, ignoring her calls.

"Ki-mun!"

His voice echoed out of the dark trees. "We might get more to eat if we show the papers to the army guys!"

The woman heaved a sigh. The wood in the jige on her back rattled as she ran after him, each step arduous in the deep snow, until she emerged in a clearing on a hillside. The trees ringing the far side were sparse, allowing her to catch a glimpse of the darkened village that sat in the valley below.

Ki-mun stood just out of the trees, transfixed. She reached him, panting.

"The next time you go running off on your own, you're getting…" She trailed off as the thin moonlight revealed what he was looking at.

Beetles.

They covered the open space, a writhing mass of brown shells and long feelers. They climbed over each other and scuttled over the snow with a sound like whispers in a foreign language. Some were stuck on their backs, spindly legs waving helplessly at the black sky. Some were thin and some were fat, but none was bigger than her thumb. She could see that more of them writhing in and under the trees to the sides of the clearing, disappearing under the shadow of the conifers.

One scuttled by her foot, allowing her to see the little white spots on its car apace, glowing under the moon, and she realized she knew what they were- white-marked spider beetles. They'd used to plague the pantry, chewing through sacks of rice and getting into the potatoes.

But she'd never seen them in the open like this before. And never so many.

As she stared at the shadowy, roiling mass of insects, she felt a primal revulsion rise in her stomach, along with the hairs on her arms.

Ki-mun crouched, reaching for one with a bare hand.

"Don't touch them!"

His neck cracked around, staring at his mother with wide eyes, unused to her snapping like that.

The woman seized him by the arm, dragging him away from the clearing, swiping at his thin coat and her own, shaking out the knot of hair at the base of her neck and dropping her jige to check it, feeling suddenly dirty and itchy.

Satisfied that none of the creatures had gotten on them, she hustled her son away from the unnatural sight, looking over her shoulder one last time.

A beetle dropped from a tree onto the snow where they'd been standing.

She could still hear the drone of the planes in the distance.

Adolfo <3 Also for reference he prefers to have stubble, but he shaved to look presentable to confront America. And the chapter name is referencing Grito de Jayuya (Cry of Jayuya), which was an uprising in Puerto Rico against the American occupation in October 1950.

Comrades... I hate to say it, but Taylor Swift finally made a bad song. What do you mean 'redwood tree his love was the key that opened my thighs.' That album was so nothing that I was glad when my food processor started smoking and I got the chance to forget I was listening to it. Every single song. I wonder if it's because her soul is rotting like an overripe persimmon.

Okay, finally getting to the finer details of the POW execution claim. It comes after the album complaint because honestly I care more about Taylor Swift's music (not Taylor Swift) than American soldiers. So after over a week of negotiations, the KPA/PVA agreed on having the front as the ceasefire line. They had been suggesting that combat should cease immediately after the line was decided on, but Van Fleet said business would continue 'as usual' until the 'Communist aggressors terminate their violation of human liberty.' Which begs the question- if the US has decided what violating human liberty is, then do they also decide when that ends? If they decide it hasn't, will business continue 'as usual' forever? Ironically, he said this on American Armistice Day. On that same day, November 11th, Ridgway suddenly demanded Kaesong. Same man who has been rejecting returning to the 38th Parallel in the areas the US army was north of it for months now wants to return to it in the areas they're south of it. There is literally no explanation for this beyond either trying to prove that the US can do whatever it wants or intentionally trying to stretch out the talks. At this point even papers like the New York Times and more conservative ones in America were questioning why they didn't just sign a ceasefire. Then on the 13th, Ridgway told the UN that 8000 American POWs had been executed, 7000 by the North Koreans and 1000 by the Chinese. The next day, James Hanley talked to war correspondents and told them that 5500 American and 290 Allied had been executed, and that the *Chinese* were responsible for most of them. Two days later, Hanley says 6270 Americans, 7000 South Koreans, and 130 Allied were executed. The next day, Ridgway confirms what he says. Three days later, Ridgway says it's *possible* that 6000 of the MIA America soldiers might have been executed, but they can only prove 365. His UN report from the 13th doesn't come to public attention until two days later. After it does, on the 29th Ridgway holds another conference and says numbers are always up to re-evaluation and 8000 was the first guess, but 6000 is the right one, for *all* UN soldiers, not just American (and not counting SK and there's still only proof for 365).

Now a year earlier in November 1950, MacArthur was still in charge and he had estimated that 400 American prisoners were

killed before the Chinese entered the war. Yet James Hanley's report estimated far more- 3000. But his only specific mention for this time period was a sourceless story about 1250 prisoners being marched from Pyongyang to the Amnok during the tactical retreat and being fed rice and wine before being executed. Why would the KPA go through the trouble of escorting them all the way to the Amnok during a difficult withdrawal before killing them? Why would they feed them just to kill them after the last two summers were droughts, their harvest was interrupted by the retreat, and they were pressed up against the border in a small mountainous area with limited supplies? If North Korean soldiers did do this, it seems clear it couldn't have been an order from above when they were ordering not to celebrate holidays or leave offerings for the ancestors to conserve food. And also, though this was apparently in September of last year, MacArthur never reported on it. After the PVA entered the war, Hanley says that 2500 were executed. But MacArthur said none were. He even said that Chinese soldiers protected American POWs when North Korean civilians tried to go after them. No Chinese war crimes were reported until next June when 7 Americans were executed at the front. (Side note I hate when they go 'Oh the Chinese were so civilized to our soldiers, unlike those savage North Koreans.' Yeah, because the Chinese weren't the ones whose home you invaded and families you murdered. Don't act like *they're* the savages when *you* are the ones invading *them.) **Hanley gives the numbers of 147 Americans by the North Koreans, 2513 by the Chinese, and 130 Allied as well. But the only specific instances he mentions are 200 American Marines in December 1950, 17 Turks in May 1951, and 12 Turks in April 1951. MacArthur also never mentioned the 200 Americans, yet Hanley doesn't say how they learned the information. Journalist I.F. Stone says that he spoke to a Marine Corps liaison at the Pentagon and that the officer in charge said they had no record of the incident. None of Ridgway's previous reports after he took over mention it either. In April he said 6 UN soldiers were killed by North Koreans in September 1950. In May he said 2 Americans had been killed, 1 by KPA, one by PVA, and 10 Americans and 1 SK by guerrillas (remember, the US army is *not* responsible for any**

guerrilla actions and actual South Korean NDA actions when they massacre civilians, but the KPA and PVA and every single government figure *are* directly responsible for any Communist guerrilla actions). Yet suddenly in November 1951, the number skyrockets to 8000 (then 6000) without any explanation. I.F. Stone conducted these investigations back in 1952, but even in this current year, no evidence has ever surfaced for 8000 executed American POWs (though plenty did die in the camps of disease and starvation). In two weeks, the story faded from the news. Ridgway never brought it up again in the talks, even when discussing POWs. Fascinating how something that filled them with such righteous fury could just be forgotten like that. Almost like they were just using it to turn public opinion against a ceasefire, then wanted people to stop thinking about it after.

***I* think it would be just for the North Koreans to execute 8000 American soldiers, considering- 300 or more innocent civilians at Nogun-ri, some say 400. Either way that's almost as many civilians directly executed by the American army at *one* time as their executed soldiers that they have proof for in over one year of war. And almost 15 000 civilians at Jeju, likely more, 100 000 purged in the south before the war 'began,' and that's being generous. Another 100 000 soon after. And that's not even counting the massacres in the North, the villages that were literally wiped off the map by napalm, or those killed by reactionary guerrilla groups infiltrating during the stalemate. Because if we're going by the US's own logic then their army and every single person in their government is responsible for everything Rhee's army and youth groups did. And in this case they really were. They were in charge and had heard Rhee advocate for war crimes multiple times, such as when he talked about burying Communists with a bulldozer. They were aware that South Korean officers were vicious. Orders were captured that showed that the North Korean government ordered strict handling of POWs and always openly advocated good treatment. The Americans never punished their own, just like they didn't punish the pilot that killed the boy at Kaesong. The mass murders that were interrupted by other UN soldiers never resulted in anyone being charged. They actively stoked hatred by making up those numbers and broadcasting them to**

their soldiers at a time when peace was near. They painted the North Koreans as savage and bloodthirsty for the act of trying to defend their homeland in the exact same way they did to their own Indigenous people. A dead white American is a sin, anyone else is just a casualty of war. They invaded their home, cut it in half, separated families, burnt every single city to the ground, and murdered hundreds of thousands for *nothing*. Working class American soldiers shouldn't have deserved to suffer. But they chose to come to Korea, they chose to rape and murder, and even the most 'innocent' *chose* to kill people protecting their home. So if they did, I really don't care. You had no right to kill even one of them and they had every right to kill every single one of you.
Alas, by the fact that they didn't do that, or kill even 6000, it seems the North Koreans and Chinese are better people than me. On average. Has to be a few reactionaries there that would lift my scale.

Read I.F. Stone's 'The Hidden History of the Korean War' for mo re details. It's old, but has never been disproven, and all his sources for the statements are in there.

Commander Supreme is America's (made up) appointed title, like commander-in-chief is the US President's appointed title. But he is also a general in his army. Modern day America is no longer Commander Supreme, and doesn't flaunt his general status unless a situation calls for it. In the late 80s he works at distancing himself visibly even further from military actions. It's why he also has no actual governmental position, so he has plausible deniability for every awful thing they do. Vietnam was the main motivator for this because his personal popularity fell farther than it ever did before, even during his invasion of Korea. So when the Iraq invasion came around, his popularity stayed high because he 'had nothing to do with it.'

Same Old Game

"I demand to speak with America."

The irksome man outside South Chungcheong's door let out another in a string of increasingly long sighs. "For the last time- Mr. America isn't even here. He's. In. *Seoul.* Because he has more important things to do than waste time talking to a foreign province. Unlike *your* country, *he* actually *does* shit."

"Stop responding, man," the other jailor muttered. "Ignore her long enough and the bitch'll get tired."

South Chungcheong grit her teeth. *"If a week was not enough to become tired, then what makes you think more weeks will be?"*

She spoke slow and clear, trying to wrap her tongue around the alien English words, to eliminate the rounded consonants her accent attempted to grace them with, and make them as jagged and breathy as its native speakers did. She had no respect for the barbaric language, but could not stand the way the foreigners outside snickered and parroted her words back to each other, turning her 'l's' to 'r's' and making them far harsher than they had ever left her lips. Speaking the dialect made her feel childish and stupid, unable to translate the far superior words in her lexicon into anything even half as advanced. The bumpkin's frustration when confronting her for criticizing her lacklustre Korean skills was understandable now.

South Chungcheong felt no regret for that. 'Twas a difference between speaking your native tongue poorly and that of savages whose language she should have heard the last of a year ago.

"If you want to talk to someone so bad, maybe *I* could come in there," the cruder jailor said in a tone South Chungcheong was well-acquainted with from her secretarial days. "I'm sure we could find plenty to talk about."

From ‘You must be lonely in that little house. Maybe I could come keep you company sometime?’ to ‘You’re always working so hard. If you stayed a little later tonight, we could have some drinks in my office.’ The words were always light and innocent, only twisting towards the end, the inflection darkening as their lechery could not help but seep through. But never enough to protest. Any claim of impropriety would only ever be met by a victim’s hurt and a deflection of ‘I was just trying to be friendly!’

Not that South Chungcheong had ever complained of it, to the perpetrators or any other. She had witnessed too many other brainless women find themselves fired after whining about inappropriate behaviour, not understanding that those whose responsibility was ostensibly to put an end to anything of the sort were truly only there to protect the men in charge from their own actions, not those under them.

Victims sought others in an attempt to put men in their place. South Chungcheong had her own methods.

“I am sure any talk we had would be short and unsatisfying,” she clipped, imbuing her tone with all the distaste in Korea. *“Is that not why your wife left you for your gardener?”*

There was a stunned silence as the other man barked a laugh. “What’s with the face, Sheets? That is why your ‘rife reft you,’ isn’t it?”

“I am hearing that divorce is very hard in your shameful country,” South Chungcheong continued to the door between them. *“But since you married a whore, I am sure it will be given to you. Though I do not believe it is easy for men to keep the child when parting, especially if it is a girl-child.”*

She knew well it was not easy. The man had been fretting over losing his daughter ever since he had received the letter and read it aloud to his partner.

“You shut up, *cunt!”* the man snarled, his desire to strike her evident even through the door.

"If I am quiet, I will hear everything you say as I stand by this door," South Chungcheong sniffed. *"I do not want to. I find your speaking very unpleasant."* She cursed not knowing how to say 'droll.' *"And I will use what I hear until you let me speak to America. But if you let me speak to him now, I return to needle-work and you return to being a cuckhold in peace."*

She had refused to ever speak English when the abhorrent language was forced upon her after the Division. But she had memorized several insults and slurs so that if she was ever truly pressed, she could communicate concisely. 'Cuckhold' was one of those. She had to admit that as much as she despised how clumsy it felt in her mouth, she was quite pleased at the opportunity to wield it.

"Here's a better idea." The cuckhold's voice was tight. "Why don't I come in there and teach you a lesson about eavesdropping?"

She no longer dreaded the possibility as she had before the southern one's visit months ago. She was no longer entirely helpless. Yet her hands still clenched at the thought.

But she could not back down. She had taken her jasu hoop off the windowsill after a week, pulling every thread out, unweaving the crimson and gold magnolia and their emerald leaves to dispose of the evidence. If he had received the message, he would be waiting for the next, which meant he would be lurking nearby, and had been for almost two months. Every day that passed was one in which they were both in greater danger.

"I would like to see you try," she said, keeping her words steady. *"I am sure any lesson from you would be so **small** it was meaningless."*

There was a thump and rattle of keys as he aggressively shoved them into the lock, his partner trying to talk him down. The door shuddered and South Chungcheong took a step back while she still could, staring it down as it slammed open to reveal her guard and his unpleasantly doglike countenance.

"Listen here, you bitch," he growled like one of the beasts as he took a step over her threshold. "We may not be allowed to fuck you

up, but that doesn't mean we have to take it when you get mouthy."

South Chungcheong did not retreat, tilting her chin arrogantly. *"So your threats are too meaningless? It is good you will lose your child. She should not have a weak father. Maybe the gardener will teach her his own lessons."*

The man's eyes flashed and he started forward, only to be yanked back by the other.

"Watch it, man," he muttered, jerking his misshapen head over his lumpy shoulder. "America's coming this way."

"America is back? Perfect." Before they could stop her, South Chungcheong strode past them and down the drive, heading for the gate as the ugly green foreign vehicle rolled down the street with the uglier red-white-and-blue foreigner inside.

"America!" she called stridently. "I needs must converse with you!"

The Jeep stopped abruptly in front of her gate, and the Countryhuman leaned out of the window, grinning. "You? Want to talk to li'l ole me? Ah thought the day would nevah come."

A chill shivered down South Chungcheong's spine from more than the chilled air of November in Busan.

Despite his gleaming grin and cheerful bumpkin accent, in the second before he had looked her way, the foreign man had looked nothing but empty. South Chungcheong had years of experience in gauging the temperaments of men, in identifying when it was safe to enter their offices or if it was wiser to turn a report in late than to approach them now. She knew their moods.

And America was not in a good one.

"I would," she confirmed, though there were very few things she had ever wanted to do less. "Now call off your dogs. I do not think they need to wave their guns around so for one woman."

America looked to her guards, who had sprinted after her to

loom menacingly, their firearms pointed at her. “Care to explain how she got out?” he asked amicably.

“Just letting her stretch her legs, sir.” The more unpleasant jailor sounded nothing like he had previously. His tone was firm, imbued with respect now that he was speaking to a high-ranking male.

“I could’ve sworn I told you your orders were to keep her inside at all times.” America raised an eyebrow. “She’s well-behaved- Well, relatively.” He sent her a little wink to remind her of their encounter in the POW holding camp. “But we still don’t want a repeat of that other incident, do we?”

South Chungcheong knew what he was speaking of. On Liberation Day, one of the other provinces- of course it was that imbecile who could be called her brother- had used the small bit of freedom his jailors had allowed him to scream his fool head off in his yard, attempting to overcome the Commands in his hopes of broadcasting his reluctance to be in South’s possession. After that, she had been forbidden from setting foot outside her door to even stand in the yard, let alone go on the occasional heavily-supervised foray. The only light she had seen in months was that which was cast around the crosses taped over her windows.

As much as she loathed the other Chungcheong, she begrudged him not for the loss of the ‘privilege.’ Foreigners should not be able to deprive or grant their freedoms. Her ire was on America, and the Southern one for allowing it.

Yet it was undeniable that if she were still allowed to walk the streets, this would be far easier.

“No, sir,” the jailors clipped. “It won’t happen again, sir.”

Certainly knowing there had been more to the situation, America disregarded it and turned his head to her. “So what do you want to talk about, dame?”

South Chungcheong steeled herself. “I have been hearing rumours.”

“Oh?” The man raised a brow. “And how have you been hearing *anything* all cooped up in your house?”

Having had the foresight to make sure the items she needed were on her person before harassing her jailors, South Chungcheong reached into the skirt of her choson-ot and pulled something out, presenting it to him.

“I enjoy staying informed of the National Defense Army’s efforts against the Communists,” she said, just as crisply as the newspaper was folded. “I did *not* enjoy some of the words I happened upon in here.”

“Oh yeah?” America gave an ugly smirk. “And which words would those be?”

“Ones best discussed in private.”

She kept her fingers tight, but not tense on the paper. If this failed to work she would need to devise some other means to leave her prison, which would be made even more difficult now.

America eyed her as a wolf would eye a goat that strayed too far into the mountains, then showed his teeth once more. “Alright. Why don’t you come on over to my place then?”

With a gesture, he bade her jailors open the gate. It squealed the way the bars of a real prison cell would.

South Chungcheong marched through, head up, her feet leaving that of her commandeered property for the first time in over three moons. It could have been shorter, but that would have required not slamming the door in the southern one’s face on Liberation Day.

She would not run if she could. But she could not anyways. An experimental thought revealed that the Commands would halt her feet. Her leash had been loosened, not removed, as she had already known.

America leapt from his vehicle, smoothly opening the door on the far side for her. South Chungcheong climbed in, clasping her hands in her lap. She spared no glances for the two manors between hers

and the Southern Korea’s, nor for his. The small window that faced North Gyeongsang's in her disgustingly Western kitchen had been completely boarded over. She had no doubt that her neighbour's had been as well. And she doubted he would be looking out the front.

She knew South would not be.

She remained tense until they pulled into the drive of America’s stolen mansion and her feet were once more on the ground. He had not driven her to an unknown location.

But anything could happen inside.

South Chungcheong kept her eyes on the front door as she approached, not wavering to the barbed wire that topped the white wall that encircled the building, nor the men in uniform that leered at her as she passed. She waited imperiously for America to unlock the door and beckon her in, ignoring his mocking bow as he did.

The entryway loomed before her like so many office doors once had. The coatrack and scattered footwear might appear normal, as did the glossy hardwood floor that extended beyond the tiles of the shoe stoop. But South Chungcheong was not fooled- this was a man’s space. And stepping into it would be the same as every gamble she had taken during the Occupation. Every time she set foot in a man’s office, whether it was to hand over financial reports or another damned coaster, was a risk. It was placing yourself in the hands of the man behind the desk, giving him the chance to isolate you, not knowing if this would be the day you looked too good or he felt too small, and needed to prove he still had power. So many women she had worked with had lost that gamble, but never her.

She had not been supposed to play these games again.

Gritting her teeth, cursing America and the southern one and her idiot brother and that little bumpkin and harlot and the person who had promised that to her in the first place, South Chungcheong stepped into America’s office.

The door slammed behind her.

"Hey, Gracie," America called into the depths of the darkened house. "Get decent, babe. Gonna need you to take a walk for a bit."

After a few moments, the Yankee wench emerged from around the corner, gaze obscured by the same foolish eyewear as her master.

"The other boys are on their lunch break, but get Samson to take you down the road for a bit," he ordered, strolling onto the wooden floor in his soggy boots. "And turn on a light once in awhile, the blackout's only at night."

The girl nodded obediently, slinking down the hall to put on her coat and boots. As she knelt to tie the laces, she eyed the province. South Chungcheong eyed her back distastefully.

"Don't worry, babe," America said casually. "I'm not going to cheat on ya with the dame. You know I'm an honest man."

The woman bobbed her head. "I know," she echoed.

South Chungcheong curled her lip. She knew exactly what type of female Grace Hartman was- not one of the women that lost the gamble, but one of the ones that *wanted* to, then saw it as winning.

Even with the faded bruises revealed under her vapid blue eyes as she looked up from behind the aviators, she still thought she was a player, not a piece.

As she opened the door, the Countryhuman said in a more serious tone, "And Grace? If you see a commie plane coming, get inside."

"Does the North command such fleets that he can now send them all the way to Busan?" South Chungcheong asked sarcastically, fishing for information that could not be published in the newspapers.

"Nope," America said, back to cheerful after Grace agreed and left. "We destroyed the planes the chinks sent in months ago. I'm in control of the skies, so you don't have to worry a bit, dame." He looked around the obviously empty entryway, then said in a conspiratorial voice, "But you know how the Reds accused us of

using germ warfare last year? I've been thinking- what if they did it to themselves just to blame me? And if that's the case, that means *they* know how to use germ warfare. And all it would take was one plane loaded with something nasty making it past mine to wreak havoc on this filthy little city. I'd rather my girl *didn't* get the clap delivered via Red bomber."

South Chungcheong did not let her thoughts at any of those sentences show on her face, beyond a wisp of disgust.

There had to be more to it. It had not just been his voice that lowered when warning his whore, but his mood. The hallway had grown darker for a moment. He was thinking of something deeper than his obviously false claims.

The province paid no further thought to it. As soon as that door had closed, she had been left with one objective- escape this encounter so she could do what she must.

America set off down the hall, she on his heels. The foreigner had set out no inside slippers for guests, and was slovenly enough to traipse around in his filthy military boots, so she kept her outdoor shoes on. Though it felt sacrilegious, it also gave her pleasure to get melted snow on his stolen floors.

And they would allow her a quick escape.

"Is this an office talk or parlour talk?"

"Office," South Chungcheong said, knowing he would choose the opposite.

"Parlour it is!"

As unpredictable as the foreign country was, he was not nearly as unpredictable as he thought. He was still a man.

South Chungcheong gazed disdainfully around the sitting room. A small bar lined the back wall, with a cold fireplace across from it, and a cluster of Western-style furnishings set nearby, patterned in cream and paisley.

Those with money always seemed to spend as much of it as possible to make their demesne appear as far from Korean as possible, hoping it would make *them* as far from it, too, turning them into the foreigners they so idolized.

'Disgusting.'

"You know, dame," America remarked as he sauntered over from the bar. "Southie's right- you'd look a lot prettier if you didn't look like you were sucking on a lemon half… all the time."

*'And **you** would look prettier if you shut your maw **ever.**'*

South Chungcheong stayed frostily silent, perching on the edge of an overstuffed armchair on the opposite side of the small table, pointedly ignoring both the gesture to sit on the sofa with him and the glass of amber alcohol slid her way.

"Sorry it's so chilly," the man said, settling in. "Grace always forgets to light the fire, no matter how much I remind her. You're probably used to the cold, though, right, Ice Queen?"

"I did not come here for small talk," she said icily. "I came here for this."

South Chungcheong pulled the newspaper page from her pocket once more, unfolding it and slapping it down on the table with force, headline turned to America, though he surely already knew what it proclaimed.

'RED PROVINCE PRINCESS FORMER PROSTITUTE.'

The rest of the article was just as crude, using the vulgar language lesser 'independent' newspapers got away with more easily. It contained mockery for all those who hailed from the province, demands to know just what kinds of people the Northern Korea let into his halls of power, and detailed three anonymous males' encounters with visiting a brothel in Kanggye during the Occupation, and buying South Hamgyong for sex.

South Chungcheong did not lower her eyes to the paper as America scanned it. She had read it once. 'Twas enough.

Korea had an obsession with information-gathering. Undoubtedly he had seen this article already, or another print of it. This one was already twelve days old when she received it a week ago, and she had no way of knowing if it was breaking news or not.

But whether it was the first print or thirtieth, she knew it would not be the *last* print.

The harlot would not read reactionary papers, intent on keeping any negative emotions as far from herself as possible, per usual. But would he have shown her?

Doubtful. He had always been a hypocrite. He would keep her sheltered even as degenerates whispered and pointed behind her back, even though he would despise if one of them did the same to him.

South Chungcheong would have relished seeing the look on the harlot's face if she *did* read it. Maybe then that pitiful mask of hers would finally crack, and she would finally have to face what she was- a whore.

"Huh," America said when he was done reading. "Guess some of her Johns came forward."

"With absolutely no financial incentive at all, I am sure," South Chungcheong clipped. "If they even exist."

"You think the free press would *lie* to you?" America placed a hand on his broad chest as if personally slighted.

"I think any man that had lain with a Provincehuman would be eager to attach his name to the deed."

The male pointed at her rudely. "You might be right about that. You have no idea how many boyfriends Cali's had to pay off. But why was showing this to me so important? If I wanted to read spicy stories, I'd have a few volumes of the girlie pulps shipped over."

South Chungcheong straightened, clasping her hands professionally in her lap. "I want this removed from the papers."

America leaned back. “And what do you expect *me* to do about that?”

“Let us not waste time with games,” the Korean said scornfully. “I am well aware that no official newspaper in this half of the country gets published without your acceptance, if not your outright permission.”

“Let’s say that was true.” America swirled his drink in his glass. “Would you have a problem with that, dame?”

“I care not,” she replied immediately. “I understand the importance of controlling the narrative. The North is incredibly persuasive.”

“He is, isn’t he?” America took a long sip of foreign ale, looking contemplatively somewhere over her shoulder.

South Chungcheong snapped her fingers to regain his attention. “I know that if you give the word, this vulgar story will be removed. I want you to do it.”

“You know.” Something in the man’s voice made the province’s hands clasp tighter. “You didn’t exactly strike me as the type to be concerned for that doll’s honour. If I recall correctly from what Southie got out of you and the others with the Commands, you two can’t stand each other. And I *know* you can’t stand me. I don’t think you’d stop giving me the cold shoulder just to stand up for the doll.”

The foreigner leaned forward, his aviators gleaming darkly, and the oxygen in the room thinned. “So what’s your angle, babe? Why are you *really* here?”

Heart pounding in her breast, South Chungcheong remained poised, her spine so straight it ached, trying not to think of the other item in her pockets. She had been dreading this.

‘Precision, poise, grace. They cannot see you falter.’

“You are correct,” she said succinctly. “I cannot stand South Hamgyong, nor she I.”

The harlot was too naïve, too emotional, too desperate to please. That eagerness to serve had never left her, no matter how she chided South Chungcheong for being traditional-minded, or babbled about women deserving to be masters of themselves. She would never master herself if she continued to refuse what she was. *All* of what she was. Just as the female Chungcheong had only been able to free herself from the game once she acknowledged that she had never been a real player in it, only a pawn.

'Pathetic.' She despised the woman even more than her imbecile of a brother.

"But this has nothing to do with her."

It did not. Perhaps she had felt the slightest flicker as she beheld those words for the first time. But that was all it was. She was not Korea, 'twas not her responsibility to cover up the harlot's past, and she would not be risking herself like this if the story had not given her the opportunity she needed.

"Oh?" America said. "That sounds pretty harsh, babe. No sympathy for what your dear sweet cousin went through? I mean, it sounds like these Johns had a great time." He patted the newspaper on the table. "But reading in-between the lines…" Pulling a face, he said, *"Eesh.* How long did she have to do that for? Nine years? How many men do ya think she had to screw?"

"South Hamgyong chose to be a whore," South Chungcheong said coldly. "She had to expect she would be exposed one day. She is only reaping what she sowed. But *I* sowed nothing."

"I didn't see your name in the article, dame." America squinted at it over his aviators. "Think you might be imagining things."

"My name is not mentioned," the province confirmed. "But if this is allowed to stand, how long until it is? If questions are being raised by the masses about the explanations of what the northern provinces were being subjected to during the Occupation, will they not soon turn to questioning those of us in the south?"

Despite the article's indignant tone as it accused the northern

government of hiding the truth of South Hamgyong's past, Rhee's government had also hid the Jeollas' shame. It had hid *all* of theirs, distancing them from the indignities they had suffered and the revolutionaries they had been. And from the Northern Korea. If one read only the official story, they could not be blamed for thinking that the southern provinces had tolerated nine to ten years of oppression, then either gone into hiding or fled to China as the Southern Korea had.

"If one female province was being sold, would they not start to think that perhaps others were, too?" South Chungcheong's lip twitched in disgust. "I will not tolerate my name being covered in dirt."

It was dangerous to say it so clearly, and the largest part of why she would not be here if 'tweren't necessary. If he knew how much she truly loathed the idea of such slander being spread about her, he may decide to have a tale crafted just to prove that he could. It was what men did.

Staring into the dark surfaces of America's aviators, she willed him to believe that was the whole truth.

"Hmm." After a fraught moment, he leaned back again. "So you want me to cut a real story- assuming I can- before someone thinks *they* should attach their name to lying with *you?"*

"Correct."

He smirked, resting his arms behind his head, and South Chungcheong's pulse calmed the slightest bit. Clearly he was not going to just give in. But he had bought her motive of self-preservation.

"So," the foreigner drawled. "You want something from me. Now normally I'd just do it out of the good of my heart. But you haven't exactly been the nicest to me. I'm a guest in your country, but you've insulted me and my girl, tried to hit me, cut me, and given me the evil eye more times than a man can count."

His smile dropped, voice lowering. "And I'm still missing a set of

keys."

South Chungcheong's expression did not twitch.

"So!" His white teeth returned. "I'm not exactly feeling filled with charity, which means we're going to have to pull out the ol' law of equivalent exchange. If you want something, you're going to have to give me something of equal value in return. And this seems *pre*-tty important to you."

The man cocked his head predatorily, and even through his dark lenses, she could feel his gaze crawling over her. "What are you willing to give me to convince me to pull that story, dame?"

"There is nothing you want from me that I would ever consider giving," South Chungcheong replied coldly, smothering the urge to add her arms to the protection her dark violet jeogori gave her chest. It had been decades since she had not simply been able to strike a gawker with words or hand.

With a *'tsk,'* America shook his head. "You're a poor negotiator, babe. Never show you're playing with a dud hand from the start."

"Is that what I said?" She arched a brow. "There is nothing I will give you. That does not mean I have nothing to negotiate with."

"If everything fun's off the table, what's left?"

She drew herself up, her tone firm and composed. "If you see to it that that story is never printed nor whispered about again, I will make sure that another rumour I have heard never makes its way to the press."

"And what rumour would that be?" America asked dangerously. "Not the kind you tried to fill Southie's head with, I trust. 'Cuz that would end poorly for you, babe."

"South Hamgyong and the Jeollas worked as prostitutes for six to nine years," she told him. "South Hamgyong was forced into sex slavery after only being in Japanese hands for a few days. Your puppet was with Japan for far longer."

America stared at her, his smile fading. She stared coolly back.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" he asked eventually.

"Japan was a degenerate country," she said smoothly. "He was and is filled with sick perversion, as I am sure you are aware. There is not a single thing he could be accused of that my people would not believe."

After another pause, America said, "You realize that could apply to North Korea, too, right?"

"And why would I care?" She glanced at her nails. "Though I do believe most would be less willing to believe something of that nature had happened to him. He is strong, domineering, aggressive. Everything a man *should* be. But your puppet-boy is…" She looked up, wrinkling her face. "Soft. Submissive. Almost a woman already, some may say."

He was pathetic. And America knew that just as well as she. The Southern one made the perfect little poster boy for convincing the world that the Northern was the aggressor, and he had been using him as such.

The man stared at her in disbelief.

"If this little tale, or one like it, becomes widely known, neither South Hamgyong nor I will be truly affected," she continued. "I merely dislike the idea of garnering the sympathy of peons. Because that is what an assaulted woman is- sympathetic. Inside, one may be disgusted by her, but 'tis not what would be shown by most. But a man? One who has let himself be violated, by another man, no less? And by a foreign country that colonized ours?"

She shook her head slightly. "That is not a man with the makings of a leader. And 'tis not a country worthy of standing behind. How is one supposed to have pride in their Countryhuman when he has let his be stripped away? Some might feel that they should pledge themselves to a more… respectable Korea."

South Chungcheong cut her eyes back to America's. "A raped

woman is pitiable. A raped man is only *weak."*

America's lips were parted, speechless for what she had no doubt was the first time in his over three hundred years. The Korean woman straightened her shoulders, crossing her ankles the other way.

"So," she said airily. "'Tis a simple choice- either this crass article is never seen again, or the respect that you will need your puppet to obtain and hold victory will be permanently unattainable. I think you will find this an equal exchange, yes?"

The foreign country stared at her for a long while, jaw now slightly agape. South Chungcheong's kept her composure, though her heart beat rapidly enough to make her feel ill.

The outcome did not matter, she tried to remind herself. She only had to make it out of here.

But it did matter. She knew how the people of Korea would look at her if America were to release a falsehood about her. The same way they would look at South Hamgyong. The same way *she* had looked at her, and at the women that emerged from the Governor-General's office with messy hair and flushed cheeks. It did not matter if the story came with evidence or not- it would come from the mouths of men, and so it would be believed, even in the society that Korea wanted to create. Even if by some miracle that one day changed, the lie would already be truth.

'Twas unfair that after all those years of playing the game, of sharpening her tongue and then learning how to kill so that even if she were to be captured she could make sure she was not tainted, that it could all be made for nothing. So many years of being surrounded by powerful men who thought they could do as they pleased, even more of fighting against Japs who would tear her open like a fresh kill if she missed a shot and Korea did not move swiftly enough, and she had never fallen to what so many other women had. The wolves had never made her their prey. Yet a few words of print could make it so that her people saw her as it anyway.

She did not deserve that. And South Hamgyong did not deserve to have her shame torn from her before she could overcome it.

The only reason a man was seen as weaker than a woman for being assaulted was because women were *expected* to be weak. They were expected to be victims taken advantage of by any male that could. What had happened to the harlot and the bumpkin twins was predictable. It was what happened to women.

But Provincehumans were not solely women. They could not afford to be. Yet if their people heard what had been done to them, true or not, they would become pitiable. And pity would turn a province into just another girl, too weak to defend her own honour, let alone to change what needed changing. How could any woman feel like the game was beatable, not winnable but *beatable,* when not even her provinces had been able to overcome it?

South Chungcheong had no interest in most of Korea and South Hamgyong's righteous crusades. But she did have an interest in destroying the game. And they could not do that if the women amongst them were seen as having already lost it.

This *did* matter.

America stared at her, long and hard. She could feel the tension that had been radiating from him since she first lay eyes on him. It strained against his composure, seeping through the cracks to crackle in the frigid parlour, making her lungs strain for air.

Then he grinned. Not one of the wolf's teeth barings, but a genuine one. And he started to laugh.

South Chungcheong sat very still as he threw back his striped head, howling at the ceiling. There was no malice in the sound, no sense that 'twas a precursor to violence. Only bone-rattling amusement. Yet something in the woman's body told her that the slightest twitch of a muscle could change that.

America may be as predictable as any other man when it came to certain things. But just as she, he was also far more than that.

The laugh penetrated her marrow, and for one moment she felt a fear deeper than that of a woman and man- that of a province faced with a foreign country.

When the foreigner's mad howls ended, it was abrupt. He snapped his head back down, grinning. As he wiped the back of a hand under his glasses, South Chungcheong could see that there was real liquid on it.

"You know, babe," he said, humour still burbling in his throat. "I was having a bad day before this, but you just made it a little better. I can't believe you actually have a sense of humour. You've been holding out on me!"

He chuckled again, taking a swig of his drink while the province remained still. "You really are a crazy bitch," he said, almost sounding impressed as he stood. "But so long as you're not a commie, I can't help but respect that."

The American sauntered toward her, still grinning. South Chungcheong did not turn her head as he took up a place behind her chair, placing his hands on her shoulders.

"Tell you what," he said, the alcohol-soaked words brushing the back of her neck. "As a sign of how much I respect that, I'll talk to a few of the papers, see what I can do to get that story cut. Even if it *is* the truth, it's not right to air out a girl's dirty laundry like that, is it?"

South Chungcheong said nothing, her fingers digging into the back of her hands as she watched a droplet of sweat slowly run down her glass of whiskey.

"But if you *ever* try to threaten me again-" The grip on her shoulders turned cruel as his voice came from right next to her ear-slit now, stained with darkness. "I'll have to teach you a lesson. Got that, babe?"

"Release me," South Chungcheong said, the words mechanically cold.

His hands tightened, digging into the sensitive spots above her collarbones, bearing down with enough force to press her into the chair, holding her down just to prove that he could. South Chungcheong did not resist. She knew she could not escape. Even with her leash loosened, she could not defend herself from him. If he wanted to, he could pin her down and make her pitiable with ease. She was a province, a revolutionary.

But she was still just a woman. And he a man. A very powerful man.

Then the pressure lifted, and his palm cupped her face from behind. There were too many calluses for someone who should only be here to supervise.

"Yeah, you got it," he cooed, patting her cheek as her lavendar flesh twitched in disgust. "You're a smart girl, aren't'cha? Maybe *too* smart."

South Chungcheong bit back a retort about his Yankee whore's intelligence, and his own. She had accomplished something she had thought impossible. Now she had to escape with dignity before the feeling coursing through her body overcame her.

America moved back, allowing her to finally inhale, carefully steady. But he did not go far.

South Chungcheong could not wait for him to retreat. She stood, ignoring the way he towered over her.

"I am glad we could reach a agreement," she said, coolly.

"Me too, babe." His grin was predatory again, though still with a tinch of amusement at the edges. "Isn't it great what we can accomplish when we're both being civilized?"

Neither he nor his people would know civilization if it tore down their doors and splattered their wretched brains on the walls of their hideous dwellings.

South Chungcheong said nothing, marching for the hall, her head held high. The heavy footfalls behind her made her muscles wind

tight.

She made it to the front door, placing a hand on it. America's slammed into the wood over her head, his chest just brushing her back.

"It's been fun," he said mockingly. "You could visit more often, if you wanted to stretch those gams of yours. And hey, maybe once I've dealt with your little Communist problem for you, you, me, and the doll can get together. I could help you two kiss and make up."

South Chungcheong opened the portal, forcing him to lean back or go falling out it. She slid out, keeping her footsteps even on the snowy gravel as she headed for the gate.

"Oh, and babe?" the foreign man called after her. "Thanks for telling Southie that wild little conspiracy theory of yours way back when. We got to have a nice li'l chat about it, and I think we're *both* better off for it."

He was not simply taunting her. He was making it clear- *'He's mine, not yours.'*

There was no one to keep her safe.

She should not need someone. He had promised he would teach her to protect herself, and he had. He had kept that one.

But with the Commands, she could not even do that. Not truly.

Her jailors were waiting for her, taking the helm as they started down the street. They did not look back, knowing that even if she were to run, they could easily catch her.

South Chungcheong fought with every nerve in her body, forcing them into submission, knowing she needed to act now or lose her chance.

'Precision, poise, grace.' She could not lose control.

Not outside America's house, and not outside South's. The Yankee came and went from both too often. Not outside Gyeonggi's right

next to his. Not outside hers. This could not come back on her.

As they passed the wire fence wrapped around North Gyeongsang's prison, South Chungcheong reached a hand into her chima, willing it not to tremble as she slid it into her secret pocket. The men ahead of her were not looking, those beyond the fence were smoking. She did not look around. Nothing but her hand moved as a scrap of paper fell to the ground, nearly invisible in the dusting of dirty snow.

She waited for the shout of notice from behind, for her guards to look back and see what lay in her footprints.

They did not.

She made it safely to her door. But before she could make it inside, the crasser jailor held the keys up above her head. His mouth was smirking, but his blue eyes were cold.

"I know you're used to getting your way," he said lowly. "But we aren't your scaredy cat gooks, lady. Try to watch that pretty little mouth of yours in the future."

"I would advise that you wash yours," South Chungcheong replied rigidly. *"Now* ***let me in."***

He did, his furry lips curled in spite, and she was finally able to put up a barrier between herself and the men outside.

But she was not one of the women that let themselves be caged and called it safety. No longer. Bars were not safety, not when someone else held the key.

Whoever had owned this house might have decorated it with Western trappings, with ceramic sinks and sofas and a four-poster bed. But the door was still Korean. It swung outward. She could not even bar it.

South Chungcheong did not bother looking out the window to check on the message she had dropped. He would have seen her drop it or he would not have. He would retrieve the coded name and instructions or he would not. It was no longer her problem.

The province went to her dark sitting room, stiffly lowering herself onto the cushion on the floor, snatching her jasu hoop and needle and thread, stitching a crimson and gold campfire burning on an emerald mountain with hands that refused to hold steady.

She had kept her promise, for all it could have cost her. *Again.*

She tried not to think of a small, frightened girl clutching white mountain magnolias as flames flickered outside and her loss drew near while she muttered, “Now you had better keep yours."

'Twas foolish to hope this would end as that had. The world was not so kind.

But she always had been a fool.

Her shaking fingers slipped, and the needle pricked her finger, a spot of blood staining the tangled threads on the back of the jasu hoop. South Chungcheong held it tightly in both hands, the frame creaking.

‘Please.’

South Chungcheong: Women that have been assaulted disgust me.

North: ×_ō

SC: So we should create a world where women are seen as equal to men so that will no longer happen.

North: ...You know what? We're at war. That's good enough for now. We'll work on the rest later.

Men out there- you are just as capable of being victims of sexual assault as a woman, and just as worthy of empathy if you are, whether it was done by a woman or another man. You’re not weak. South Chungcheong just hates you. Her opinions on this matter are not to be seen as reality. I saw the phrase ‘dark woke’ and I think that describes her very well.

I am subjecting you all to this excerpt from a ‘girlie pulp’ I

found while researching. Context- this American man went all the way to 'Rio Jamorca' (I do not think this is a real place) and is complaining that everyone's unfriendly to him. Followed directly by this (warning, racism):

"Whiskey," snapped Galahad peevishly, "And plenty of it; and say Pedro, are there any people in this village, women, for instance?"

The bulky little man smiled uncertainly and bobbed his head in bewildered agreement. "Si, senor, I get heem at once."

Galahad sighed morosely. "And that," he muttered, "is that. I certainly made a star spangled ass of myself by coming to this God forsaken rim of civilization. The people can't even speak English."

I wonder why they aren't being friendly to him? He is also portrayed as in the right and gets to sleep with a gorgeous rich Argentinian woman. She is the only one in the village that speaks fluent English and negatively refers to Argentinian men as 'men of my race.' He calls her 'Blanchita.' He gets to marry her.

Wait afterthought. 'Rio Jamorca.' I assumed it was in Brazil because 'Rio.' Does Argentina even use Rio for place names? I can't find anything. I hope whoever wrote that is dead.

I looked up 'oldest dirty magazines in America' for that one quip America makes and I was subjected to horrors. Every time I think 'maybe I don't hate men' I am reminded that many of them are no better than animals. Worse actually. I got to read a quirky little story about a male doctor hypnotizing women and raping them and it was shown as sexy and funny. You would not have seen that in a Soviet or North Korean magazine in the same year (1949). And Korean women had literally *just* gained rights. I am going to go into the street and beat the first man I see until he apologizes for his entire gender. And then I am going to keep going. This might be better accomplished in America but trust me Japanese men need to pay, too.

Men who are my followers, you are exempt from this. Unless you are evil.

A Creeping Chill

"So- CCCP or America? Who do you think would win?"

"It would likely depend on who managed to drop their atom bombs first," Hwang said, not looking up from his notes for his trip to the POW camp tomorrow. "Though of course there are other mitigating factors. Navy proficiency, supply lines, air force size, etcetera."

South Pyongan clicked her tongue. "Forget all the fancy technology and armies and crap. I'm talking one-on-one melee combat, fist-to-fist."

"Ah think Korea would win," Hae said confidently from her place next to Hwang on one of the downed logs they'd set up near the open-air stove as a seat.

"I don't think Korea was an option, Hae," SH said, then returned to glaring at Kangwon as he stirred soup in the cast iron pot.

Some might say she was doing it passive-aggressively, if they wanted to be struck again.

"Ah know," Hae chirped. "Ah still think he'd win. But ah guess if it's *really* just between CCCP and the Yankee bastard, CCCP would win. He's real big."

While SH scolded his sister for her language, Hwang said, "Size isn't everything. When it comes to a fight," he added, shooting South Pyongan a withering look as she snickered. "As you should know."

"Okay, but it is when he's *that* big," she argued. "Sure, I can beat guys bigger than me, but that's because I'm awesome. The Yank isn't. CCCP would get one punch in and his head would like, explode. He'd totally win."

"Wait a minute, Pyo," Hae said, suddenly sounding suspicious. "Is this one'a your trick questions, like when you asked if ah thought *you* could beat CCCP and ah said 'No, ah think your hand would break if you hit him,' and then ya got mad at me?"

"I didn't get mad at you," their cousin defended.

"You were just sulking," her brother hummed from the side, where he was chopping dried mushrooms for Kangwon's soup.

"Do you want to die?" South Pyongan asked indignantly. "I don't *sulk.* I was just disappointed she didn't pick the clearly obviously correct option."

"If you're posing a question as one whose answer is an opinion while already having an objective answer decided, it is by definition a trick question," Hwang pointed out, and his cousin tossed her gloves on the ground between their feet.

"You guys are boring," she huffed.

"I think CCCP would win," North Pyongan soothed, sliding his own gloves back on as he came to join them. "America might be able to outmaneuver him, but he is also cocky and overconfident. Temperaments like that tend to lose battles."

He smiled at Hwang.

"Right?" South Pyongan preened.

"He is referring to you," Hwang said and she let out a cry of indignity, slapping her brother on the shoulder.

"That's it, I'm kicking your ass. And then I'm taking my championship back from Korea."

"Could you wait until we return from our assignments?" North Pyongan asked politely. "I don't think Korea would be pleased if we went to handle Party work covered in bruises."

"*You're* handling Party work," South Pyongan grumbled. "I'm going to try and find the bastards sabotaging our shit."

‘Our shit’ was storehouses and power lines in she and the Hwanghaes’ provinces, though mostly Hwanghae. Hwang himself couldn’t see to the task as he was kept busy with his lessons at the temporarily relocated Kim Il-sung University, and his work in the camps, most of which lined the Amnok River. And Hae wasn’t quite cynical enough to hunt down traitors.

He looked back down at his notes, squinting to read his handwriting in the flickering light of the fire that burned in the agungi. Though he was writing with the mindset of these being formal reports to keep his characters neat and orderly, he had to cramp them all together in order to preserve precious paper.

He cringed at using it for non-school-related tasks at all, but he felt the need to take down the names and details given to him by the captured enemy POWs. Even though he had already helped compile the list of names and ranks for the issue of prisoner repatriation, he wanted his own personal notes. He had faith in his mental filing system, but as he always advised his students, it was wise to take notes when you could. Being able to remember that a man came from Louisiana and had two little sisters assured the enemy soldiers that they were people in the Korean province’s eyes, and would make them both more likely to speak highly of their treatment after being released, and more willing to divulge information presently.

Hwang was only allowed to speak to prisoners that had already shown remorse for their actions, or at least a willingness to comply. If they wrote their essays confessing their crimes or engaged in their criticism sessions, he could speak with them. But if they were openly hostile or one of those who targeted their fellow prisoners for doing the latter, he was not.

It disappointed him, both because he was curious to learn how the truly hardline enemy foreigners justified their actions in his country to themselves, or at least what sort of education had made them so vicious, and because any attempts at re-education would likely mean more to their native reactionaries coming from one of their Provincehumans.

But he did understand why Korea forbid it. Just as someone who

was sympathetic to their country would be more willing to speak kindly of them after, someone who was predisposed to hostility would be more likely to speak harshly, or make accusations. The last thing they needed was someone returning to their country after the war was over claiming that a Korean Provincehuman had personally assaulted them.

Which they could do anyways. Clearly the Americans had no compunction about lying, as seen by their claims about executed POWs, which had already started to fade out of public consciousness after America's conference last week, according to Korea.

But Hwang could limit their ability to convincingly lie as best he could, both by complying with Korea's order to only speak to prisoners on good behaviour, and always being both accompanied and recorded while doing so.

Hopefully it could dismiss any ridiculous claims of 'brainwashing' as well. Hwang may find the new word delightful, with its implication that by eliminating the remnants of ideology forced on the masses by their colonizers and bourgeois, they were cleaning filth away (something he wasn't entirely sure the author of the article first utilizing it had fully realized), but the concept itself was dangerous. If any shifting of morals or beliefs due to new information was perceived as brainwashing, moving away from preconceived ideas or biases would be seen as leaving your 'natural' state, and stigmatized. Change itself would be start to be seen as some sort of outer force, instead of an innate human and universal constant.

People were meant to change. They were meant to learn and grow and integrate new information that transformed how they saw things. The world was meant to incorporate new ideas and inventions that moved it forward, from hunter-gatherer society, to agricultural society, to feudal to the current mainstream capitalist mode of production, to Socialist modes to Communist. If change and new ideas could be demonized as implanted by the enemy, society would grind to a halt and never advance.

Hwang supposed that was why the notion of brainwashing had

started to grow so prevalent in the American consciousness, enough so that several prisoners had accused him of it for merely informing them how a Socialist mode of production worked. Those who held power now did not want change. They wanted the world to stagnate at a point they were comfortable with.

The idea was despicable to him. He knew very well that there would be some who would suggest that in order for him to have changed his opinion on peasants being incapable of leading the vanguard of revolution, or on the inherent progressiveness of the intellectual class, he must have been brainwashed by Korea, instead of having internalized new information and evidence and worked hard to change his own principles quite intentionally.

If he had stagnated and resisted that change as something being forced on him, he never would have been able to fight for their country or educate their people in the way that was needed. If their country had stagnated, they would still be under Japanese control, and with the colonial mindsets their children were made to be nurtured with, they would see it as a good thing.

Hwang shuddered slightly. It was unnerving to think that one man could see the popularity of the Communist Party in China with those that had once been in chains, and come to the conclusion that they must be 'washing brains' for it to happen. And that all such simple words needed to become a concept that could do real harm was to be caught by a government with enough power and wealth to make it real in the eyes of the global community.

"Cold?"

Hwang broke from his mulling to see Kangwon standing over him, and realized he had finished his cooking. The others were already drinking down their soup. North Hamgyong and the Liaos had emerged from the bunker to fill their own bowls.

"It is quite chilly," he admitted, though that hadn't been the reason for his shiver.

"Here, mushroom and tuber soup." Kangwon handed him his half-full tin bowls. "And rice."

Hwang took them gratefully as his cousin settled down next to him on the log with his own bowl, grains already mixed into the soup, the way he preferred.

“Find him yet?” he asked around a mouthful.

Hwang shook his head regretfully, setting his notes aside. “I’ve visited every camp now, and went over all the prisoners we have. And while there are a handful of Jeffrey Morgans, none of them match your description.”

His cousin nodded regretfully. “Thanks for looking. Hope he’s okay.”

Hwang did, too. If the man had died from illness, he would have been identified and added to the list. The options were either that he had been one of those left behind in the tactical withdrawal, and as such had fallen back into his own army’s hands, or that the African-American man had been one of the few hundred that truly had been unlawfully executed.

The province took a sip of the ambery liquid in his bowl, and sighed as it spread out from his stomach to warm his body. The broth was watery, the mushrooms, roots, and sprinkling of dried herbs only serving to impart a mild earthy flavour. But it served to bring feeling back into his toes.

This year was thankfully nowhere near as frigid as the last (especially since Hwang didn’t have to go wandering through the northern mountains), but one of the Premier’s most important directives had still been to make sure their soldiers all had hot soup to drink, with specular emphasis on those in the hills at the front.

“This is excellent,” he said to Kangwon, taking a spoonful of rice to fill with broth. “Even with your limited ingredients, you’ve once again managed to create something edible. I never understand why you say you can’t cook.”

Kangwon shrugged. “I can make soup and roast meat. Not really anything else.”

“You just don’t want to get stuck on cooking duty,” North Hamgyong grunted disdainfully, hunched over by a nearby larch as he shovelled down his supper.

Kangwon smiled.

“You didn’t have to come back tonight,” SH said, perched next to South Pyongan, the seat farthest from where her brother was lurking. “I could have made soup.”

Without missing a beat, South Pyongan declared in a broadcaster’s tone, “Startling news from the rear, somehow our Provincehumans have developed a one hundred percent casualty rate without even seeing combat! A feat only possible in the People’s Korea!”

North Pyongan cleared his throat politely as SH shoved her.

She elbowed her cousin back. “Y’know, Sang loved that bit.”

“I can make soup,” SH said stiffly. “It’s just water-“

“Boiled water,” Kangwon cut in.

“Boiled water, mushrooms, herbs, and roots, cut up then simmered. It isn’t hard.”

“So how do you get it so fucking wrong every time?” North Hamgyong grunted.

SH turned full body to stare at him with a tight smile. “Maybe next time I’ll try adding meat to the soup.”

The words were joking- ostensibly- but Hwang had been liking the look in her eyes less and less lately. It was different than before. Less… restrained.

‘Give me your gun, Hwang!’

Yes, like that.

Thankfully Kangwon intervened before there could be bloodshed.

“Korea said he’s coming back to the bunker tonight. So I figured I’d help you comrades dispose of the evidence.”

“Evidence?” Liaotung asked innocently.

Hwang almost jumped. He hadn’t realized she was still standing in the shadows under the leafless trees.

From the looks on a few of his cousins’ faces, they hadn’t either.

“Helping everyone get cleaned up,” Kangwon said casually. “Dishes and stuff.”

The Chinese province didn’t appear as if she bought the cover. “Alright. I know when secrets are being discussed. I suppose I’ll just go join my sister.”

She slid away towards the clearing. Despite how the Korean provinces had been speaking, while she had only been eating, her bowl was still much more full than any of theirs.

The heavy bunker door shut with a mighty *‘clang’* in the night, and North Hamgyong *‘tch’*ed. “She’s a damn sneak.”

“She was just standing there,” SH shot back. “It isn’t like we’re in a strategy meeting.”

“Comrade Liao Juān’s real nice,” Hae confirmed. “Ah told ya she helped me lots in the fields. And ah’ve seen her helpin’ hand out winter clothes to the folks in the hills.”

Chagang nodded in conformation.

“I don’t trust her,” North Hamgyong grumbled, glaring off in the direction of the bunker. “I don’t trust *any* of them.”

“Well I don’t think anyone here actually cares about your opinion,” SH sniped.

“SH, don’t be mean,” Hae scolded, then looked at the other Hamgyong. *“Ah* care about your opinions, Hambu.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Sometimes.”

“SH didn’t mean that,” Kangwon placated, though Hwang thought their cousin very much looked as if she meant it. "And neither did you. We're all just hungry. Though some of us could be *less* hungry, if they wanted to be.”

He pointedly eyed all of them but South Pyongan.

Hwang cleared his throat. “We’ve discussed the matter, and decided on our course of action. Rest assured, none of us are foolish enough to go too far.”

They all exchanged looks that clearly communicated, *‘Unlike some people.’*

Kangwon said, “That’s the only reason I’m helping. I’d still rather you didn’t, though.”

“You’re all being idiots for doing it at all,” North Hamgyong grumbled.

Seeing the fire blaze in SH’s eyes, Hwang quickly interrupted with, “We would be hungry anyhow. With our empathetic hunger, even if we ate a full twelve dishes a day with our grains and soup, we still wouldn’t be satiated.”

No matter how much a Country or Provincehuman ate, so long as their people were starving, they would starve.

And right now, Koreans were certainly starving.

“You know I have a theory about the biological reasoning for that,” he said excitedly, having been thinking about it lately. “I have a hypothesis that it might be a built-in punishment-reward system to encourage Countryhumans to take care of their people. Human monarchs and bourgeoisie can indulge however they like without ever having to think about the condition of the lower classes. But no matter how much a Countryhuman eats, it won’t matter so long as their masses go without- they’ll still feel a hunger.

That provides an incentive to make sure *all* of their population is fed."

Though it rarely seemed to work that way. From stories of Rome, China, Korea, and other societies with large class divides, it seemed instead of feeding their people, the Countryhumans would only eat more.

Hwang's common sense told him that during the Kyeongsin Famine, a year-long famine that devastated Korea in 1670, killing possibly up to a million people, Joseon had spent an exorbitant amount of funds importing enough food so that not a minute would go by without him having something to eat. During the devastating famines that China was constantly wracked by, several Chinese Countryhumans had been known to devote resources that could have gone into projects to increase yields or purchase food for those who had none into searching for elixirs of immortality, desiring not to just make their conditional immortality unconditional, but to eliminate the empathetic effects of hunger and illness.

And that was in Korea and China, states that were relatively reserved with their Confucian influence. Hwang had read accounts of some of the last days of Rome, when several famines had plagued the land, that recounted the Roman Countryhuman summoning his provinces, from the favoured to the 'barbarian' northerners, to hold a month-long feast. The story went that they'd gorged themselves on sweetmeats and roast peacock, stewed pork and ostrich, all smothered in imported seasonings, along with pears and figs and honey-drenched cakes, while guzzling down wine spiced with herbs, until they quite literally ate themselves to death in an attempt to escape the hunger.

There was no way to know if that was true. The tale could have been penned by a bitter lower-class scholar or an enemy that came after the fall, seeking to discredit Rome. But it did seem that there was a period where there were no mentions of any Roman province or Rome himself after when the feast was said to take place. Three months could be long enough to recover from a food-induced death.

Perhaps Italy or some other 'descendant' of the Roman Empire had more information in their archives. Hwang couldn't wait until

Korea was recognized as a nation, and he could start to engage in informational exchanges with foreign countries. There was so much Korea didn't know about them, and so much they didn't know about Korea. Hwang was looking forward to making sure their country's five thousand year-long history was more widely known.

And perhaps whoever he spoke to would be more enthusiastic about his knowledge than his cousins.

Hae was focused intently on the centimetre of soup left in his bowl, and Chagang's eyes were glazing over as he finished telling them about the past.

"Who cares *why* we're hungry so long as we are?" South Pyongan moaned, then clutched at her head. "Why'd you have to mention stewed pork?"

Hwang would admit that his own mouth had started to water as he thought about the descriptions of ancient feasts (and wondered what ostrich even tasted like). But at least he had prevented SH from saying whatever she'd been about to to her brother.

"Apologies," he said after swallowing. "I might have gotten carried away."

"Uggghhh!" South Pyongan flopped backwards off the log, her legs still hooked over it.

"Why the fuck are *you* complaining?" North Hamgyong demanded. *"You're* actually eating."

"So are you," the Pyongan shot back. "I'll take criticism from literally anyone else."

North Pyongan patted her knee. "No you won't."

"Hungryyyyyyy," his sister moaned dramatically.

Hwang shook his head. At least the complaints meant she wasn't truly starving. But his own sister…

Hae was still fixated on his soup bowl. Hwang spooned the rest

of the rice in, then held it out to her.

She quickly leaned back. “Ah ate all mine. Ah ain’t hungry anymore.”

“Hae-"

“Ah mean ah’m not.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I was going to say you can have it anyway,” Hwang said. “And you don’t have to participate in this.”

“He’s right,” SH said, her brows furrowed. “I didn’t suggest it to force everyone. It’s just if you want to.”

“Ah want to,” Hae said stubbornly. “And there’s no reason ah can’t do what y’all’re doin’. Ah’m still not a kid.”

“I know,” SH sighed, though Hwang knew she couldn’t help but see his sister as younger.

Admittedly, neither could he. Though he was well aware she was the same age as him, it was difficult not to see her as his little sister. She pouted when he referred to her that way, and he generally tried not to. But sometimes when she came up in casual conversation when he was hosting a discussion, he would find himself slipping up and using ‘nyeodongsaeng’ to describe her.

He didn't see her as a child, in the way he sometimes suspected SH did. But he did feel a protective urge over her, even if he knew she was far stronger than he.

‘And even if I’ve done such a poor job.’

“If Korea can work as hard as he does on nothin’, ah can get by on somethin’,” Hae said stubbornly.

“Korea’s not really the person to look to when it comes to calorie intake, Hae,” Kangwon said gently.

Per usual it was a losing argument.

“Korea’s the person to look to on everythin’.” She tilted her chin up and away from Hwang’s proffered bowl. “And ah’m full.”

Her stomach growled.

Hwang sighed, lowering the bowl. “Very well.”

He knew Hae’s body was far better at retaining stores of fat, as evidenced by the fact that she still had a bit of padding on her, while he had to be careful not to cut himself on his ribcage when he got dressed in the morning. But he also knew she burned far more energy with all her bouncing and running around. Even with the winter crops planted, she remained active checking on the fields, hauling supplies for the Rehabilitation Corps, and distributing the the free winter clothing to their workers.

He could still remember how she had looked the first time he lay eyes on her. Arms and legs projecting from that dirty shift, as thin as cheap pencils, and cheeks that were concave enough to hold juk. When he had first touched her, a feeling of warmth and familiarity had flooded through him as he connected with his other half. But a chill had came with it as he felt her shoulder bone under his hand- fragile, light, like that of a bird’s. As physically unfit as he had been at that point, he had known that if he gripped too hard, he could shatter it.

He didn't want to see her that way again.

Hae nudged him, perhaps sensing his malaise. As she snuggled up, he could hear her stomach growl again. With the warmth of the soup leaving his own, he could feel the hollowness creeping back in.

He had to wonder if Hae felt the empathetic hunger even more strongly than he. He knew she truly was more resistant to regular hunger after her long years of dealing with it in Japan’s clutches, but what about the kind that came with their people? Could her bond with the masses have an effect on the empathetic symptoms?

Thinking of that brought back that uncomfortable feeling of envy. He didn’t *want* to feel even more ravenous than he already did, and

he didn't like to think that his sister might be suffering even more.

But it still irrationally hurt to think that he might be being distanced from their shared suffering again.

"Hey, Hwang." South Pyongan held her top half off the ground, legs still wrapped around the log. "You can give me the rest of that."

"You've had quite enough to eat," he sniffed, pushing his glasses up.

"Oi, I better not be hearing judgement in there," she warned. "I'm not being selfish- I'm literally being responsible. I need calories if I'm gonna remain in ass-kicking shape. *He's* being selfish." She pointed at North Hamgyong.

"Fuck you."

"You still aren't getting my supper," Hwang told her.

"Gah!" Her head thumped into the snowy ground again. "I'm wasting away! Tell North Pyongan his hat is dumb once I'm gone."

"I will," North Pyongan solemnly assured her.

"I can feel my skin shrivelling," his sister bemoaned. "My organs are shutting down."

"Are your muscles wasting away?" Kangwon asked, leaning back on the log.

"No," she said swiftly. "Those are fine. But everything else is wasting away! I'm going to turn into a skeleton with muscles if Hwang doesn't give me his last spoonful of rice."

"Not scientifically possible," he told her.

"When I turn into a muscular skeleton, I'll make you eat those words. Then I'll eat all those brains of yours." She groaned up at the sky again. *"Starvinggggggg."*

Chagang suddenly stood up, making them all look.

"Korea is coming," he said after a moment.

In a few seconds, Korea indeed emerged from the winter woods, China on his heels, as usual.

"Douse the fire if none of you are using it," he said in lieu of a greeting, looking up at the dark sky. "It's clear enough for bombers tonight."

"I've got water boiling for dishes," Kangwon said. "And if you brought your rations, I can cook them with the leftover soup."

"Or I can," SH offered.

"I already ate," Korea clipped, and none of the provinces needed to see China's eyebrow raise behind his head to know he was lying. "And even if I hadn't, I wouldn't let *you* cook them." The last was directed at SH.

She sighed, and Kangwon echoed her.

"You know," South Pyongan said, pulling herself back into a sitting position. "If you ever want to make donations, I'm right here. Joke, joking," she said to his glare. "Well, not really. I'm starving."

Chagang closed his eyes as he sank back into a seated position.

"But our people need it more, I know," the Pyongan woman said swiftly.

"Maybe if you spent less time picking fights, you would require less fuel," Korea icily told her.

Kangwon gave a pointed eyebrow raise. "Good advice."

He had been predictably exasperated to find out that the two had torn each other's burns open in their fight two and a half weeks ago. He was also predictably not letting them live it down.

Korea made a face. "Kangwon, Comrades Sip Yung-su and Ri Il

are waiting at the road for you. Stop making them come all the way out here. Either sleep here or don't come at all."

Kangwon could not inform him of his reason for being here without getting them all lectured, so he simply gave a small salute.

Hwang jolted as Korea swung his head to him. "North Hwanghae, South Hamgyong- come with me."

SH stood as Hwang began, "What-?"

"Now." Korea turned away, headed into the woods. China flitted after him.

Hwang exchanged a glance with his cousin, who pursed her lips to say, *'No clue.'*

"Good luck," Kangwon said, swaying as he rose. "I'll get all the contraband out of the bunker while he's busy with you."

"Don't call it contraband," SH scolded, placing her dirty dishes on the stump next to the stove. "That makes it sound like we're doing something wrong."

"It's going to be treated like contraband if Korea finds out," their cousin warned.

"Because he's a hypocrite," Hwang stated.

"Because he's a hypocrite," Kangwon agreed.

Hwang set his near-empty bowl next to Hae. "Finish this for me. It will get cold before I'm back," he added before she could protest.

She pushed her bottom lip out. "You're sure? You won't be hungry?"

"A few morsels of rice aren't going to make the difference, Hae."

"They do," she said, then reluctantly took the bowl.

"Don't feed it to that dog," he warned. "Korea won't be pleased,

and it's capable of finding its own food."

The hound had started sniffing around the bunker at the end of November, expecting that where there was inhabitance, there would be food. Hwang had caught his sister letting it lick her bowl a few days ago.

"Ah won't," she said, pouting.

She had already finished inhaling the truthfully already cold spoonfuls before Hwang left the clearing.

"If he kills you, I call your organ meat!" South Pyongan called after them.

"Do you ever worry, sleeping in the same room as her?" Hwang asked SH as they followed Korea's prints through the snowy forest, using the light of his flashlight to navigate.

"I'm more worried about Hae," she joked, her words creating a cloud of steam around her face. "She crawls into my bunk to cuddle, then wakes me up sleep-talking about food. I'm worried she'll eat my entire arm without even opening her eyes."

Hwang chuckled. Neither of them found it very funny.

They found Korea a five-minute walk away from the bunker, standing in the midst of the grove. He was staring into the woods, his arms behind his back in a military brace and his expression impenetrable, as usual. His light breathing created no mist in the winter's air.

"What is it, Korea?" SH asked as they reached him. She spoke quietly, but her voice seemed to echo in the night.

Korea did not acknowledge her. "China," he said to the forest. "If I get back and North Pyongan says you haven't been there for at least five minutes, you are getting locked out."

Hwang peered into the darkness, flashlight panning over the silver and russet tree trunks. He saw nothing, but after a minute Korea finally turned to them.

“Is he gone?” the male province asked.

“He had better be.”

“Did you just threaten not to let him sleep in your room?” SH asked dryly.

“Shut up.” Korea straightened up, and the look on his face made them mimic him. “This is about Choi Jung-nam.”

He spoke quietly enough that his words were absorbed by the trees.

Hwang’s eyes widened as he snuck a glance at SH. “Are you sure we should talk about this with present company?”

He hadn't even been receiving updates on the man, if updates were being given, nor had he expected to.

“Her input is needed,” Korea replied.

“Does he have intelligence for us?” Hwang asked eagerly. Then a chill ran down his spine as he considered another possibility. “Is he well?”

“He’s fine so far,” Korea assured him. “He doesn’t believe he is under surveillance.”

“Choi Jung-nam?” SH whispered. “He was your student, wasn’t he, Hwang?”

“And now he is our agent,” Korea cut in, eye darting around. “No more names unless necessary. He has no intel for us yet. He wasn’t supposed to make contact with his handler unless he did. But he might have an opportunity.”

Hwang bit down on his questions, knowing they would either be answered or wouldn’t be.

“He has been casing out the residence America is staying in,” Korea said. “Amongst other activities. He has observed he and his guards coming and going.” His fist clenched. “And South. As well as

that American nurse."

"Gra-?" SH cut herself off, but perked up. "She's alive?"

"Yes. And a few days ago, he spoke with her."

Hwang blinked in surprise. "A bold move."

"He used his guise as a contractor to ask her about American architecture," Korea explained. "He managed to catch her on the street with only one guard, and said she seemed eager to talk."

Hwang connected the dots. "He wants to use her to gain access to America's residence."

Their Countryhuman nodded as SH's eyes widened.

"That's dangerous," she fretted.

"Yes." Korea nodded. "For several reasons."

"He would be entering the heart of enemy territory," Hwang said, wringing his hands. "And I don't suppose his base would be lightly monitored."

"No," Korea confirmed. "And if America finds out the woman is speaking to him, he'll look into his history personally. If even one thing links him to us, he would likely be killed."

Hwang racked his brain, trying to think of anything that could connect them that he hadn't already thought of.

The most damning evidence would be that Hwang had taught him in school. He could only assume it hadn't raised any flags when it came to hiring him because the information wasn't widely known. Even their own informationals only said he had worked at 'a specific school.'

But with his access to Japanese archives and Japan himself, if America wanted to find out, he could. Though Hwang had also taught over a hundred other students, he knew that in the eyes of a man looking for guilt he expected to find, that would be it.

“It’s dangerous for Grace, too,” SH said, her brows furrowed.

“I don’t care about the American,” Korea coldly dismissed. “But I don’t want to jeopardize a valuable asset and a personal comrade for nothing. Which is why you’re here." He looked SH in the eyes. “Do you think she could get him access to worthwhile information?”

SH’s lips pursed in thought. “I think she must have had fairly high-level clearance before, since she was able to visit the holding camp. But if America has her living in his house and keeps multiple guards on her now, then he's likely moved on to isolating her completely. And I can’t see him telling her anything important.”

“Would he have to?” Hwang inquired. “She must be around him more than almost anyone. There is a high probability she’s overhead something, at least.”

Frowning, SH said, “Maybe.” She mulled for a few seconds. “America seemed a little paranoid, but arrogant. If he thinks he has her under his control, I don't think he'd be too careful around her. She might be able to give us something.”

“And do you think she would?” Korea asked intently. “Is she careless enough to slip up?”

SH considered the question again, then nodded. “I think she’s smarter than she acted. But she’s lonely, too. And if she’s really isolated now, she must be even lonelier.”

Her gaze steeled somewhat as she seemed to decide something. “She was desperate for a friend. If he can give her that, I think she’ll tell him anything.”

Korea dipped his head, then looked back to Hwang. “Then do you think we should risk it?”

Surprised to be the deciding factor, Hwang said, “Beg pardon?”

“He was your student. And it was you he came to volunteer himself to.” Korea looked at him seriously. “This will be dangerous. There is a very good chance he will be discovered and executed. Do

you think he's up to it?"

That was far more culpability than Hwang wanted, though he knew it was only one of his responsibilities.

Choi Jung-nam had always been charismatic. As a boy he'd been skilled at ingratiating himself with the other students, Korean and Japanese alike, even when his views on the Occupation were barely disguised. Suzuki Yoshi had been shy and nervous at their first shared extracurricular lesson, but by the end of it, he had coaxed her open and had her excitedly sharing her opinions.

The Japanese woman had been the one to gather most of the information they had shared over the years, but Choi Jung-nam had also been responsible for passing some of it on- the plans of landlords and politicians, gleaned from smooth-talking his father's influential friends.

And that essay, the one he had turned in that had originally brought him to Hwang's attention, had been so persuasive he suspected it could change the minds of even some of those that supported the Occupation wholeheartedly.

"He's a capable man," Hwang decided. "I think if anyone is up to it, it's him. And…" He straightened his glasses. "No matter how dangerous it is, when the opportunity is as compelling as this, there isn't really a choice. If it can aid the war effort, he must do it."

"Anything for the mission," SH said softly.

Hwang nodded, though a shred of guilt dwelled in his heart. "Anything for the mission."

He found himself wondering if Hae would agree, then shook his head. It didn't matter. He might envy his sister's ability to be so unerringly compassionate, but it didn't mean that compassion was always right. This was war.

And Choi Jung-nam knew what he had signed up for.

Korea nodded decisively. "Then I will give the order to attempt to make contact with her again. I don't need to tell either of you not to

share this."

"Lips sealed, Korea," SH assured, and Hwang once again promised as well.

"Good. Move out."

They followed Korea back to the hearth, where the others were finishing cleaning up. Hae was dozing on the log while China- who did seem to have been there for at least five minutes- wound her scarf around her head, apparently attempting to cover it entirely without waking her. Kangwon and North Hamgyong were gone, likely returning to the city with their 'contraband' and returned to the bunker respectively. Liaotung leaned over Chagang, quizzing him while he answered with one-word responses. South Pyongan flicked water at her brother as he did the dishes. The fire in the agungi still flickered so he could prevent his hands from freezing after, but was being allowed to burn low.

Hwang watched as Liaoxi emerged from the bunker with her dishes, taking her sister's as well to place next to the washbasin. She and North Pyongan seemed to exchange a few awkward words before she slunk away. His cousin sagged dejectedly, making him wince in sympathy.

'Likely for the best, really.'

SH went ahead, and Hwang took the opportunity to pull Korea aside.

"Thank you for looking for my input and not simply assigning Comrade Choi Jung-nam to the task," he said sincerely.

"You're more familiar with him than me," Korea replied. "You know better what he's capable of."

"And I'm grateful for you acknowledging that."

Hwang acutely realized that his early years spent teaching under Japanese authority had affected him. He had never been allowed to create his own syllabus or give lectures he thought were pertinent. He had to follow the Japanese-designed courses to the letter or risk

being censured. Or worse. None of his recommendations to advance students or offer them extra help had ever been listened to, forcing him to watch silently as their talent was either squandered or they fell behind.

Even now he would find himself hesitating to speak at Teacher's Union meetings and feel genuine shock when he did and his suggestions were taken immediately. He knew it was why he had reacted so negatively back when he had been told their peasants understood Hae better than him, and why the idea still bothered him, even now that he was far better at tailoring his words for his audience.

But Korea had always listened to what he had to say, and if he disagreed, he would explain why (when it came to matters of policy, anyhow). And even though he would still ask around questions, not wanting to divulge when he didn't know something outright (though the Premier and Party experience had improved that somewhat), he had used to ask Hwang about the meaning of words or concepts in the theory they read, and now that he had mastered that, he still asked about historical events or things he suspected the province might have a better grasp of than he.

"I just wanted you to know that it truly means a lot to me that you seek my input, and that you listen to me," Hwang said, removing his glasses to polish them on his shirtfront, cheeks warm.

The Korea-shaped blur before him hunched. "And why are you suddenly telling me this?"

"Simply following my own advice." Hwang smiled as he slid his glasses back on. "I always tell my students they should let their teachers know when they appreciate them."

Korea turned his face away, *'tch'*ing before scuttling off for the bunker. Hwang shook his head fondly, then looked into the woods as a stick snapped, expecting to see the wild dog his sister was enamoured with.

North Hamgyong trudged towards the clearing, hands shoved in his pockets.

“Where were you?” Hwang asked as he approached.

“Damn Kangwon can’t walk down to the fucking road alone,” he grunted scornfully.

‘Ah, Kangwon and his spirits.’

Hwang raised a brow knowingly. “Are you sure you weren’t also taking the opportunity to give him something?”

His cousin halted in his tracks, giving him a murderous look. “I’ll kill you if you tell anyone, Four-Eyes.”

The Hwanghae turned away smugly. “It’s enough that I know. Though perhaps if you want your secret to go undiscovered, you should be more crafty when hiding your ‘contraband.’ But perhaps that’s beyond a lug like yourself.”

North Hamgyong jostled him, but didn’t bite back, embarrassed enough to storm off.

Hwang snorted. Korea wasn’t the only one that pretended at hard-heartedness.

His amusement melted away as he recalled the words he’d used to describe Choi Jung-nam. ‘A valuable asset and personal comrade.’ He had been worried enough to say the quiet part out loud.

Hwang was appreciative that his Countryhuman had sought his opinion instead of throwing their comrade into danger, and knew it wasn’t a mistake to prioritize the possibility of gaining an intelligence source so close to America over the man’s life.

Still, he hoped his former student could complete his mission and bring his family home to the country he would help Liberate.

I added a chapter to Safeway Pyongyang, if you're interested. It's called Softening. And in the chapter before it, now called Like To Like, I added a scene with SH and South Pyongan. Dejected sigh. Time to work on the sex scene.

I also had a dream where I was fighting Nazis in Poland with

North, China, and Poland. ?? There were also some sort of Creatures. And at one point I think I was in Minecraft.

Butterfly Lovers

[image]

1933

The Japanese had no desire for them to be comfortable. The Palace of the Restoration, or the Palace of Shame as Heilongjiang called it, was beautiful, far more so than the quarters given to that traitor Puyi while he awaited his own grand palace.

But it was still small, a cluster of swept-roof buildings surrounding a main hall in the center of Xinjing, whose occupants could hear each other at almost all times.

So Fengtian could also hear the fuss outside quite well, the gasps of shock and cries of “Seize her!”

She faltered in her steps, her eyes straying to the large doors, embossed with golden emblems in the shape of suns.

Manchukuo made a noise in the back of his throat, and fear sparked inside her, her feet swiftly returning to the rote motions.

Eyes lined the room, dark and critical. The officials were watching. Watching her long skirts swish in vivid gold, ruby, sapphire, snow, and ash, the colours of the puppet flag, watching the bare skin of her navel between them and the strip of silk that bound her breasts, watching her long gossamer sleeves spin in carefully practiced circles.

The commotion was still there. She could not look. Manchukuo’s white eyes often glazed while watching her, but today they wandered. Fear flashed in them, his fingers tight on the arms of his throne.

‘Jilin.’ Was he back? Had they caught him?

The doors slammed open. Fengtian kept dancing, all the hair on

her body prickling as she fought the urge to turn. She kept dancing until Manchukuo raised a hand and brought it down in a slashing motion. Then she scurried over to kneel at the foot of the throne. Her knees ground into the stone tiles.

When she looked up, her eyes widened.

Not Jilin.

The guards were throwing a woman to the ground. A Countryhuman woman.

She was dressed in a qixiong ruqun, the flowing skirts a blaze of crimson and gold, embroidered with alternating thread. The hemline of the ru that dipped down to her chest-high waistband was as white as pure snow, only marred by black accents, as were the long sleeves that splayed across the floor as she was tossed to her knees.

The Tang-era dress was beautiful, and Fengtian's heart swelled as her common sense gave her an image of the Liao Dynasty clad in an even more extravagant one.

Yet a part of her noted that it was strange to wear the upper body ru in white. Like the woman was at a funeral.

She looked up, and Fengtian almost gasped.

Her features were elegant, her cheekbones high and sharp, shadowing her dramatic cheeks. The delicate gaitou veil that draped down from the surprisingly simple crown of copper, iron, and jade did nothing to conceal her bow-shaped lips, parted in surprise, nor her slender white eyes.

Or the hammer and sickle on the top left of her face. That, and the characters on the bottom right, like a birthmark drawn in golden ink- 中共- marked her as property of the Communists.

The Jiangxi Soviet.

There was a silence in the room, the gathered Japanese and puppet officials struck speechless. Manchukuo, with no one to feed

him his words, said nothing.

"What?" the woman said in a voice like the softest silk, her shock at being handled so roughly replaced by amusement. "Am I so beautiful you've forgotten your lines?"

"Executive Manchukuo," one of the men murmured, and the puppet state straightened.

"You," he said, his long nails scratching at his armrests. "What brings an enemy of the State of Manchukuo here?"

"Am I an enemy?" the Jiangxi Soviet asked in dismay, now sitting on her knees. "I don't recall us meeting before. I'm sure I would've remembered *you."* She stared up from under her lashes, the look sultry enough to make even Fengtian flush.

Manchukuo may be used to the affections of women, yet her beauty still seemed to shake him. "I- Manchukuo knows well of the desires of the Communists. They created the Jiangxi Soviet to oppose cooperating with Japan to bring prosperity to the East. And they oppose the restoration of China."

The 'restoration.' A crown given by foreign hands.

"Must a nation agree with its purpose?" the Jiangxi Soviet asked. "Can we not break free from it?"

Manchukuo shifted uncomfortably in his high-collared tunic.

"I do not desire a life of hardship," the woman continued, rising to her feet, surprisingly tall for a southern province. "I do not desire to fight uselessly in the muck in a fight that can't be won. I desire prosperity and the greatness that China once held." She smiled coquettishly. "And I desire to dance for you."

Manchukuo blinked. "To dance?"

"I hear you enjoy it," the Jiangxi Soviet said playfully, her eyes not straying to Fengtian. "And I would dance for the one who will be Empire."

Fengtian fought the urge to press her lips flat at the reminder. An empire beholden to an empire. How could such a thing exist?

'As a puppet.'

Manchukuo looked subtly around. One of the men leaned in and whispered to him. He nodded, his eyebrows drawn in.

"Then dance."

Fengtian wanted to tell the woman not to, to tell her to run, run far, run back to the Communists. She was not safe here. Manchukuo's handlers would cage her like an exotic bird and give her to Japan.

But the woman was a traitor. Maybe she deserved her wings being clipped.

The Jiangxi Soviet stepped into the center of the room, moving so gracefully that the coloured glass beads dangling from her crown didn't clatter, and the tassels on her skirt tie didn't tremble. She spread her arms out, reaching up for the heavens beyond the high roof.

And she began to dance.

Each step was light and perfect, effortless in a way Fengtian had never been able to master with all the concentration in the world. The vibrant pibo followed each precise flick of her arms like something alive, a crimson and gold serpent that obeyed her every command, wrapping around her slender limbs, tying itself into shapes that shouldn't have been possible before seamlessly freeing itself, never tangling, never tripping her up.

Her long sleeves dipped and whirled, never so much as brushing the ground, and while Fengtian kept waiting for her beaded crown to slip, it never did. Somehow, the decorations barely made a sound. Her long skirts twirled around her, a blaze of fire, and as light rippled across the gleaming threads, the province realized they were embroidered to look like a dragon.

She was dressed far more modestly than Fengtian, yet no one in

the room could take their eyes off her. Even Manchukuo, who would so often stare off into middle-space while the province performed, was awestruck.

There was no music, she hadn't given them time to put on a record. But her movements needed no accompaniment. Even the sweetest strumming of Sunü's zither would be vulgar in comparison. Ling Lun would have wept for ever creating music in the first place.

Fengtian's dances were always slow, rote. She moved carefully, in the constrained way that was suitable for court.

The Jiangxi Soviet's dance was nothing like that.

Despite how graceful she was, how her silk slippers made barely a scuff against the floor, how her beads didn't jangle, there was something unrestrained in the way she moved. Her pibo didn't flow like a snake lazily winding across the sand, but like a viper striking. Her skirts were not the slow flap of a crane's wings, but the flash of a phoenix's, and her steps were elegant, but wild. Each one had a destination, but only she knew where that would be.

Even Fengtian, knowing she was a woman and a traitor, felt something well inside her heart, struck by the beauty before her, knowing she had never seen anything like it before and likely never would after.

For Fengtian, performing was shackles. It was waking up early and going to sleep late and using every bit of time she had to practice steps for dances to show a man who had no interest in them and who she wanted dead.

But for this woman, dancing was freedom. And for a moment, Fengtian could feel it, too.

She could feel the wind on her face and smell the tang of saltwater from the Dalian Bay. She could taste the sweet spring rain, feel the hot summer sun and cold kiss of winter. She could remember the rush of sneaking out of dinner parties to eat steamed buns and cheap noodles in Shenyang, trading couplets with the poets under the willows until the light faded and the lanterns came

on.

The Jiangxi Soviet spun and whirled and dipped for a hour, and no one tried to stop her. No one entered. No one left. There were no reminders of meetings or duties. There was only her. Right now everyone, from the Japanese puppet masters to the Chinese traitors to the serving girls in the corner to Fengtian to Manchukuo himself, was equal. They were all just an audience.

When the woman stopped, it felt like life did, too. As she finally halted, right before Manchukuo's dais, and bent at the waist, her pibo finally allowed to rest on the floor, it felt like all light went out of the room.

Just like back then, when Fengtian's minders would finally find her and drag her home, the freedom had only been temporary.

Her eyes welled with burning tears that she couldn't let fall. They came from deep inside her, and her throat swelled closed as she fought the urge to throw back her head and keen.

Someone *was* crying. It was Manchukuo.

He shook on his throne, a hand pressed over his mouth as tears rolled down his face, staining his expensive collar. His eyes squeezed shut, trying to hide his shame from the eyes of the court, unable to flee.

The Jiangxi Soviet smiled.

"Executive Manchukuo," one of the Japanese said, his voice raspy. "I think you would do well to let the woman stay."

Manchukuo opened his mouth like he might protest, then closed it, nodding soundlessly.

"Thank you, Your Future Majesty." The Jiangxi Soviet inclined her head, and was escorted out.

Fengtian soon followed, released to get her away from the shameful display of the puppet state she was bound to.

'A puppet of a puppet.' How could such a person exist?

And here this southern woman came to throw away her freedom.

In her room, she felt hollow. She should feel glad for the chance to shuck her dancing silks for the comfort of a qipao. But today she didn't. She didn't seek out Heilongjiang or practice her routines. She just lay there on her couch bed, empty.

Until the door opened.

She sat up, expecting Heilongjiang, though he usually knocked. It wasn't.

The Jiangxi Soviet slid into her room.

Strange. Fengtian would have thought she was being kept monitored, perhaps in Manchukuo's own suites.

"Hello, Little Sister," the woman said, closing the door softly behind her. Here in Fengtian's cramped suite, she seemed even more radiant.

"Greetings, mistress," she said, rising. "May I help you with something?"

"So formal," the woman chided, gliding towards her to perch on the edge of the bed. "We're family, are we not?"

'No.' Fengtian had no desire to be family with a traitor.

"Sit, meimei." The woman patted the plush fabric with a well-manicured hand. "Entertain me until our illustrious neighbour comes to pay me a visit."

She would die then. The Jiangxi Soviet was not an original Chinese province, and she made no claim to be one. She wanted to be China. Japan would have no desire to annex her, only stamp out the Communists that opposed his rule.

Fengtian sat. "How should I entertain you, mistress?"

She was even more beautiful up close. Her naturally red lips were painted a deeper crimson, and gold powder dusted the corners of her lovely eyes. Her long lashes tickled her cheeks when she blinked, and her scarlet skin was smooth and flawless.

Very flawless.

Fengtian's eyes went to the hammer and sickle, half-hidden by her veiled crown.

"Tell me what you thought of my dance," the woman prompted.

"It was beautiful," Fengtian said sincerely. "You're far more skilled than me."

"Passion is required in art," the Jiangxi Soviet said. "If there isn't passion behind your movements, they'll never make an impact."

It was true that Fengtian's dancing lacked passion. It was hard to feel passionate about something you were made to do.

"What would you say my dance was about?" the Jiangxi Soviet asked.

"Freedom."

The woman seemed pleased. "And what does freedom mean to you, meimei?"

Fengtian stilled as her silk slipper trod on dangerous territory. This woman was a traitor, one who would soon meet with Japan. Anything she told her could be used against her.

Her eyes remained on her clasped hands. "This is freedom, mistress. Japan has given us the freedom of prosperity. Soon he'll bring it to all of China."

"You don't need to lie to jiejie," the woman chided, making her want to stiffen. "I can tell our neighbour anything I like. So tell me the truth, little actress- what is freedom to you?"

Fengtian swallowed, her citrine knuckles paling. "Being free from

Japan and Manchukuo. Being independent."

"So you want a return to your Republic days?"

"No."

She hadn't been free. Every moment of freedom in her life had been stolen, snuck out from under the fingers of her minders. She had wealth and status, but she hadn't had freedom. And most of the people she met on her escapes had none of those.

"Japan already had a part of me," she told the Jiangxi Soviet.

Her common sense of Dalian was not her own. It was the Fengtian's from before 1907, and years before that. The Liaotung Peninsula had traded hands between Britain, Japan, the Russian Empire, and Japan again. It had been decades since it was Chinese.

"I want it back," she said, her fingers digging into her black qipao. "I want our nation to stop carving parts of itself off for foreigners. I want our people to have real prosperity. I want-" Her voice finally cracked like ice on the river she hadn't seen in two years.

"I want to be *free."*

The Jiangxi Soviet searched her face, and Fengtian abruptly stood up.

"And I think *you're* a traitor," she accused, the words bubbling over. "I think you don't know what you're throwing away. I think you have more freedom than most Chinese provinces have had in decades, in a *century,* and you're handing it over like an *idiot.*

"And I don't think you're even the Jiangxi Soviet."

The woman smiled, her crimson lips stretching. "And what makes you think that?"

Fengtian reached forward, lifting her veil and cupping her jaw, swiping her thumb across the characters on her flawlessly smooth face.

It came away with a smear of scarlet and gold, revealing darker red skin underneath, unmarked.

The impostor smiled wider.

"You're wearing that veil so no one can tell you don't have pores," Fengtian said, wiping the oil make-up on her hem.

"Actually, I'm wearing it because it gives me sex appeal," the mystery woman corrected. "I don't think anyone here is observant enough to notice whether I have pores or not. Aside from *you,* meimei."

She stood, towering over her, and Fengtian took a step back.

"I like your passion," she said, following. "You're much more sincere here than when you're dancing."

Fengtian opened her mouth to demand to know when she had seen her dancing, but the woman cut her off by gripping her chin, her short red nails lightly scraping her skin as she tilted her face up to meet her squinched-up eyes.

"So tell me, Little Sister," the 'woman' purred in a voice that was no less silky, but far more masculine.

"Are you ready to be free?"

—

It was always impressive, watching China at work.

Or listening to him, at least.

Liaoxi lurked below the embankment she had painstakingly crept along, back pressed against the frozen earth. It wasn't tall enough to hide her completely, and this summer hadn't been as dry as the last. The cold waters of the Taedong River lapped at her toes, leaving her unable to crouch. She stood with her knees bent painfully, the chill of the icy embankment seeping through her padded jacket.

Above, China cut loose another rabbit.

“I’m sorry, meimei,” he sighed to the woman that had just breathily confessed her love to him. “I’m afraid I’ve given you the wrong impression.”

“W-What do you mean?” the young Korean woman stammered.

“You’re lovely,” he said ruefully. “And I’ve enjoyed our talks by the river. But I have a lover back home.”

Liaoxi internally winced as she heard the woman’s heart shatter in his palm.

“Don’t cry,” China soothed, and though his province’s hearing didn’t near his levels, she knew the rustle was him using his long sleeve to wipe her tears away. “You’re too beautiful to shed tears over a man like me.”

“B-But I thought-“

“I never meant to be anything more than friendly,” he said, regretfully enough that one might think he meant it. “I think perhaps our cultural differences caused a miscommunication. Even so, in another life…”

Liaoxi knew he had just pulled his hand away from her face like it had physically hurt him.

“But I can’t,” he said with resolve. “There isn’t anyone in this world like my Jiang Qing.”

Ah. He was stealing Comrade Mao’s wife again. And neither poor woman even knew it.

‘Not until I tell Comrade Jiang, anyway. And then he will pay.’

“Is- Is she beautiful?” the Korean woman asked, simultaneously dreading to hear she was more so than she, and needing to hear that she could only be rejected for a great beauty.

“So beautiful, meimei,” China sighed. “But her looks are far exceeded by her kindness.”

Liaoxi flattened her lips as he went on, waxing poetic about a woman that sounded nothing like the one whose name he had stolen, spinning a sorrowful tale about being torn apart by the fires of civil war, only briefly reuniting before war had once again swept him away, to Korea this time.

"But you volunteered," the woman breathed, wrapped up in his story. "Why would you leave her when she's taking care of her ill mother all alone?"

"My heart broke when I did, meimei." Liaoxi puffed her cheeks out at the tears she could hear brimming in her country's voice. "But she told me that if I wasn't the sort of man that would fight for our comrades, then I wasn't the sort of man she wanted. So I left my broken pieces with her. If I make it home, she'll put them back together, and I'll spend the rest of my life making her as happy as possible."

"You'll make it home," the woman said fiercely. "You'll make it home, Comrade Mao. And I *know* you'll make her the happiest woman alive."

"Thank you, meimei," China said, choked up. "You really are a good friend. But I think it might be easiest for both our hearts if this was the last time we met."

They shared a tender, teary goodbye, and the poor rabbit hopped away, so affected by his tale of tragic love that she no longer remembered he had been the one to lead her on in the first place.

Liaoxi could hear China sniffling long after she left, making her internally *'tsk.'*

"You're despicable," she said, popping up, her knees protesting as she inched around to face him.

"Are you sure to me that word's applicable?" China smiled, unsurprised by her appearance. "You dislodged a bit of dirt on your way down the bank, Little Sister."

"You could have told me, so I didn't have to crouch so

awkwardly," she huffed, accepting his hand so he could pull her up next to him.

"Ah, but then you would have interrupted my parting words."

Liaoxi looked in the direction the woman had gone. She was heading for the hills across the open fields, another victim of China's little one-act tragedies, not knowing that being released was far safer than being snared.

"If I may say so," she said. "One day for an answer, one won't take 'no.'"

"Joking about gege getting assaulted isn't funny, meimei," he said, plucking at her masked cheek. "Big Brother wouldn't say that to you." He thought for a moment. "Unless it was for a role."

"I had thought from this game, in Korea you might refrain."

"Aiya, Little Sister. It's not like I'm ruining their honour. I'm just giving their lives drama," China said proudly. "In thirteen years when they're married with three children, they'll think of the mysterious masked foreign soldier and wonder what could have been."

"I don't understand how for you they fall, when your face they can't see at all."

China's eyes squinched up as he leaned in close, his tone sultry. "I guess I'm just irresistible."

Liaoxi hummed doubtfully, pushing his face away. "For what did you summon me here?"

"I've noticed something odd recently." China paused, and she narrowed her eyes. "…I fear."

Satisfied, Liaoxi tipped her head in question.

"You used to be stuck at the hip to that religious province. But lately you've been avoiding him."

Liaoxi's smile fell as she looked away.

China clicked his tongue in disappointment. "A more obvious tell there could not be, Little Sister. Even if I hadn't heard your awkward little exchange night."

His voice softened to an impression of her that was so accurate it sent chills down her spine. "I can… wash my own dish."

Switching to a slightly deeper register that sounded almost exactly like North Pyongan, he responded, "It's… alright. I've got it."

Back to her, he finished, "If that's… your wish."

China winced exaggeratedly as his vouce returned to normal. "I suspect that kept you both up at night."

Liaoxi looked back up at him, smiling neutrally under her mask again. "To talk to our comrade, I no longer have a whim. I've gotten every piece of intelligence I can from him."

"Are you sure that's it, meimei?" China started to prowl around her. "Are you sure you're not scared?"

"What would I have to be scared about?"

He stopped behind her, draping his arms over her shoulders, using a hand to pull the fabric shielding her lower face away as he murmured, "Your mask slipping."

Knowing he could feel her heartbeat, Liaoxi tried to still it as he read her so easily.

She *was* scared. North Pyongan was so kind and honest, so easy to talk to, it compromised her role. Her mask had came almost completely off on that night in the sampan, not because it had slipped, but because he had made her *want* to remove it. She had wanted to reassure him that he had no reason to fear for his Countryhuman with hers, and that China was as harmless as someone like him could be.

But she calmly told China, "Of that happening, I have doubt."

“You still haven’t found your tell, Little Sister,” he hummed, propping a elbow on her shoulder. “You know, a good actress doesn’t run from difficult scenes. The only way to master a role is to face them.”

She wanted to, but…

“China,” she sighed. “I don’t want to act just a scene like you. This kind of act would be the whole way through.”

“Aiya, it sounds like you’re calling me a womanizer.”

“We’re comrades with him for today. It might not always be that way.” Liaoxi’s arms twitched, and she resisted the urge to wrap her arms around herself. “I would never choose anything over you. But making that choice would hurt to do, if I committed. And even the possibility of slipping and hurting our country…”

“Cannot be permitted?” China supplied when her words failed.

She nodded quietly.

"Aiya,” he sighed. “You and North are both such cynics.”

He let go of her, sliding around to her front again. “Do you like him, meimei?”

Liaoxi flushed, her eyes dipping. She nodded.

She wouldn’t be so scared if she didn’t.

“Then the possibility of ‘hurt’ shouldn’t matter,” he said. “You know that. And I know you’ll never betray your country. Which means there’s nothing to fear. So I’ll ask- how *much* do you like him?”

The hairs on the back of Liaoxi’s neck prickled as his voice lowered. When she looked back up, his eyes weren’t smiling.

He reached out, gripping her chin with a gloved hand, tilting it up. “Would you want to be with him, knowing it won’t end well? Knowing you’ll be butterfly lovers instead of mandarin ducks?”

Liaoxi's blood ran cold. She wanted to ask her country what he was planning, but knew she wouldn't receive an answer.

The province closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "Yes. It doesn't matter how something ends. All that matters is that the love was there."

China pierced her with his gaze for a long moment, then nodded, releasing her.

"Then I think you should be with him."

The province looked up in surprise.

Her Countryhuman smiled behind the mask, and the look in his eyes was… not sad. But it was the look of when he sent their comrades off to battle, knowing he would not see them again.

"You deserve to feel this, meimei. While you still can."

Liaoxi asked no questions. There was really only one that mattered. And she already knew the answer- China would never do anything to her that wasn't for the good of their country.

"Thank you," she said to him.

"You're welcome," he said, his eyes once more smiling, like that look hadn't ever existed. "I'll even overlook your momentary lapse in rhyming scheme, since you were quoting me." He reached out, adjusting her ushanka. "I hear your sailor is setting sail for his province soon. You should hurry up if you want to join him."

Liaoxi sighed. "You've timed it perfectly so I'm going to have to dramatically run after his truck, yes?"

China smiled. "Good guess. You had better start running if you don't want to look too ugly when you catch him."

Without another word, his province turned and ran for the place the Korean provinces usually caught their transport. By the time she got there, the sun was setting and the truck was rolling away. Huffing in exasperation at China's maneuvering, she redoubled her

efforts, calling out, “Wait!”

One of the figures in the back of the truck stood, and the vehicle rolled to a stop as he said something. As she drew closer, Liaoxi could see it was North Pyongan.

“Comrade Liaoxi?” he asked as she reached him, huffing and puffing.

“Sorry I’m… late,” she panted, hands on her knees. “Would I… be able to come… with you? If that wouldn’t be… too much… *ado!”* She gasped the last words out.

North Pyongan looked surprised, and a little shy. “You… want to?”

Wordlessly, Liaoxi nodded.

“Of course,” he said, easily accepting her even after she had been so cold. He held out his hand, and she took it, letting help her up.

She squished in next to him and the other soldiers and technicians in the truck as it started forward again.

“Nice sprint,” South Pyongan praised from his other side. “You were cutting it pretty close there.”

“Your driver’s patience I didn’t mean to test,” she said apologetically. “But I was held up by a pest.”

“No one’s patience was tested,” North Pyongan assured her. “I’m… glad you’re coming.”

He gave her a tentative smile, and her heart skipped. She found herself wishing he could hear as well as China.

Liaoxi quickly grew cold as the truck drove through the winter’s night towards Anju. But the places pressed up against North Pyongan were warm. After a moment of deliberation, she placed her gloved hand on top of his in the dark. He looked over at her, cheeks flushed from more than the cold, then hesitantly curled his fingers around hers so that they were holding hands in secret.

Perhaps it would be unfair to him. Perhaps it would be just like China leading women along, making them think they had the possibility of a future together before breaking their hearts.

Yet the Chinese woman couldn't see it that way. Unlike her Countryhuman's, her feelings were true. And grief and pain were nothing compared to what they stemmed from.

Just like the thousands of comrades she and China had lost, it didn't matter if it hurt either of them to look back on, so long as it hurt because it had been love.

100 septims for anyone else that draws me China in his female disguise. And, uh, *flips through archives* My third-born child? Are we on third-born now?

China's comment about being butterfly lovers instead of mandarin ducks is referring to this story about a man and a woman that meet when the woman is pretending to be a man. She falls in love with him, they part, then he finds out she's a woman when they reunite, and they vow to be together. But the woman has already been pledged by her family to someone else. The man dies of a broken heart, and on the wedding march the woman throws herself onto his grave and begs for it to open. It does, she throws herself in, then they both emerge as butterflies and fly away together. So tragic story. While mandarin ducks are a symbol of happy, lifelong couples.

I didn't know how to do the dragon pattern yet here he is!

Not Again

Most of the people in the truck had passed out almost as soon as they left Pyongyang, trying to catch some sleep before they reached their destinations. The only ones still up were South Pyongan, her brother, one of his bodyguards, one of hers, and maybe the Chinese chick. And the driver, hopefully.

South Pyongan tipped her head back to let the cold night air rush over her, imagining the driver falling asleep at the wheel and her pulling off some sick move like swinging from the back into the front and commandeering them back on course.

Sure, it might just be easier to shout and wake him up. But where would be the fun in that?

"You can get some rest."

North Pyongan's voice made her pull her head out of the slipstream, stretching as much as she could, crammed in with all the men as she was.

General, some of them needed a bath. She did, too. A *real* bath, not just dunking herself in boiled water for the minute it took until it got freezing. She had no idea how SH could soak herself in ice water like she did.

"I'm good," she said, slinging an arm over the side of the truck bed. "What if we get jumped by the traitors cutting our wires and crap? Someone's got to make sure you don't get carried off again."

"That won't happen," her brother said, and she snorted.

"Yeah, I'm sure you *wanted* it to happen the first time." She drummed her fingers on the side of the vehicle, feeling the engine hum. "Any word on what Korea's doing with that Pak guy?"

She kept her voice low, just in case.

North Pyongan looked down. "He's still being held. I..." He moved closer to her, barely audible over the rushing wind as he whispered, "Think he might want him to die in jail."

South Pyongan bobbed her head. Made sense. The traitor-priest must be in his what, seventies? And it wasn't like jail was a fun place to be ever, let alone while they were at war. If she had her way, *none* of the prisoners would be eating at all.

The political ones anyway. She got that breaking the law now that it was actually *their* law was bad no matter what. But she wasn't gonna start calling for death by firing squad for some poor bastard that stole his neighbour's chicken to feed his family, or that picked someone up when they didn't have a transport pass.

But Pak had fucked with her brother. She'd kill him herself if Korea let her.

"I don't know if he's worried I might ask for leniency," he murmured. "If it is just his niece's testimony, an argument could be made that he was one of those forced to work for the enemy under threats of coercion."

Which meant no death penalty. Bleh.

"Would you ask for leniency?" she asked.

Her brother was silent for a long moment as they drove down the bumpy road.

"I don't know," he said eventually.

South Pyongan pressed her lips together. "If he gets offed, it's his own fault. You know damn well he didn't do that shit to protect himself or his niece. And even if he did, he'd still deserve it."

If he'd wanted protection, he could have come north. They'd literally been retreating. If he'd asked her brother, he would've pissed Korea off by personally escorting him all the way back to Pyongyang. Instead the bastard had turned her brother over because he was a traitorous, god-fearing idiot.

Unlike North Pyongan, who was a god-*loving* idiot.

"I know," he said quietly, making her huff.

She leaned her head back over the edge of the truck again. Whatever. Hopefully the old bastard would rot in some lightless cell. Maybe the Yanks would bomb him like they'd bombed their own prisoners.

She turned her head, looking up the highway. The last line of hills were still between them and Sukchon, but she knew she wouldn't be able to see it anyway. Normally she'd be able to spot a village or two, but with the blackout, the only light came from the half-moon illuminating the snow that dusted the fields, getting deeper higher up in the hills.

'Can't even turn on a light in our own damn country.'

The province tilted her head more, eyes fixed on the mountains that rose beyond the hills, darker shadows against the inky blue sky.

Chaejon-ri was somewhere over there. Commander Ro's hometown. And more than a year later, his body was still a thousand ri away by the Raktong.

She didn't want to think about that.

Turning her head the other way, wind rushing in her 'ears,' South Pyongan looked back the way they'd came. The lights of the road crew working on the cratered highway were hidden by the hills behind them, making it look dark all the way back to Pyongyang.

Her eyes flicked over to someone in the truck.

Liaoxi was on the other side of her brother, squished up against him so she wouldn't fall out the back. Her chin rested on her chest, but that didn't mean she was asleep.

South Pyongan didn't have it out for the Chinese provinces the way North Hamgyong did, but she *definitely* thought they were sneaky. And that *wasn't* her being racist, it was her being one

hundred percent certain that Liaoxi had been using her brother for information, and that Liaotung had gone through her stuff in the bunker.

She thought of the woman telling her she'd have to pretend she didn't care about her sister if she was captured by the enemy, that she didn't even know her, and huffed.

Whatever. They were fighting for Korea, so they were still cool. And it wasn't like South Pyongan hadn't rummaged through their stuff, too (the most interesting thing she'd found was Liaoxi's poetry, which wasn't actually interesting to her at all, though a few poems had made her eyes narrow).

She *did* have it out for China, though. She didn't care why he was here or why he was putting up with Korea- he was *way* too pretty for anything to make up for it. And Korea hadn't taken his chance during their fight to fix that. The guy literally slept in his room now, and he hadn't even once slammed his face into the concrete and said he did it by accident in his sleep. South Pyongan had no choice but to think he was playing the long con, lulling him into a false sense of security. If he didn't leave Korea after they won this war permanently disfigured, she was going to be disappointed.

Liaoxi shifted a closer to North Pyongan, and he twitched. Not like he wanted to pull away, though. He kind of side-eyed South Pyongan, then settled back in.

She narrowed her eyes at the Chinese woman. *Was* she awake?

She didn't have it out for Liaoxi exactly. But she *was* growing suspicious of her.

Opening her mouth to ask her brother what that little look had been about, she stopped, looking past him.

"Shit." South Pyongan shoved her sleeping bodyguard awake, then jumped up, quickly hopping through the maze of legs and guns to pound on the back window of the truck. "Hey!" she shouted. "Incoming fighter jet!"

Behind her the soldiers startled awake, and the truck swerved as the driver took them off-road, accelerating for the cover of the hills. South Pyongan threw herself down half on top of some guy so she wouldn't go flying out, and the people close to the back crowded in closer, her brother putting an arm around Liaoxi, preventing her from sliding.

As they reached the edge of the hills, their driver aimed for a crevice between two crags, cutting the engine as soon as they were as hidden as they could get. Together they all watched the fighter jet soar towards them, a dark shadow up above.

"Seriously? We can't even take a damn *drive?"* South Pyongan muttered, finally getting off the guy she was crushing.

"It's weird that it's alone," he whispered, crowding close to the edge of the truck with her. "Where's its wing?"

"You know you don't have to whisper, right?" the province asked. "It can't hear us from up there."

Still, the guys kept their voices low as they talked.

Whatever. She guessed they did have sabotagers. She doubted they'd coincidentally be just off the highway, but with their luck, they might be.

Actually, maybe she should start shouting. If she could finish them off here, she'd save herself a search and interrogation.

The fighter jet swept over the road, heading northwest and over the hills.

"Okay, it's off to get eaten alive by the MiGs," South Pyongan said, clapping her hands. "Let's get this show back on the road."

North Pyongan frowned. "I think we should wait a bit longer."

One of his bodyguards watched the empty sky with narrowed eyes. "Did you see how low it was flying? It was looking for something."

"You don't think they saw us, do you?" one of the technicians- a younger guy- asked nervously.

"Not with their eyes. Comrade South Pyongan caught 'em pretty far out," his escort- an older gruff soldier- said, lighting a cigarette. "Might've caught us on radar, though. Best to wait it out."

South Pyongan blew out a puff of air, jumping from the truck to stretch. They hadn't been on the road long, but she couldn't stand the smell of tobacco smoke. She also didn't need Kangwon to tell her it was bad for her body. Opium had fucked the Chinese up, so she didn't see why tobacco was any different. The only thing going in *her* lungs was air, especially now that she could run without getting out of breath again.

She eyed Liaoxi, who was checking her sniper rifle as she talked with her brother.

Sure enough, after a handful of minutes (and a eighty-two push-ups), the drone of the jet returned, and it soared over the hills again.

"Told you comrades we should wait," South Pyongan said, dusting grit from her hands. "Looks like the deathbird *is* looking for us."

The driver *'tch'*ed, leaning out his window. "I've got a fucking schedule to keep. Pardon the language, Comrade Provinces."

"We've all got fucking schedules to keep," South Pyongan assured him.

"Hard to tell, but it looks like an F-80," the soldier in the passenger seat said, squinting up at the shadow. "Where's the closest place it could come from? Cho Island?"

Cho Island was off the coast of South Pyongan and the Hwanghaes' provinces. And *yes* it did piss her off immensely that the Yanks had set up camp literally in her backyard, thank you.

"There's no air field there yet," she told him. "The Yanks are just using it to spy, and rescue the bastards we shoot up over the Amnok."

Though Korea said intel said they were building one, which meant *she'd* be getting bombed more. Great.

"Seoul, then," the gruff soldier grunted.

"If it came from Seoul, it could have up to four hours of juice left," the passenger seat guy judged. "More, if they've got drop tanks."

'Ughhhhhh.' South Pyongan had enough dignity to groan internally.

"Want to try outrunning a fighter jet?" she tried.

"It can carry two thousand-pound bombs, too," passenger guy- who was clearly a buzzkill as well as a deathbird expert- said.

The driver smiled wryly. "The mechanic course the State got for me makes me good enough to get a stalled engine running again. We *might* be outta luck if we get bombed."

His expression went more serious. "But do you want me to try?"

"No," South Pyongan quickly said. "I'm not on a time-crunch or anything. And if we ended up dead, we'd *really* be off schedule."

It would be cool if they actually managed to outrun the plane, maybe shoot it down in a burst of flame that they barely escaped. But she wasn't going to get them killed over that. She had enough things to not think about.

They waited as the plane flew by again, veering away from the road this time to swoop low over the hills.

"It's being too persistent," Liaoxi whispered, shrinking down. "I think it has some intent."

South Pyongan tensed as the shadow buzzed towards them.

Suddenly the night was split by gunfire, and the crags above them erupted in shards of rock as the soldiers shouted in alarm.

South Pyongan lunged for the truck to save her brother as the rapid machine gun fire sprayed over them. She heard the whine as a

slug shot by her, missing by an inch.

North Pyongan's guards had already hustled him down, hauling him for cover with Liaoxi, so she switched course, rushing for the front of the vehicle as she heard the explosion of the windshield shattering. Rounds peppered the front of it with the screech of rending metal as she hauled the door open, tearing the driver from his seat just before another wave of bullets hit.

She tugged the man towards the shadow of the crag, blood slicking her hands, before the passenger rushed over to help. As soon as she had him safe, she raised her Type 49, aiming for the deathbird as it circled back over.

"Wait!" North Pyongan grabbed her arm, resting her attempt to shrug him off. "Don't shoot. I don't think it knows we're here."

"It just shot us up!" she hissed, throwing him off. "And it's coming back for round two!"

But as she lifted her muzzle skyward, the deathbird didn't beat her to the shot. It soared over again, moonlight glinting off its silver wings.

Against her better judgement, South Pyongan held position, watching as it veered north, unleashing another wave of rounds against the hills there.

"It's just shooting blind and hoping it'll hit something," the gruff soldier grunted in relief, slinging his own rifle back over his shoulder.

He probably wouldn't have got a good shot in, anyways, considering the young technician was clinging to his waist.

"Is anyone hurt?" North Pyongan asked, hustling back over to the shadows under the crags.

"Driver took a slug," South Pyongan said, not taking her eyes off the sky as she wiped his blood on her pants. Just because the deathbird hadn't seen them yet, didn't mean it wouldn't.

"I'm alright," the man said in a strained voice, blood pouring through the fingers over his bicep. "It was just a glance. I can still drive."

"I'm not sure you can," the technician said, no longer clinging to his escort, but still hiding in his shadow. "The truck got hit."

South Pyongan glanced over to see that yeah, that metal sound she'd heard had been their hood getting fucked up, engine probably included.

"Let me take a look at it," the driver grunted, heaving to his feet.

North Pyongan gently guided him back down. "Not yet. I'll bandage your wound while we wait for the plane to leave."

The man reluctantly agreed, and Liaoxi hustled for the truck, getting the first aid kit that all military drivers were required to carry, along with his mechanic's bag.

One of North Pyongan's bodyguards had got hit, too, covering him on the way to safety. It was only an actual graze, unlike the almost direct shot the driver had taken. But South Pyongan knew thigh wounds could sting like a bitch.

Her own guards were giving her the eye, probably displeased that she'd stolen any heroics from them by moving too fast.

The fighter's guns rattled across the hills, eventually interrupted by a familiar whistle and *'boom.'*

"It's doing everything it can to get us," a soldier noted.

"Hope there's no refugees where it's aiming." The gruff soldier's voice was softer than before.

The deathbird expert said quietly, "It had to be aiming for something."

The next explosion came close enough that it lit up the hillside, sending showers of rock and shards of wood down towards them, though luckily they weren't hit by the actual shockwave. After

another volley of machine gun fire, the deathbird started to soar away.

South Pyongan gripped her gun tightly.

It was unfair that this bastard could just soar over their country as he pleased, screwing up their truck, making them bleed, and definitely blowing up their civs. She wanted to bring down the plane and drag the pilot from it screaming, show him he wasn't as high and mighty as he felt up there. To show him that if he was going to rain death on their country, then he had to *pay* for it.

She looked back over her shoulder at the cluster of soldiers, North Pyongan helping his guard with his leg wound while the driver clutched at his already blood-soaked bandage.

They'd been lucky. They'd all made it out.

The province grit her teeth, slinging her submachine gun back on, watching with narrowed eyes as the fighter gained altitude, soaring back over the plains towards the south. Soon it was gone.

While she'd watched, the driver had made his way to the truck and lifted the hood with one hand. He made a low whistle of disappointment as he observed the smoking insides.

"Engine's shot," he grumbled. "Nothing in my kit can fix this. We'll have to head to the Sukchon checkpoint and get someone to drive back and tow it."

"You're sure we can't get it working?" the technician asked, peering our from behind his human shield.

"Kid." The man slammed the hood. "This is a gasoline engine with a hole in it. We're lucky we didn't get blown to hell. In fact, we should all probably put some distance with it, just in case."

The technician scrambled back, and the rest of them followed.

"Sorry to make you late, comrades," the driver said, dusting off his hands. "You head on to Sukchon. I'll keep the old hoss safe."

"It's the pilot's fault, not yours," North Pyongan assured him. "And we won't leave you out here unguarded. South Pyongan can go."

South Pyongan blinked, tearing her eyes away from the sky. "Did I volunteer to do that?"

"You're the only one that can turn a two hour run into an hour and a half," he said, making her chest puff.

"Well yeah. That's true." She examined her blunt nails. "I guess we can go."

Her brother looked over his shoulder. "I should stay here."

South Pyongan shifted uneasily, looking around at the dark hills. "Yeah, I'm not comfortable with that. There might be reactionaries around, and I kinda don't want you to get kidnapped again. Especially since that Yankee bastard's looking for an excuse to drag these talks out longer."

Seriously, they'd decided on a line, and Korea had been magnanimous enough to offer a ceasefire right away so they couldn't kill any more Yanks. But *noooo.* Now the miguk-nom wanted to hash out POW shit before signing anything. While the loser Korea was *still* trying to hijack Gangwon.

South Pyongan wouldn't mind getting more time to kill Yankees, but she wasn't even allowed to! She had to go do detective work. Blurgh.

"My guards won't let me accompany you without them both," her brother said. "And Comrade Kim Don-om can't run right now."

He looked back at her, pulling his brows in so she knew that was only an excuse. *'I'll slow you down.'*

She glared back at him. *'Maybe if you were actually eating full meals-'*

"Fine," she said out loud. "I'm ditching my guards then. They'll slow me down, too."

"I'm afraid we can't let that happen, Comrade South Pyongan," one of them cut in.

Korea had literally chosen the worst guards for her. They were super serious, like, no sense of humour at all, wouldn't entertain the idea of an all-bodyguard football match (even though she knew they'd win since they were hers), they were similar-looking enough she thought they were related, which meant she couldn't play them off each other to distract them, and they literally wouldn't even tell her their names so she could try and get chummy enough with them to convince 'em to let her sneak off and do her own thing!

Okay, maybe Korea had chosen the best guards for her for *him*. But not the best guards for her for *her*.

South Pyongan paddled her feet, glancing around the shadowy terrain again. "That deathbird was weird. What if the traitors are planning something?"

"I think it must have just caught us on its radar," North Pyongan soothed. "And it's not like I am staying alone. Our comrades are here, and Comrade Liao Shī. And I *can* take care of myself, you know."

"Yeah, totally," she said sarcastically. "Until you get kidnapped by another priest." Catching his disapproving look, she muttered, "Sorry. I just- *Ugh!"*

She turned around, not wanting to do this in front of their guys.

"I'll be alright, sister," her brother said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "But we need to be out of here by morning. The hills won't hide us from planes in daylight."

South Pyongan bounced on her heels, then growled again. "Fine," she said, then immediately shot off, calling, "I'll be back! Keep up," she shot at her guards without slowing, sliding down the slight slope they'd driven up and sprinting as soon as she hit flat ground, heading for the highway.

She was *not* leaving her brother alone longer than she had to.

An hour and a half there, an hour and a half back. Less if she got lucky enough to catch a vehicle in Sukchon. That wasn't too bad. What could happen to him in three hours?

She had an image of the truck's engine exploding in a fireball. And if that didn't kill him, the rockslide caused by it would. Or that deathbird would come back with its friends and carpet the mountain in napalm. Or those reactionaries had conveniently decided to move their operations north on this specific night. Or-

South Pyongan stretched her legs as far as they would go, letting the pounding of her feet and blood drown out the thoughts in her head.

The province reached Sukchon in under an hour and thirty minutes *(not* dying in the slightest), and gasped out the situation to the military checkpoint, who assured her they'd contact Anju immediately and get a truck sent out. They offered to boil some water for her to drink while she waited, but she was already running again, back towards the highway, passing her wheezing guards on the way.

Honestly, they'd kept up pretty good. Korea had also chosen incredibly athletic men. Not athletic enough, though, and South Pyongan was pleased to learn that if she ever wanted to lose them she just had to take a brief jaunt of over an hour.

She pushed herself even harder than on her run to Pyongyang from tank-hunting training, through the stitch in her side and the cold wind scouring her lungs raw and the crackling of her skin as the burns on her things chafed and split. And the hollow ache that seemed to spread out of her stomach to pervade every inch of her body.

'I can take care of myself,' her brother had said.

But he couldn't. Not when he was just as burned up as her- worse- and starving on top of it. Not when he'd said *'I don't know'* about Pak Chae-eun. He might be getting better, but he still needed her.

A little under three hours. That was fine. There was no way something had happened in that little amount of time. He was fine. She was going to get there and he was going to be fine and she wasn't going to feel like the entire world was crashing down around her again.

But as she skidded over the crag they'd relocated to, adrenaline flooded her body on a second wind, making her heart pound so hard it felt like it was going to burst.

The men were up and tense, firearms in hand, and the injured one of her brother's guards had even pointed his submachine gun at her before he realized who it was. She didn't see the other one. Looking around frantically, she also didn't see someone else.

*'No no no no **no** not again-'*

South Pyongan drew in a breath that made her lungs scream in protest, glaring murderously as she demanded to know,

"Where is my *fucking* brother?"

I've been obsessed with tree jellyfish lately. And this Korean daeju tea paste. I have been eating it out of the jar with a spoon.

Also I just learned that I didn't have the proper chapter up for the One's Own Destiny chapter? I accidentally had my third draft up instead of my fourth? So it wasn't that big of a difference, just a few word changes and a few added lines, but those lines were important. So go back and read that if you please. I don't know how I did that since I usually do a fifth draft read.

I had a friend say that she didn't get why Israelis go around claiming they speak for all Jewish people and that all Jewish people support them, because if people think 'Oh, all Jewish people support genocide,' then they'll be anti-Semitic. But I think that's the point. I think the reason Zionists are so obsessed with saying that every Jewish person believes what they do (they don't) is because they *want* to increase anti-

Semitism. They want people to think that all Jewish people are genocidal racist freaks because it exacerbates the culture of fear for Jewish people, which makes the Israeli claim that Israel is 'the only safe place for Jews' seem more real, and can draw normal Jewish people towards them. Just a reminder that Zionists are Jewish in the same way that ISIS is Islamic (and American-funded), Evangelicals are Christian, and Kokka Shinto supporters follow Shinto. Which is to say religion is a weapon for them instead of a belief. Don't let anyone tell you saying death to Israel and the IOF is anti-Semitic, but also be very mindful to never attack actual Jewish people just for being Jewish.

The Unfaithful and The Upright

A far away drone hummed over the plains on the edge of hearing. It was difficult to tell where it was coming from, but it was likely Pyongyang or the rail lines to the south. North Pyongan kept on alert for the bombers to come closer, but they remained distant.

Apart from that the night was silent, filled with the cold hush that only winter brought. Whites and silvers painted the landscape where moonlight shone off the ice and snow clinging to the hills.

Winter was North Pyongan's favourite season, visually. It had always made him want to craft poetry. But he was never able to truly appreciate it when he knew firsthand the hardship it brought.

His eyes scanned the horizon, wondering how many people were roaming the dark hills in search of food even at this late hour.

The province looked towards the highway, though he couldn't see it, and South Pyongan had only just left.

'God watch over her.'

North Pyongan could not afford to rely on God any longer, if he wanted to become the type of province his people could believe in, and his sister could rely on. But in this case, where he couldn't follow her, it still felt appropriate to ask the Lord to keep an eye on her.

"Do you see anything suspicious?"

The province looked over to see his injured bodyguard limping towards him. "Comrade Kim Don-om, you should rest."

"Not while we're so exposed out here." He flanked North Pyongan on the other side, squinting out at the plateau. "I don't like how those hills cut off our line of sight to the southwest."

"Me neither," his other bodyguard- Ho Yong-ik- grunted.

Both men spoke Pyongan dialect, from close to the Amnok. Korea had chosen pairs from each Provincehuman's lands to guard them, as well as those who had been both involved in the fight against Japan, and were members of the Worker's Party.

North Pyongan hadn't been the one to realize it- SH had, from introducing herself to all of them. She guessed it was to provide another layer of assurance. Even if they turned out to not support their State's goals, hopefully their feelings about their home provinces would keep them loyal.

"And I don't like what was up with that plane," Kim Don-om said, lifting his eyes to the dark heavens above. "You know it wasn't right."

North Pyongan nodded. He did. He had only told his sister otherwise to reassure her enough to leave him to get help.

Without discussing it, the small group had taken up a defensive position at the sheltered base of a crag, a safe distance away from the damaged truck. They clustered around it in a semi-circle, with the wounded driver and young technician safely behind them. Some squatted, some stood, but all remained on guard.

It could have been a coincidence that a single scouting plane had found them while they were transporting a Provincehuman across open ground. But it had also seemed like one when North Pyongan encountered Pak Chae-eun in Seoul.

The priest had taught him that when it came to war, it was safer not to believe in coincidences.

"Comrade Liao Shī will warn us if she spots anything coming," he said, looking up at the foothills, where the woman was keeping watch.

He had asked her to remain in sight, just in case, so he could see her positioned within the shadows cast by the scrub trees clinging to the rocks above her, rifle in hand. It was too dark to see her clearly, but he could make out that she was sitting at attention with her eye pressed to the scope.

The rifle briefly lowered as she looked back at him, and he swiftly turned back to the plateau, cheeks warm for some reason.

He wasn't… quite sure what had happened between them in the truck. Why after saying it was best if they spoke less and studiously avoiding him for two months, she had suddenly seemed to have a change of heart, enough that she had…

Realizing he was cradling the hand that had held hers to his chest, North Pyongan hid it behind his back, almost expecting to hear his sister teasing him.

He wanted to talk to Liaoxi, but now wasn't the time. Especially when any words they exchanged would echo down below.

His gaze had snuck back to the Chinese province, so as she suddenly stiffened and made a hand signal, he was already tapping his guards, all of them hurrying back to the group. Kim Don-om attempted to stand next to North Pyongan, but the province ushered him in with the driver and technician.

"One person," he murmured, rifle pointed at the outcrop that shielded them, one eye on it and the other on Liaoxi's signals. "Northwest approach, coming down through the foothills. Possibly unarmed."

None of the soldiers relaxed, their firearms remaining steady as the clatter of rock broke the hush, followed by the harsh rasp of heavy breathing, before a woman came staggering around the rocks.

She took a few tottering steps, looking around frantically, before seeing the men and stumbling back, her eyes wide with terror as she fell to the ground, her palms scrabbling at the icy rock.

"It's alright," North Pyongan quickly soothed, placing his gun on his back, and gesturing for the others to lower theirs. Though not holster them. "KPA, General North Pyongan. You're safe now."

The woman stared at his extended hand with blown-out pupils, looking like she wanted to run. But after a second she took it,

allowing him to pull her up.

"C-C-Comrade North Pyongan," she stuttered, her hands balled in her thick skirt. "Thank God I f-found you- found someone. M-My sister she's- she's sick. I need- I n-need-"

"Slow down," he soothed, guiding her over to a ledge of rock she could use to sit. "Get your breath back first."

The woman started to inhale and exhale deeply, each breath containing a whistling note of hysteria, while North Pyongan examined her more closely.

She was young, under thirty he'd say, and thin, as many were, though the layers of her winter choson-ot and coat made her look sturdy. Her hood was down and her dark hair was loose, pasted to her forehead with sweat. Her skin was the colour of pearls in the moonlight.

He looked up, seeing no sign of Liaoxi.

Once the woman's chest wasn't heaving, he asked, "Can you tell me your name and what you're doing out here?"

She took one last deep inhale. "I'm K-Kim Jin. I'm from a nearby farm. M-My sister is sick with something. I need you to come right away."

North Pyongan's heart sank, thinking of the American-spread smallpox of last year. "Do you know what she has?"

"Does it matter?" the woman shrilled. "She's coughing blood and- and mucus, and I need you to come see her."

"We don't have any medical supplies," the province told her. The driver's kit was for emergency first aid, not illness. "But we have a truck coming for us soon. We could pick her up and take her-"

"No!" Kim Jin shrilled, shooting up, the whites of her eyes gleaming wildly. "No, she's so ill, I- I don't think she's going to make it. Please, I need to get back to her *now."*

“I understand,” North Pyongan said gently. “But in that case, I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do for her.”

The woman clutched at the ties of her coat. “You- You’re Christian, right? You’re with the Christian Federation, aren’t you?”

North Pyongan hesitantly assented, though he never actually had been. Mindful of Korea not wanting him to broadcast his faith, he had only ever worked closely with them as his appointed go-between.

“Then you have to come!” the woman urged, clutching at the collar of his tunic. “Please! You can give her final rites or- or-“

Her eyes welled with tears that glistened like diamonds in the silver light, her knuckles creaking with how desperately she was clinging to him.

If the woman's sister really was dying, then North Pyongan couldn't not do what he could for them both.

He looked over his shoulder at his comrades, who were still holding their firearms, watching warily. Kim Don-om met his eyes, giving a slight shake of his head.

“A… few of us could come see her, I suppose,” the province said to Kim Jin.

Her eyes somehow widened even further as she stepped back, shaking her head vigorously. “My sister, she- she doesn’t trust soldiers. Men. B-But you’re a Provincehuman, so you’re safe. Please.”

North Pyongan hesitated, wishing his sister was…

No. This was his situation. He could handle it.

“Let me speak with my comrades first,” he said.

“O-Okay.” The woman’s eyes darted around at the looming shadows. “Please hurry.”

North Pyongan hustled back to the men, all of them going aside to confer in brief, hushed tones.

After some fervent protests from Kim Don-om, the province turned back to the woman.

“Alright,” he said. “I can accompany you back. But my bodyguard has to come, or I can’t.”

Kim Jin glanced at Ho Yong-ik, her tongue darting out to wet her chapped lips. “Th-That’s fine. But we need to hurry.”

She started off before he could say anything else.

As Ho Yong-ik adjusted his firearm, North Pyongan glanced back at the others. Kim Don-om’s lips were pressed thin, still displeased, and the gruff old soldier had his fingers tight around his submachine gun’s grip.

He still couldn't see Liaoxi. But he trusted she would know what to do.

The province and his guard set out after Kim Jin.

North Pyongan did not ask God to watch over him. He needed to prove to his sister that he could take care of himself, so that she would no longer have to worry about leaving him. He needed to prove to Korea *and* himself that he was someone he could rely on.

And he shouldn’t need divine providence for that.

They followed the woman out of the hills and across the plains, looping down around the small range of ridges that flanked the Pyongyang highway to the west to avoid the river that ran through them, before setting off across a dark country road.

Kim Jin rushed ahead, looking back every few metres as if to make sure they were still following. She shook off North Pyongan’s offers to carry or even support her, though her steps were unsteady.

He thought of how he had felt on his way from Anju to Sinuiju, his thoughts whirling around the abyss in his mind, driven only to keep moving so that he could save his sister sooner. If hers was dying, then her haste and anxiety were understandable.

They walked for over an hour, long enough that he thought they might have gone farther west than Sukchon, though the darkness and sameness of the snow-covered fields was disorienting. There weren't many villages in this part of his sister's province, mostly scattered farms between here and the coast.

"Where did you say your farm was?" he asked, wishing he could have done it before they left the others.

"Close," she assured him, looking around the glowing fields.

"How long have you lived here?"

"All my life," she replied. "We can leave the road now."

He gently took her wrist before she could plunge off it.

"Winter wheat," he said, pointing to the small green plants almost hidden by the dusting of snow. "Let's find a path."

"My sister is *dying,"* the woman said, frustrated.

"I understand. But we can't doom anyone else by treading on food that they need." North Pyongan escorted her farther down the road, finding a farmer's trail through the crops. "We will need as much as possible for the rebuilding effort when the war is over."

Kim Jin was silent as she led them down the path. Then she quietly asked, "Do you really think that Korea can withstand this?"

If she had asked him if he really thought they could force a ceasefire or free the south, North Pyongan might have paused.

He had told his sister that he wasn't too upset by the talks falling through after the American offensive back in August, as negotiating with them when they weren't being honest about wanting peace would only stretch the war out. And it was clear by now that he had

been right. And he knew their army couldn't free the south by force. He had known it since the end of the Fifth Phase Offensive. Korea knew it, too, deep down. It was why he'd moved them into the Jangsan bunker. It was why he put up with the Americans murdering that child instead of pulling away and launching another offensive.

The only option left was to wear the enemy down. But could they? Could their army cause enough damage to force America to make peace while remaining strong enough to stand against his growing forces? North Pyongan believed their people could keep fighting, just as Korea had said during his Foundation Day speech.

But even if they fought long and hard enough to win a ceasefire…

Would they be able to win Reunification?

And if they didn't, what would that mean for Korea and his brother?

But none of that was what the woman before him was asking. She had asked if Korea could withstand it. So North Pyongan was able to earnestly answer, "Yes," with no hesitation.

Before, he might have had to utter a silent prayer, seeking reassurance that they could and causing a moment of hesitation that would seem like faltering to Kim Jin. But he didn't need to now.

It wouldn't be up to God. Withstanding America's aggression was up to *them.* It was up to their people to resist and forge forwards, and it was up to Korea and his provinces to find them that way forward. North Pyongan knew his Countryhuman could do it, and he knew that in order to help him, he had to believe he could, too.

He had to believe that no matter what, neither Korea nor their people would let them remain Divided, so that they could believe he wouldn't either.

"Korea has withstood worse than this," he said to Kim Jin. "No matter what, we will withstand this, too."

“Is there even a point?” the woman asked, her voice heavy as guilt. “The Japanese didn’t raze everything like this. Even if we won tomorrow… How are we supposed to live our lives in *this?”*

She raised her eyes to the plains that spread out around them.

North Pyongan knew that if the sun had been above them, they would have been able to see the destruction. Scorched patches high on the hills where their guerrillas had been targeted when the enemy held South Pyongan, craters in the farming roads where ox carts and sheds had been wiped off the map, the burnt-out remains of houses and barns.

There weren’t many villages in this part of his sister’s province. But there had used to be more.

“It will be difficult,” he admitted, not wanting to lie. “But we’ve faced difficult before. We will rebuild, and thrive again.”

The echo of *‘Please God’* sounded in his head as he took another look at where the dark line of the horizon hid the West Sea from view. But he didn’t allow the words to form.

‘We will.’

Kim Jin was silent for the next few minutes, as a farmhouse rose out of the fields, and they drew near.

It was a typical thatch-roofed one, large enough for a small family, with a few storage buildings and an empty cowshed with a broken roof. A window peered from the front of the house like one large, dark eye, watching them approach.

The snow was near spotless, except for a swathe of path scraped down to the dirt, like a sled had been dragged over it. No footprints marred it.

“Would your friend mind waiting outside?” Kim Jin said as they stopped outside the front door. “My sister should be sleeping. It will scare her if too many men come in.”

“Maybe you should go in and wake her up first,” North Pyongan

suggested.

"I…" She dipped her head in a nod. "Yes, you're right. Wait here a second."

She opened the door a crack and slid inside the dark mouth of the house.

Ho Yong-ik kept his gaze fixed on the window. North Pyongan readied himself, looking around the fields. He thought he might have seen a slim shadow slipping behind the cowshed, but it could have been his imagination.

His heart beat hard in his chest, the hair on the back of his neck prickling.

'Not again.' He wouldn't let it happen again.

"You can come in," Kim Jin said from inside a moment later.

Ho Yong-ik stepped to the side of the window, and North Pyongan exhaled.

No prayers. He had gotten himself into this. He had to get himself out.

The province opened the door, stepping into the dark.

"I'm s-sorry there's no light," Kim Jin's voice said from another room. "It's the black-"

She hadn't finished her sentence when North Pyongan felt someone lunge for him.

But he had been prepared. He dodged aside, lashing out in the dark and feeling his fist connect with a firm side. There was a grunt and a crash, then chaos erupted in the farmhouse as the men lying in wait for him leapt into action.

North Pyongan sprung, not back for the door but forwards, feeling two bodies go flying past him. He ran until his hand met the back wall, then spun, raising the flashlight he had ready and flicking it

on.

Someone hissed as the military-grade beam illuminated the small room in harsh white light, and the province caught a glimpse of his opponents. Five men, all with guns, one of them with his own flashlight in hand, about to turn it on.

North Pyongan aimed for him, the shot from his pistol catching him in the forehead. The man's flashlight tumbled to the ground, and North Pyongan doused his own, jumping aside as someone fired back. He leapt, again not for the front door, but for the sliding one he'd seen farther along the wall.

The shots were deafening in the enclosed space, louder than the startled screams that had come from the room he dove into. He flashed his light again, stunning the one person inside, then lunged for her in the dark, dragging her into the corner as bullets tore through the thin wood of the sliding door, and the light of the enemy's flashlight poured through in piercing spotlights.

"I'm sorry!" Kim Jin screamed, kicking and thrashing. "I'm sorry, please don't-!"

North Pyongan cut her off. "Is there anyone else in the house?"

"No!" she cried, then yelped as a bullet shattered the window next to them, causing glass to rain down on their heads.

Praying she wasn't lying and glad she'd chosen a room with a window, North Pyongan said, "Then please hold still."

He jumped up, hauling her with one arm as he fired at the door with the other, forcing the shooters on the other side to take cover. When he reached the window, he hurriedly lifted the woman, tossing her unceremoniously through the open portal while she shrieked.

"He's going out the window!" one of the men shouted, catching a glimpse through the holes in the door.

"Comrade Ho, we're out!" North Pyongan shouted as he dove and rolled, thankfully not cutting himself on broken glass this time.

Pieces of it crunched under him as he hit the ground a few feet below, then grabbed Kim Jin by the arm as more gunfire sounded from the other side of the house, Ho Yong-ik free to fire now that the woman was safe.

Rushing for a storage shed around the side, North Pyongan shoved her behind it, warning her, “Stay here if you want to be safe.”

“W-Wait!” Kim Jin snagged his sleeve, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. “My kids are in a shed here, please don’t hurt them, please, I’ll do anything-“

“We aren’t going to hurt you,” North Pyongan promised. “Just stay quiet.”

He whisked away, sprinting for the corner of the house, running directly into a man who had retreated there to escape Ho Yong-ik.

North Pyongan smashed into him just as he turned, both of them sprawling to the ground. Cries were raised as the other men saw him, and more as Ho Yong-ik’s submachine gun rattled. It sounded like there had been more hiding in wait outside.

He wrestled the man he was fighting back, shoving his pistol against the side of his head and spraying his brains out over them both. Dropping him, he charged out, running for the cowshed, trying to put distance between him and Kim Jin.

A bullet grazed his lower back in a line of heat, and he threw himself forward, rolling behind the dilapidated shed and springing up with his Type 49 ready. Somewhere Ho Yong-ik was still laying down his own fire, and North Pyongan heard the distinct sound of someone choking on their own blood.

How many was that down? At least three. But there were definitely more than two left firing. How many were there? Had he gotten in over his head? Should he have waited for-?

North Pyongan shook his head, leaning out to fire at the man trying to take cover back in the house, his body jittering as it fell back against the door.

Ho Yong-ik and Kim Jin and Liaoxi could depend on him. *He* could depend on him.

He spotted another enemy guerrilla leaning around the corner of a shed, but stopped himself from firing.

“Watch the sheds!” he called. “There’s children in one!”

Lowering his gun, he slid around the side of the cowshed, running into a reloading Ho Yong-ik on the other side.

“Status,” the man demanded.

“Minor injuries. Cover me.”

Under his covering fire, North Pyongan sprinted across the open path between them and the storage shed, sliding behind it just as his comrade had to stop to reload. The soldier using it for cover met him at the back, lunging with his knife and scoring a cut across his forearm. But the province grabbed his knife hand, and- using a move his sister did whenever she could- yanked him closer, bring his knee up to meet the man’s groin. Hard.

The guerrilla let out a strangled shout, instinctively trying to grab at himself, and North Pyongan took the distraction to yank his knife from his hand, driving it into his eye, then cutting his throat as soon as he hit the ground.

He shoved the blade into his belt, immediately peering around the shed again, ready to fire.

But the night was still. As he scanned the battlefield, he couldn’t see any movement, aside from Ho Yong-ik peering out from behind the cowshed.

He looked at the man, who signalled him to stay put. He prowled out, moving slow while North Pyongan eyed the sheds.

As his comrade stepped over the body in the doorway to clear the house, the province remained alert.

The ground was littered with the bodies of seven men. Some lay in

the open where Ho Yong-ik had caught them leaving the house, while others sprawled half out from behind cover. Blood stained the snow, glistening like dark ink under the uncaring moon.

He looked down at the man he'd killed, his eyes already misting over in the cold. He briefly closed his own, mourning that he had been right about this being a trap.

A slight creak split the night, and North Pyongan tensed, his eyes darting to a wood shed off to the side of the house. He could have sworn he saw the door shut.

He hesitated, then moved forward, not wanting to alert whoever it was by calling for his bodyguard. He crept toward the shed, his pistol ready.

A man lay on the ground in front of it, blood spilling from a scarlet smile carved across his throat, his face frozen in a startled expression.

Standing off to the side, North Pyongan yanked open the door, bracing for gunfire.

He only heard a whimper.

Cautiously peering in, he relaxed upon seeing three small figures clustered together in the dank darkness.

Two of the children cringed back, their eyes shining wide and terrified in the meager light, while the other only sat there listlesy.

"It's okay," North Pyongan quickly assured them, holstering his pistol and raising his hands. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Where's Eomeoni?" one hiccupped, his teeth chattering, though he was clearly trying to look brave.

"She's alright," North Pyongan said, then glanced around. "Stay here for a bit longer. I'll come get you when it's safe."

He heard the front door close, and went around the side to see Ho Yong-ik emerging, hauling a body with his hands bound behind its

back, and a gash on his head.

"Clear," the man said, dropping the unconscious man on the ground. "One of your shots must've caught him. It's not too serious. If we get him back and patch him up we can interrogate him."

North Pyongan nodded, ashamed he hadn't thought to leave at least one alive for that.

Nine in total then. That seemed about right for a small task force.

"Finish clearing the sheds," he ordered. "But don't open that one." He gestured to the woodshed. "There's children in there."

Ho Yong-ik asked no questions, only nodded.

"I'll go get Ms. Kim," the province said, but before he could a haggard voice growled, "Not so fast."

Both of the men spun to see their firearms pointing at one of the guerrillas that had come around the opposite side of the house.

In his arms was Kim Jin, a pistol pressed against the side of her skull.

"Weapons down," the man panted, his eyes almost as wide as his hostage's. "Or the bitch gets it."

Kim Jin shook in his grasp. "Y-You can't shoot me! You said you'd get me to America!"

"I don't give a damn what happens to you!" the man hissed, wincing. He must have been wounded in the firefight. "I'm here for the province. Weapons down. *Now."*

Ho Yong-ik eyed North Pyongan, whose jaw feathered. But he nodded, slowly setting down his Type 49, followed by his TT-33 and rifle. He dropped the knives from his belt while his bodyguard did the same, both of them kicking their weapons away as prompted.

As soon as they were down, the man fired his pistol.

North Pyongan flinched, but the shot had only gone into the unconscious enemy guerrilla. More blood spread over the churned-up snow outside the house.

"Good," the man panted, pressing the gun back to his hostage's head. "He was the last one that had to die today. You can turn yourself over to me, and this lady and your guy can go free."

"And then Syngman Rhee uses me to stall the negotiations for even longer," North Pyongan said, his hands in the air. "And tens of thousands more die."

"At least we wouldn't let the Communists win," the man spat, and the province knew there would be no negotiating with him.

There were many reasons someone might join up with the right-wing youth groups. Selfishness, wrong convictions, being misled, personal grievances. But at this point, after all this bloodshed and all of Rhee and America's machinations, if someone was willing to operate behind their lines in order to sabotage peace, there could only be one motivation.

Cruelty.

"This doesn't have to end with you dead," North Pyongan still tried, buying time. "If you hand over Ms. Kim Jin peacefully, and give us the location of your accomplices, we can show you leniency."

He wasn't lying. Life in prison wasn't death.

"Not a chance," the man sneered. "And now it's your last one. Get over here or the woman dies."

'Please,' North Pyongan prayed, not to God.

"I'm sorry," he said sadly, not moving.

Kim Jin's eyes squeezed shut as the pistol dug into her temple.

"Fine," the man growled. "I'm not fucking going out alone."

But before he could pull the trigger, his head exploded.

Kim Jin let out a bloodcurdling scream as blood showered her, stumbling back as the man's body slumped to the ground.

Liaoxi came trotting around the corner of the house, where she had set up her shot from the shadows.

"Sorry it took me so long for the shot to take," she lilted in Korean, slinging her sniper rifle back over her shoulder. "I didn't want to make a mistake."

"I knew you would make it," North Pyongan said, still feeling a deep relief as he retrieved his firearms. "I assumed that was your work."

He tilted his head to the dead man outside the woodshed, and she nodded proudly.

"He was going for the kids. I got him before he did."

North Pyongan was pleased he'd been right to trust that she would know to tail them all the way here from the hills. He had told his soldiers she would. It was the only reason Kim Don-om had agreed to let him go.

"You really were following us the whole time?" Ho Yong-ik asked, impressed. "I didn't even catch a glimpse."

The Chinese woman dipped her head demurely. "On the way here, you also had a less friendly tail. At his job he did fail."

"They must have sent someone with Ms. Kim Jin to make sure she didn't tell us we were walking into a trap," North Pyongan said.

Kim Jin seemed to finally realize it hadn't been her that had been shot. She patted at her bloodsoaked body with her hands, looking stunned.

"You could have shot me," she said to Liaoxi with an air of vague surprise.

“She wouldn’t have,” North Pyongan assured, smiling at the other province. “She’s a good shot.”

Liaoxi dipped her head so deeply her chin pressed to her chest.

“I- I was right th…” The woman’s shock turned to horror as she looked up at North Pyongan, the dazed expression draining from her eyes, replaced by horror. “Oh God. You’re going to kill me.”

“I’m not going to kill you,” he firmly told her.

“Y-You’re-" Kim Jin’s eyes filled with tears as she started to shake. “I’m so sorry, I’m so-“

“Eomeoni?”

North Pyongan looked over to see one of the children peeking out from the woodshed. It was the oldest-looking boy, who looked to be perhaps eight or nine.

He stared down at the corpse outside the door, his eyes wide.

“Min-jun, go back inside,” his mother said, her voice clogged with tears.

He looked at her, alarmed, and ran over, placing himself between her and North Pyongan, his stubby legs firmly planted.

“Why’s my mom crying?” he demanded. “What are you doing to her?”

“Min-jun, shush.” Kim Jin tugged him down into her arms, getting bloodstains on his already filthy white shirt.

A girl crept from the shed behind him. Creeping like a barn kitten, she skirted the corpse and curled up in her mother’s arms.

“Min-sol’s shaking again,” she muttered, burying her face in the woman’s breast. “He’s scaring me.”

“He’s just- He’s just sick, I-min,” the woman said, holding the two close as she looked up at North Pyongan. “I’m sorry. They said they

would hurt my kids if I didn't listen."

"I don't think they did," the province replied.

The woman had seemed genuinely shocked when the guerrilla mentioned hurting her. The implication might have been there, but he didn't think that was what they'd used to motivate her.

"They promised to get you passage to America, didn't they?"

Fear flashed through the young mother's eyes before she lowered her head. "What did you expect me to do? My son is sick and the hospitals are full. Even when the medical units visited, all they could do was give these two vaccines and give him teas. We don't have any medicine left."

"And you don't think we'll ever recover from this war," North Pyongan said tiredly.

"It's going to take years," Kim Jin said, tightening her grip. "No matter who wins, my children are going to grow up poor and hungry. And if we *don't* win, then I'm going go be persecuted. You conscripted my husband, *you* sent him to die. And Rhee's people would punish me for that."

She curled tighter around her children. "I could've got a pardon. I could've given them a better life over there."

"At the expense of the children here."

"I'm a mother," Kim Jin said into her son's hair. "I have to look out for my kids first. I won't be judged for that."

"I won't judge you," North Pyongan said. "But God's judgement cannot be avoided."

"Please don't kill me," the woman whimpered.

Realizing that had sounded like a threat, he told her again, "I really won't kill you. But you were willing to turn one of your Provincehumans over to the enemy for the chance to start a new life in the country that is the *reason* ours has become unlivable for

children like yours. You can't escape justice for that."

There was the urge to understand her, to send her off and pretend he'd never seen her to anyone but Korea. Even if his Countryhuman wanted to hunt her down, it would be difficult with how displaced everyone had become.

He *did* understand her wanting a better life for her children, even if he couldn't understand wanting that life to be in the country that had made their lives miserable in the first place, where they would be poor and othered.

But he knew if it had been his sister or one of his cousins she had risked, or Korea, he wouldn't forgive it. Like Korea had said about Pak Chae-eun, he shouldn't forgive it just because it was him she had betrayed.

"I'm going to have to turn you in," he said, and the woman paled further.

"B-But… What about my kids? M-Min-sol is sick and-"

North Pyongan closed his eyes, an idea forming. When he opened them, he said, "I'm going to drive you to Anju, and you're going to leave them in front of the Provincial People's Committee office."

Kim Jin blinked up at him. "What?"

"They're going to be taken in as orphans," North Pyongan told her. "And I'm going to make sure that they're sent on a train to Europe with the next batch of orphans our Polish comrades take in. And when I take you to Public Security, you aren't going to mention that you have children."

He didn't know if their mother being a criminal or still being alive might impede the process. Their comrades were still recovering from the World War, and he knew they would already be stretching precious resources for their orphans. He didn't want to chance them or those making the decisions in his own country being selective.

The woman gaped at him in astonished outrage. "You want me to-to *surrender* my kids so they can be sent to some foreign country

while I'm sent to *jail?"*

"A foreign country that isn't being bombed," North Pyongan told her. "A foreign country whose doctors aren't being murdered and whose medicinal factories haven't been demolished. And a foreign country that *isn't* destroying ours. Poland is poor. But they can grow up in peace there until the war is over."

"And- And when would I see them again?"

"You might not," North Pyongan admitted. "It depends on what your sentence is, and whether your prison gets hit by the bombs. And if we can find you and them when they're returned- they'll have to give fake names."

He crouched to meet her eyes. "But if the reason you were going to betray Korea was truly to give *them* a better life, then you will do this."

Kim Jin squeezed her children tightly, so tight that her daughter let out a squeak.

"Eomeoni, ouch!"

"What are you talking about?" the boy asked, extricating his head to glare suspiciously at North Pyongan.

Kim Jin took a shuddering breath, then lifted her head.

"Nothing," she said with choked calm. "Would you two like to go with your brother to Poland?"

"Pol-seu-kka?" the girl said, sounding the word out. "Where's that?"

"Somewhere else," Kim Jin said, inhaling shakily. "Somewhere far away from here."

Min-jun looked alarmed at that. "Are you coming?"

"No."

He threw his arms around her neck. “Then I’m not leaving you.”

His mother leaned her head against his arm, trapping it between her ear and shoulder, closing her eyes.

Perhaps she felt how thin the little limb was. When she raised her head, she sounded more steady.

“You know how you three play spies?”

“Min-sol always makes me be the evil Japanese guy,” the girl muttered.

“Mm. Well this time, you all get to be spies. You’re going to go off and learn everything you can about Poland for me, okay?”

“Okay,” I-min chirped happily.

But her brother pouted. “I don’t *wanna* be a spy if I have to leave you.”

“You’re the man of the house now, Min-jun. You can’t sulk like a child anymore.” His mother’s hand carded through his short hair, gentler than her words. “Do you remember when those nice men came to pick up your dad? They gave you that candy and told you he had to go do something really important for the country. That’s what you’ll be doing.”

“Are we going to see dad in Pol-seu-kka?” I-min asked excitedly.

“Dummy,” her brother muttered. “Dad’s dead. That means we’re not gonna see him for a long time.”

“Oh.” The girl sobered, looking up at North Pyongan and his blood-stained uniform like she had decided he was the one conscripting her. “Are *we* going to die?”

“No,” her mother answered for him, her voice breaking into tears as she pulled her in close again. “You’re going to *live.* You’re going to live happy lives and your brother is going to get better and then-then you can come home and see me again, and tell me all about it. Okay?”

“You’ll be taken good care of,” North Pyongan promised, his heart aching, but knowing this truly was the best outcome for them. For the children at least. “You’re going to go learn as much as you can, then bring it back here to fix Korea. You're doing your part for our country, just like your father. And your mother.”

He looked at Kim Jin, and she averted her eyes.

“Mmmmmm. Alright!" I-min decided. "If I’m not going to die, then I want to go."

Min-jun pouted, but nodded, looking determined. “I’ll learn everything I can about Poland for you, Eomeoni, promise.”

“That’s my brave boy,” his mother said, placing a kiss on his head. “And my smart girl. Go wake up your brother. We’re leaving soon.”

The two children ran off, I-min yelling excitedly that they were going to Pol-seu-kka.

“You’re making the right choice,” North Pyongan said gently, helping their mother to her feet.

“I hope that comforts me when they've forgotten my face,” Kim Jin said dully.

While she got her children ready for travel, Ho Yong-ik stood guard, and the provinces investigated the area one last time.

“I have to say, I know you’re quick,” Liaoxi said as they collected the dead men’s firearms in a salvaged burlap sack. “But when we set out I wasn’t entirely sure you knew it was a trick."

“I was hoping it wasn’t,” North Pyongan murmured. “But there were too many signs.”

There had been too many suspicious things for even him to overlook. The woman had come down from the mountains, a more difficult trek, and one in which she was less likely to be seen by any passersby she was supposedly looking for. And she hadn’t even mentioned the bombs that had just fallen nearby. Then she had led them out to the plains instead of back the way she came, likely

because her tail had wanted to conceal their presence on the way in, then observe them more easily on their way back. On top of that, Kim Jin's skin was too fair to be that of a peasant's, and she'd been too willing to defile the wheat fields.

All of those things could have been just her hysteria over an ill sister, or her not wanting to say she was squatting in an abandoned building. They could have been coincidences, just like it could have been a coincidence that she had managed to find them, or that she recognized him as Christian, or that a frightened woman's sick relative just so happened to be a sister who shared his faith.

"We can't accept coincidences in war."

Liaoxi nodded. "Just like we can't accept that that plane just happened to come by in the same time frame."

She examined the pistol she lifted from the belt of the dead man they'd been planning to capture, then passed it to him so that he could observe, "American."

A Colt 1911. America sold them to the 'National Defense Army.'

But these weren't Rhee's soldiers. At least not officially. They wore plain uniforms and spoke in Pyongan dialect. They wore no identifying markers, but he thought he knew who they were.

"Taedong Youth Corps," he said. "Most of them come from my sister's province."

The sons of the wealthy collaborators that had fled Pyongyang after the Division. The very people his sister would have loved to get her hands on.

"Their weapons won't be enough proof," North Pyongan said, crouching to close the eyes of the corpse at their feet. "The Americans will only say they received them from the southern army, or looted them."

Ridgway had been forced to accept that the reactionary guerrilla units in the south were part of the armed forces he had responsibility for, and so would be held liable if they invaded the

new neutral zone again. But he still denied responsibility for those above the line, and refused to say whether or not he was arming them.

But clearly he was. Even the Soviet and northern weapons the Korean saw in their hands had likely come from weapons the KPA had left behind on their withdrawals.

"En," Liaoxi sighed, squinting between the Colt and her Mauser. With a slightly reluctant look, she placed the American pistol in the bag.

North Pyongan took another look in the house, searching for any supplies he could drop off in Anju, but finding nothing except a rotting futon. Considering the fields around the property were well-tended, he allowed himself to hope that the original owners had just moved into the hills.

As his flashlight beam panned around the room one last time, he paused, catching a glimpse of something under the first man he'd killed that he had missed when looting him.

He rolled the corpse over, silently apologizing, and picked up a small notebook. He flipped through it, eyes widening.

Back outside, Ho Yong-ik was tying the sack of firearms to Liaoxi's back (all safely emptied of ammo).

North Pyongan hustled over, showing them the notebook. "Look."

His bodyguard squinted at the handwriting. "Coded."

North Pyongan nodded excitedly. "But it doesn't matter. Even if we can't break the code, this is still useful. Look at the times next to these."

He pointed at the numbers, and the light of understanding dawned in Liaoxi's eyes.

"Transmission times," she said. "They're receiving orders from behind enemy lines."

Bobbing his head, North Pyongan said, “And a radio means they have to keep their base of operations in range, which is hard since Korea is so mountainous. And the group of guerrillas that’s been bothering us is operating mostly in my sister’s province and Hwanghae.”

“Can’t be receiving transmissions from beyond the front,” Ho Yong-ik mused. “Hwanghae has that belt of mountains between it and here. I'd say they're coming from the coast."

“It could be a boat, but I'd guess the Americans would use something more reliable,” North Pyongan said, feeling like a lighthouse fire had been sparked in his head.

And there was really only one island that was both far enough south to be safe from their jets operating over his own coast, that could also easily transmit radio signals across his sister and cousins' provinces.

“Cho Island. They have to be within range of Cho Island.”

This had to be what Hwang felt when solving math equations.

Ho Yong-ik and Liaoxi both lit up at his declaration.

“That narrows the search zone a lot,” the Chinese woman said.

North Pyongan nodded, triumphant. “And once South Pyongan conducts her investigation, we’ll have their position down to the dot.”

Cracking his knuckles, Ho Yong-ik said, “Then our comrades can give those youth group bastards what they deserve.”

“Let’s get moving. I need to tell Korea.” North Pyongan started over to Kim Jin and her children, his steps light.

Though they became somewhat heavier as he took one last look back at the abandoned farmhouse and the corpses he would have to send someone to collect.

It had been wrong to hope that with the talks ongoing he could

stop getting his hands bloody when their people still were down at the front, he knew that. Yet he couldn't help it.

But he didn't regret killing these men who had been desperate to capture him for America and Rhee. It meant they shared their masters' desire to keep the war ongoing, so that even more children would fall ill, even more of their land would be destroyed, even more people felt like they had no other option than to leave. They had been killing their country's defenders and looting supplies civilians needed to survive.

It was pointless to think of what Korea had said happened to the youth group conscripts in the south. He had already thought it- if these men had been trusted to come north, it was because they were trusted to be cruel.

If things had been different, these men might have been victims.

But they weren't. And like Paik Sun-yup, they had deserved to die.

If God was real, he would judge their souls. And even if he didn't, North Pyongan had at least served them justice in this world.

He set off into the night with Kim Jin's sick son on his back, hoping to make it back before his sister could worry for him.

Did you hear those testimonies that say the Israelis are using dogs to torture prisoners (objective fact, there are videos) and rape them (enough testimonies that I believe it)? Cats wouldn't do that. You couldn't train a cat to do that. This is because dogs are inherently class traitors, while cats are the only animal outside the class system. You might think of the dogs that help farmers, but that is the Khrushev-Zhou phenomenon. 'I came from the peasantry, you came from the privileged class.' 'Yes, and we are both traitors to our class.' The bulk of dogs are the enemy and must be re-educated.
Also I think there's a sickening thing where people hear that and go 'poor dogs.' Poor dogs?? Poor PEOPLE getting VIOLATED by the dogs. It's like how during the Russian Revolution a lot of borzoi got killed for being symbols of the monarchy. I've seen people call the Bolsheviks (not individuals

but as a whole) bloodthirsty savages for that, and it is *always* tsar supporters. WHAT ABOUT THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE STARVING ACROSS THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE. WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN THAT WERE BORN POOR AND LIVED SHORT, MISERABLE LIVES SO THOSE DOGS COULD EAT RED MEAT. WHAT ABOUT THE WOMEN THAT WERE TREATED LIKE PROPERTY AND HAD TO SELL THEMSELVES TO LIVE. WHAT ABOUT THE LITERAL POGROMS COMMITTED AGAINST JEWS, INDEPENDENCE FIGHTERS, AND COMMUNISTS BY THE TSARDOM? Can you imagine being a man who had broke his back in a factory or field his whole life and still lived in soul-crushing poverty, a man who had to watch his children suffer and grow ill while he couldn't afford medicine, and knowing that there were dogs out there that were eating better than you and your family at your expense? I'm not saying I would do it, but I completely understand any person that did kill a borzoi. If the price to pay to end world hunger, class exploitation, and all war forever was to kill one dog, liberals would refuse because the lives of poor people and foreigners are worth less to them than an animal's. I get that animals are innocent, so people feel badly for them, but somehow those same people never feel sorry for children, who are also innocent while also being *people.* Yes, poor dogs, too, but the dog doesn't have the sapience to have permanent PTSD and truly understand what being raped is, nor do dogs have to deal with religious or regular shame at being assaulted. The *real* victims are the Palestinians, and the real beasts are the Israelis.

Also I do think if you ever hurt an animal for no reason you have a crooked soul and deserve to be hurt as well. I just don't think it's a crime above that of hurting a person. I'm not saying people should care less about animals, but that they should care more about humans.

Growing Past You

"If you don't tell me where he went *right now,* I am going to put you on the *ground* and kidnap the technician."

'Oh no.'

At hearing his sister's voice resound over the hill, North Pyongan sped up the slope, the sick five-year old on his back thankfully not slowing him much.

"I don't like that he went off without us either, Comrade South Pyongan," Kim Don-om's soothing tone said more quietly. "But we can't have both our provinces chasing off across the fields."

"Tell me where my brother is."

Recognizing the growl in his sister's voice, North Pyongan called, "Eon- South Pyongan!"

There was an immediate burst of movement from above as his sister flew over the slope and straight at him.

"I'm carrying a child," he said quickly, and she aborted the swing she'd been aiming at his chest, skidding to a halt in front of him.

"Where the *hell* were you?" she demanded, fists clenched. "Those bastards told me you ran off after some shady chick, but wouldn't tell me where!"

"Let's not call our comrades that," he said calmingly, ashamed for upsetting her. "Come on, I'll give you my report once we're up there."

Kim Don-om heaved a sigh of relief as he saw him, likely glad that he wasn't going to be dishonourably discharged for losing his province.

"So it wasn't a trap?" the technician asked (hiding from South

Pyongan behind his escort's back).

"It was," North Pyongan corrected, setting down the boy he'd been carrying.

Everyone eyed Kim Jin, who hung her head as she shepherded her children towards the place he indicated, hesitantly accepting his bloody tunic for more warmth.

South Pyongan immediately swept in, slugging him on the arm, not one of her playful ones, but hard enough that he knew he'd really worried her.

He gave her an apologetic forehead wrinkle.

"Idiot," she said out loud. "So you walked into *another* trap? Even though you actually *knew* it was a trap this time?"

"If her sister really was ill, then I had to try and help."

"Yeah, but she wasn't and you could've-" South Pyongan cut herself off, punching him again, causing a crunching sound to come from his burns. *"Idiot."*

North Pyongan winced. "It was worth it."

While they waited for the truck his sister said was coming, and he tended to the wounds on his back and arm, he told their gathered soldiers about what had happened at the farmhouse, biting his tongue before he could tell them about narrowing down the location of the guerrilla headquarters.

He didn't know how the fighter jet that had driven them off the road fit in to tonight. No one should have known he would be heading to Sinuiju that wasn't part of this truck crew. Even if someone had seen him waiting at the muster point or as they drove by, he didn't know how they would have gotten the information to the Americans so swiftly.

Subtly, he eyed his comrades as he talked, trying to gauge their reactions, which he admittedly wasn't the best at. He wanted to assume that the technician's brows were furrowed because he had

been worried about his province, or that the driver's lip was curled because he was disgusted by the reactionaries and Kim Jin's attempted betrayal. He didn't want to think it was because he had escaped the trap they had helped set up.

Still, it was best to observe military confidentiality.

He frowned as he noticed someone else's expression.

His sister should have relaxed once she heard how they fought off the enemy, like she always did once she worked herself down from her temper. Her angular eyes would stop appearing so sharp, and the corners of her lips would slacken. More noticeably to anyone that wasn't her, her muscular shoulders would unwind, until she was standing in her usual casual posture and less like she was about to strike like an eel.

But as he recounted how he had handled the soldiers inside the house, eliminated the man with the knife, and bought time for Liaoxi to take her shot, South Pyongan only seemed to grow tenser, her blue lips disappearing in a grim line and her brows drawing in so tightly that a new spot of blood appeared on the bandage on her forehead. She didn't even smirk as he made sure to mention how he had kneed the guerrilla that cut him in the groin.

She wouldn't appreciate him asking in front of the others, so he held his tongue.

"Damn traitors," the gruff soldier- Song Hak-su- grunted when he was done. "Hope Public Security can root the rest of those bastards out."

"There's no way there were only eleven," another agreed. "For an independent band, maybe. But I'd bet my ass these ones had foreign help. They'll be bigger."

"Woman," the driver called to Kim Jin, who flinched. "What do you know about the jet that done shot at us?"

"I- I don't know anything," she muttered, hugging one of her sleeping sons. "The man that brought me here just said we were

supposed to find your truck somewhere near the road. Nothing else."

"She'll be properly interrogated once I take her in," North Pyongan said. "But I believe her."

"Even with just that, it definitely sounds like the Yanks knew we'd be coming this way," Ho Yong-ik mused, rubbing his square chin.

He, Kim Don-om, and South Pyongan's bodyguards (who wouldn't tell North Pyongan their names, correctly citing that his sister would make him tell her), eyed the rest of the group with open suspicion.

"Once we find the rest of the enemy guerrillas, we'll find out how they knew," the province assured, not wanting them to start suspecting each other.

As the others murmured in low voices, he followed South Pyongan, who had walked to the edge of the slope, looking down at their now cold truck, which thankfully hadn't exploded.

"I have other good news," he said, coming up behind her, smiling as he quietly informed her about the notebook he'd found. "Now you won't have to scour your entire province for a lead."

It was still difficult to believe he'd not only managed to escape the trap, but also found out a key piece of information in the hunt for the sabotagers. Korea might be disappointed they hadn't managed to take one alive, but he knew his Countryhuman would be pleased with what he had accomplished.

His smiled faded as South Pyongan muttered, "Yeah."

"Sister." He placed a hand on her shoulder, coming around to face her. "I'm sorry I worried you."

Her eyes glinted like real diamonds in the moonlight before she flicked them away from his. "You didn't worry me."

North Pyongan lightly squeezed her. "I shouldn't have. And you shouldn't be."

They would always worry for each other. They were siblings, and they loved each other. But he knew he didn't worry to the same extent as South Pyongan because he knew *she* could protect herself. His sister was indomitable, and the only time he hadn't felt that way was when she'd been taken by South, unconscious from a wound that could have killed her. Then he had almost gone mad with worry.

South Pyongan must feel like that all the time. He knew the quips she made about him falling down a mountain or being crushed by a meteorite or kidnapped again were supposed to be jokes. But he also knew they disguised a real fear that her helpless brother would get himself hurt if she wasn't there.

His sister wouldn't take anything he had realized when speaking to Korea in the Party Foundation building well. If he ever implied he felt ashamed for not being reliable for her or that he wanted to be able to protect her the way she protected him, she would get defensive and lash out, saying that she didn't *need* anyone to rely on or want to be protected.

So instead he gave her a smile and said, "You don't have to worry so much about me anymore. You don't need to protect me, eonni."

He had thought the words would relieve her. But South Pyongan looked down at the frosty ground, hiding her expression from him.

"Yeah. Right."

North Pyongan frowned, but before he could say anything, she moved past him, clapping him on the back.

"Hey, look. Ride's here."

Looking over his shoulder, he could see a dark shape rolling towards them from the direction of the highway. He pulled out his flashlight, using it to signal them over.

"Come on, people," South Pyongan called, her voice strident again. "Let's get moving. I want to get to Anju before the New Year!"

Perhaps she was still just shaken from him disappearing, and embarrassed about being so openly rattled in front of their comrades. She didn't like when their people realized that under her cool, unaffected demeanour was a caring core. It was why she still refused to speak to the gunner from her lost tank crew.

*'Well, she doesn't really like **anyone** realizing.'*

He had always known she cared, but before they had joined with Korea, even he had only seen her openly show it a handful of times, mostly when he was sick, or when one of the men she'd beaten had decided to attempt to get revenge on her brother for it. He had learned that the rules of the ring had let him get off lightly, and North Pyongan had learned that worry made his sister capable of ripping an ear off of someone's head. And he had earned a permanent perimeter guard every time he needed to relieve himself.

That just made him more determined to prove to her that he could protect himself. They had both been adapting to not following each other everywhere, but what good would it do if his sister was always anxious, fretting about what could be happening to him? He didn't want her to have to feel that way anymore.

But still, as they waited for the towing line to be connected between the two trucks, and North Pyongan comfortingly leaned his shoulder against his sister's, she only gave him a forced smile, not meeting his eyes.

North Pyongan didn't end up going to Anju. Korea needed to hear his news right away, and while he was purposefully vague about whether or not the enemy had managed to crack their codes, the province didn't want to risk sending him a communication from Sinuiju.

So the new driver drove them down to the highway, where they parted ways.

Kim Jin went with he, Liaoxi, and his bodyguards. A light went out of the woman's eyes as she realized she had even less time with

her children than she thought.

"You'll be brave for me, won't you?" she asked her brood, on her knees on the unforgiving ground.

Her sons and daughter nodded dutifully, repeating the fake names she had given them back to her.

"We'll make you and Korea really proud," Min-jun was trying to appear brave, but his wobbling lip gave him away.

"Good." Kim Jin looked as if she was trying to be brave, too. The silver liquid in her hazel eyes refused to fall. "Good."

Her voice broke as she pulled them all into one last hug, pressing her lips to each of their forehead's in turn, lingering on her fevered son's.

One day the children would grow old enough to understand what had really happened this night. And what her kisses truly meant. North Pyongan wondered how long it would take for one of their only memories of their mother to be a lingering warmth on their cold brows.

"I think what you decided is kind," Liaoxi murmured as they watched the tender farewell. "A fairer option doesn't come to mind."

Letting her go might have been. But North Pyongan knew that wasn't really an option.

How many children had been claimed by this war already? How many more would have been claimed both here and in China if the enemy had gotten their hands on him and used the Commands? None of the children incinerated by napalm or buried in mass graves had gotten the chance to say goodbye to *their* mothers. And none of the mothers dragged screaming from their homes by American soldiers had had the chance to kiss their families farewell.

This was just. Perhaps more just than Kim Jin deserved.

The men loaded the three children into the cab of the truck to

protect them from the cut of the wind as they drove.

Liaoxi, sensing North Pyongan's hesitance to lie to his soldiers, had told the group they were three unrelated orphans they'd found being held hostage by the enemy guerrillas, and that they should be dropped off at the Anju Provincial People's Committee headquarters. After seeing how heartfelt their goodbye with Kim Jin was, they might doubt that story. But none of them said anything as they piled into the back of the truck.

North Pyongan felt uneasy lying to them, even when he didn't do it directly. But he also didn't want to force *them* to lie by sharing the truth. Politicians asking soldiers to keep personal secrets was a murky area he wanted to avoid. Military confidentiality was one thing, but an atmosphere of dishonesty and secret-keeping would only make enemy espionage easier.

The driver apologized once more for 'getting them bombed' (refusing to head back to Pyongyang for medical treatment, claiming that he would be fixed up in the same shop as his truck), and then the convoy of two set off down the road.

They couldn't see Kim Jin's children, but North Pyongan gave the grieving mother time to watch them depart, her eyes fixed on the truck like she could burn through the olive metal to her family curled in the front seat.

The damaged vehicle being towed blocked North Pyongan's view of his sister, but he watched, too, until they all vanished between the hills.

A cold wind blew over them, making Liaoxi shiver. But none of them moved.

"You promise you'll get them to Poland?" Kim Jin finally rasped.

"I swear on-" North Pyongan's hand moved for the Bible he no longer had, and he placed his hand over the Party membership card in his breast pocket instead. "My honour as one of your Provincehumans. Your children will be safe."

The mother closed her eyes for a long moment, then tore herself away, starting down the road towards Pyongyang.

"Then do whatever you have to with me," she said, not turning back.

North Pyongan let out a long breath, then went after her, catching up to lead them down the dark road.

Ho Yong-ik and Kim Don-om took up the rear, the injured man being supported by his comrade. Liaoxi walked next to North Pyongan. Under the eyes behind them, she didn't try to take his hand. But she walked closely enough that their shoulders brushed with every other step. It warmed the Korean province enough that he took off his tunic again to give to Kim Jin.

Still, that look on South Pyongan's face lingered in his mind.

Korea wasn't pleased to be dragged out of Jonsung complex by the courier he sent, or to see him back at first. But once he told him about eliminating the guerrilla squad and gave him the transmissions notebook, his country settled.

His eye flicked over the coded words before he snapped it shut, praising, "Good job."

The coil of intense anticipation in North Pyongan's chest eased. "Do you have any criticism for me?"

Korea gave a brisk nod. "It was reckless to follow her in the first place. Even if you had known you would be able to retrieve key information, we could have lost far more."

North Pyongan dipped his head. "I know, Korea. But I couldn't have just ignored her. And if I had made her accept the entire group coming along, her observer might have alerted the rest of them, and they could have chosen to attack directly. I wanted to make sure Ms. Kim Jin got out safely."

And he had been worried that it might just be a ploy to steal the truck. They couldn't afford that after the Americans' intense targeting of their vehicles all summer.

Korea nodded, accepting his explanation. “Just remember that you are more tactically important than a single woman.”

North Pyongan knew his Countryhuman likely would have went with her, too, and probably alone. But he also knew telling him that wouldn’t work as a justification.

“Yes, Korea. And do you have any criticisms for my handling of Ms. Kim Jin’s children?”

“What children?” Korea said coolly. “Those orphans weren’t hers. And they’ll be on their way to Eastern Europe soon.”

North Pyongan’s eyes closed, relieved. “Thank you.”

“Head back to the bunker,” the man said, turning away and marching for the sparse shadows of the trees left on Moran Hill. “Another truck will take you to Sinuiju tomorrow night. And wash your uniform.”

North Pyongan looked down at the blood stains that dyed the dark fabric of his tunic even darker. “Yes, Korea. Can I ask how you think that pilot knew I would be taking the highway?”

Briefly stopping, he replied, “I have someone working on that. In the meantime, try to travel with more secrecy. Take back roads to muster points and wear hoods.”

North Pyongan assured him he would. Before his Countryhuman could disappear onto the hill, he called, “And Korea?”

“What?”

“I’m… sorry I have so many weaknesses to exploit.” He hung his head.

He hadn’t been blindly lured in by Kim Jin’s distress over her sister, or the fact that the fictional woman was a Christian seeking the comfort of another. This time. But he knew that if it wasn’t for Pak Chae-eun’s betrayal, he likely would have been.

It was disturbing to think of his southern cousins being

Commanded to tell South and America everything that could be used against him and the others, then the American passing it on to Rhee or his soldiers or reactionary guerrillas. He wondered if it had been Sang made to tell them how much he believed in the 'wrong' sect of their religion, or SJ forced to divulge how deep the bond between he and his sister was.

It would have laid guilt heavy upon his heart if he had been forced to do that. He resolved to make sure their cousins knew none of them blamed them for it once they were reunited.

"Clearly exploiting them didn't work," Korea said, not pausing. "Their information is already outdated."

He became another shadow under the trees, then was gone.

North Pyongan lay a hand over his breast pocket, feeling warm again.

For some reason he found himself feeling slightly nervous for the walk back to the bunker. His bodyguards had turned Kim Jin over to Public Security, and Kim Don-om was getting his wound properly tended, so it was just Ho Yong-ik left to escort him and Liaoxi.

Her shoulder kept brushing his, enough so that he knew it wasn't a accident. But he still couldn't talk to her with his comrade watching. Nor could he do it outside the bunker with Chagang on guard. Especially when his cousin was boring into them with his eyes.

He didn't get a chance the next day, either, even as she shadowed him to give his report on Kim Jin and the reactionaries to the Political Security Agency, or to speak with comrades at the Korean Christian Federation, or as he visited Han-jin and Tae-min at the aid station.

Tae-min had taken to the job surprisingly well, and was actually in the midst of helping the older women wash and stitch uniforms for the soldiers at the nearby checkpoint when they arrived. His dark eyes were fixed with intensity on the clothes he was beating, his knuckles cracked and red from cold river water and domestic

work.

North Pyongan stood by the road, keeping watch with Han-jin. “How are you two doing?”

“We’re good,” the curly-haired boy muttered, his eyes on the highway. “Tae-min’s even better at sewing than me now. I’m better-*was* better at farm work.”

“Our comrades are still glad to have both of you here.”

The women had been full of praise for the two, and he knew from one of his earlier visits that Ok Guk-hui had prepared a crock of kimchi for them for the winter. The province was pleased he’d been right about the older women taking them under their wings.

“And Tae-min really is doing well,” he appraised.

He supposed it shouldn’t be surprising. The former landlord’s son had said he felt useless, like he wasn’t good enough for his friend, so of course he would throw himself into learning how to be. Even if North Pyongan’s words about never not being good enough for those that loved them had stuck, Tae-min would still need to feel useful enough for himself.

“Yeah,” Han-jin said, his gaze drifting to his friend. “He is.”

North Pyongan frowned at his tone.

But before he could say anything, Han-jin shook himself like a duck shedding water and said, “What about you and masked noona?”

“We’re doing well,” North Pyongan answered, holding back on telling him they were going to Sinuiju tonight. “We haven’t been on the front lately.”

He trusted Hyun Han-jin whole-heartedly. But you never knew who was listening.

“No, I mean ‘you and masked noona.’” The boy waggled his thick brows.

Flushing for some reason, North Pyongan shook his head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Y’know.” Han-jin folded his arms behind his back, leaning to the side in a childish motion. “You two were always together, but the last few times you’ve brought us rations, she wasn’t there. Now she’s back. Did you make up?”

“We… weren’t exactly fighting.”

“Right. And when my Ma would make Pa sleep in the cowshed, they were doing great.” Raw grief flickered across the boy’s brown eyes before he shook his head. “What did you do? Oh, are you refusing to propose?”

“Pro-“ North Pyongan gaped at him in shock. *“Propose!?* I’m not- We aren’t even together!”

He shot a look over his shoulder, hoping Liaoxi hadn’t heard that. Thankfully she was still inside the kitchen.

“Mmm.” Han-jin sounded unconvinced. “But you had a couple’s spat.”

“Friends are capable of having rough patches,” North Pyongan defended. “I think you and Tae-min should know that.”

Thankfully the awkwardness that had lingered between the boys for so long seemed to be mostly gone now.

Han-jin’s lips twisted in a brief, wry smile. “Yeah, but you’re a man and a woman. It’s different. So why *aren’t* you together? Is she ugly under the mask?”

“No,” North Pyongan swiftly denied, then cleared his throat. “And women shouldn’t be judged by their appearances, anyway.”

Neither should men. Which meant his sister should stop glaring at him whenever she remembered how long his eyelashes were.

“So there’s nothing stopping you from proposing,” Han-jin said cheerfully. “She’s pretty, kind, and can snipe a guy’s head off from

across town. She's the kind of girl my Pa would've wanted me to marry."

North Pyongan could barely speak past his embarrassment. "Why are you bringing this up?"

"Because I made a bet with Tae-min that you'd end up confessing to her," the boy relied with zero hesitation. "But he said there's no way you would, since she's Chinese and you're a Provincehuman. You're doomed, so there'd be no point."

That was… true.

"Hey, don't look so down," the boy hurriedly said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Love should… conquer all, yeah? And Tae-min gets *really* smug whenever he wins a bet. I can't take that when we sleep in the same- house."

He gave a thumbs up directly in North Pyongan's face. "So go get her, hyung!"

North Pyongan gave into the urge to hide his face in his shoulder. "I don't think it's appropriate for a government figure to be talking about this with a civilian."

"Whoa, you know you blush purple? That's cool."

"To know what's being talked about to set Comrade North Pyongan's face on fire, I do desire."

North Pyongan startled, whipping around to see Liaoxi standing there with a bowl of soup in hand.

"Nothing," he said too hastily, making Han-jin snicker.

"Hm." Liaoxi's ushanka moved as she lifted a brow. "It's good that you're honest, since you're a bad liar."

"Triple rhyme," Han-jin noted. "Nice one, noona."

Liaoxi radiated an aura of smugness. "They would not listen, this troupe. They insist you take some soup."

North Pyongan had politely turned down the aid station women's offer, but since it would be rude to decline again, he took the tin bowl, letting the radish and dried minnow soup warm his hands. The markets still weren't receiving any goods from the coasts, which meant the small fish likely came from the Taedong River.

He ate his soup (firmly avoiding the look Han-jin kept sending him whenever Liaoxi wasn't looking), then took the bowl back to the kitchen.

"Thank you," he said to one of the cooks.

She wiped her brow, sweating from the heat of the stoves even with the chill outside. "No problem, comrade. That girl told us you haven't been eating, what with how worried you are about our comrades at the front."

North Pyongan blinked, startled. "Liao- Comrade Liao Shī told you that?"

"Mhm. That's not good," a motherly-looking woman with curly black hair contained by a hairnet- Ok Guk-hui- chided. "You need to eat more when you can, no matter how worried you are. None of our soldiers would want to hear our provinces are starving themselves over them. Tell Comrade Korea that goes for him, too."

"I will." North Pyongan would try. He knew it wouldn't accomplish anything. As for him…

It seemed even when Liaoxi had been avoiding him, she'd noticed what he and his cousins had been doing. Which meant Liaotung questioning their 'contraband' had been teasing, not information-gathering.

But the Chinese province had lied about the real reason he wasn't eating enough. He *was* worried about their soldiers, but he knew he couldn't let his own strength wane just because of that. Army leadership had to remain strong if they wanted to be respectable enough to lead. Even in the depths of worry over his sister, he had always made sure to eat all his rations.

But even the women here, army dependents and Women's Union members, people far from falling through the cracks, looked thin.

He may be glad his sister wasn't doing what the rest of the provinces were. But that didn't mean he was going to stop doing it.

Outside, Tae-min handed him his undershirt, where he'd stitched up the holes left from the shirt battle. North Pyongan had taken time last night to make sure his clothes were washed, and woke up early enough to mend his outer tunic, but had been intending to fix the white shirt in the truck tonight.

"Han-jin was saying weird things again wasn't he?" the dark-haired boy asked.

"Yes," North Pyongan admitted, draping his undershirt over his arm to put on later, when he had privacy. "But it wasn't about you."

The boy crossed his arms. "Was he trying to convince you to confess to Comrade Liao Shī?"

Stricken that the two clearly *had* been gossiping about him, North Pyongan nodded sheepishly.

Tae-min sighed, shaking his head. "Sorry about him. I tried to tell him not to. It's impossible for you two to be together, so it just hurts to hear it, right?"

North Pyongan had no idea why he was suddenly being treated like a tragic figure from a poem.

"No," he said, then corrected, "I mean not 'No, it doesn't hurt to hear,' but 'No, Liao- Comrade Liaox- Liao Shī and I are just friends."

"Mm," Tae-min hummed dryly. "If you say so."

His crossed arms tightened across his thin chest as his eyes strayed over the province's shoulder, then dipped.

His tone was more subdued as he said, "It's probably better you keep telling yourself that."

Desperate to escape the strange conversation before his face actually caught on fire, North Pyongan bobbed his head and scampered away, bidding everyone farewell before speed walking for the road, ignoring the second enthusiastic thumbs up Han-jin gave him, and followed by Ho Yong-ik and Liaoxi.

He had to avoid looking at her because every time he did, she arched an eyebrow and, like the gate on a pound lock being raised, heat flooded his face again.

Despite his embarrassment at the boys' sudden lines of questioning, North Pyongan was a little relieved. They had both sounded like actual young adults teasing him, the way they should have been teasing each other over girls if Ganghwa had remained Liberated. And aside from Tae-min's guttering at the end, he seemed more lively than he had before. The work and fresh air was doing him good.

But Han-jin… Even with his chipper tone as he teased North Pyongan about his l-love life (not that that was what was going on with he and Liaoxi), there had been something in his eyes and voice as he spoke about Tae-min doing well that… reminded him a bit of his sister the night before.

Then Liaoxi's shoulder brushed his again and his thoughts scattered like a school of nervous fish.

They had only returned part way by the time night draped its shadowy veil over Korea again, and the two attempted to depart for Sinuiju a second time, now crowded in with empty ammunition crates to return to the underground factories near the border.

Hidden by the shadows of the canvas above them, Liaoxi's hand found his again.

North Pyongan glanced at Ho Yong-ik, seated against the other side of the truck bed, intently focused on the open road behind them, then down at the gloved fingers resting on his.

'That's why I like you, I confess. You're honest.'

He'd thought she only meant she liked him as a friend when she had told him that on the way to Guk Island. But had she meant… something else? Something like Han-jin and Tae-min had?

North Pyongan… didn't have any experience with relationships like that. For several reasons. Women had made advances on him before, but when he noticed, he'd always politely turned them down. It didn't feel right to have a relationship with one of their people. Even when he sometimes forgot he wasn't completely human, the moment someone got bold enough to lay their hand on his arm or South Pyongan pointed out the 'eyes' they were making at him, he remembered.

He would think it was wrong for a pastor to court one of his flock. The idea was similar. Like Korea had said- some of their people didn't realize they were walking *with* them, not following. They would obey their orders unquestionably, and do anything to earn their favour. The provinces weren't gods, but some could see them that way.

And who would say no to a god?

But Liaoxi wasn't one of his people, or entirely human at all. They were both Provincehumans.

He had thought his feelings for her were only friendly, but when he thought about it… Would he have reacted how he did if Han-jin teased him about liking one of his female friends in the Christian Federation or Worker's Party? He knew he would just shake his head and deny it with a smile, like the few times South Pyongan had jokingly asked him if he wanted her to make the first move for him.

And when he thought about any of those friends confessing to him, the idea didn't fluster him. Even if someone he'd spent time with often before the war, like Hyon Pan-yeong from the Writer's Union, had admitted to having feelings for him, he would just regretfully inform her he didn't feel the same way, and hope that their friendship didn't suffer for it.

But if Liaoxi confessed to him…

The idea made his face grow hot enough that he whipped his ushanka off his head, muscle memory making him cross himself, oblivious to the looks from his bodyguard or the subject of the warding herself.

Maybe…

He snuck a look at her, finding her eyes gleaming like moonstone as she watched him with amusement, and quickly averted his gaze.

Maybe he *did* like her that way. But…

'You're doomed, so there would be no point.'

He and Liaoxi were both Provincehumans. But she was a foreign Provincehuman. He knew it didn't matter that their nations were comrades- Korea still wouldn't be pleased.

And if she did like him, then wouldn't talking openly with her about it upset her? As Tae-min had said, if it was impossible for them to be together, it might just hurt her to bring it up.

That was *if* she even liked him. If he wasn't misreading her signals. He'd ask South Pyongan what she thought, but it would be days before he saw her again, and he also didn't trust her not to just ask Liaoxi directly. And then he would have to cast himself into the Amnok.

It probably was just better to keep telling himself that he only thought of her as a friend.

But once he arrived in his capital and threw himself into work, Liaoxi still lingered in his thoughts, even when she left him to unload supplies from her country or help stitch clothes for his soldiers.

He didn't let personal problems distract him from making sure the Pakchon County Party Committee hadn't returned to limiting recruitment or making sure the civilian military training for factory workers was coming along well. But he could *feel* her there, and knew he was treating her slightly awkwardly.

He didn't want to do that. Whether she liked him… romantically or not, she had said she liked him as a friend. And he definitely wanted to keep her as one. Which meant he didn't want to treat her any differently than before.

'And she did say she liked me for my honesty.'

So on the second night in his province, North Pyongan took her aside before they could enter the Provincial People's Committee bunker to sleep, heart pounding, and asked,

"Can we talk?"

If you ever think 'North Pyongan seems like he has a good grasp of emotions,' you are wrong. Kangwon is literally the only one capable of identifying and acknowledging both his own emotions and other's with ease.

Some day I'll write out in the art book what exactly went on with Tae-min, Han-jin, and Kim Kang-sim. But for now you are left with their vague backstories. The clues are very much there. Also it is crazy that they were literally invented as I worked on the Good Neighbours chapter. The only thing in my outline was 'North Pyongan goes Ganghwa, takes leadership role.' Then it turned into three chapters, a court case, an integral part of his 'what is justice?' character arc, and two boys who are integrally tied to both he and South Pyongan's development, and are some of my favourite side characters. If you were ever wondering how I plan things, the answer is I don't.

Bad Cop

South Pyongan should be glad North Pyongan had dealt with the traitors on his own. She should be glad her hunting zone had been narrowed down to areas near the coast, letting her go straight to fleecing the villages between Kangso and Nampo. She should be glad her brother had actually been cynical enough to tell when someone had it out for him and to handle them by himself. It was what she'd wanted ever since they'd joined up with Korea and started facing *real* threats, not just drunks and the occasional Jap- for her brother to be able to take care of himself. She should be *glad.*

So why wasn't she?

'I don't need you to protect me.'

That was good. He shouldn't. Just like she shouldn't have been so worried for him. He *should* be able to take care of himself.

But something about it just... stuck in the back of her mind, like a piece of corn between her teeth, niggling at her. She couldn't even work it lose by beating the crap out of the reactionaries' toadies when she caught them, because they turned out to be a bunch of kids.

Her first lead came on her third day, in Poseong-ri, one of the villages outside Nampo, in the form of a woman from the neat rows of hastily-built refugee houses sprouting on its edges.

She dragged South Pyongan to her place and pretty much threw herself at her feet, saying her thirteen-year old son had been cutting the phone lines between Nampo and Anju, and passing information about night watch patrols alongside a few other kids, pleading for mercy for him.

When the brat came home from fetching water to see his Provincehuman standing in the middle of his sparse sitting room

with her firearm drawn, he'd burst into tears and almost immediately given up the names of the three helping him.

It was good for her investigation, but also incredibly pathetic. So were the other boys he directed her to.

Two broke at her presence, recognizing that a Provincehuman being sent meant they were in deep trouble, and even though the fourth didn't (to be fair he was like, ten, so he probably didn't understand the stakes), it didn't matter. South Pyongan had her guy.

Because of course the reactionary gang wasn't dealing with a group whose oldest member was fifteen directly- they had a go-between. One whose name the kids didn't know, but they would apparently meet with on Sunday night to receive their orders for the week.

They wouldn't be given the location until the next morning, so in order to avoid sending the bastard to ground, South Pyongan had to let the families keep carrying on like nothing was wrong. Though she heavily hinted that with the war going on, it might be safer if they spent the rest of Saturday inside.

Obviously she didn't trust them. That one mother might've given her son up willingly, but it was clearly just to save his skin. And even if the others said they'd had no idea what their children were up to, South Pyongan had doubts. You didn't notice your kid running around acting all secretive and avoiding his best friend in the Young Pioneers all of a sudden? Yeah, okay.

So she set undercover guards on them, even though her bodyguards still refused to leave her, which meant she had to get three randoms from Public Security to do it, plus whoever they thought they needed to involve.

It made her skin prickle. The more people in on it, the more that could leak it to the go-between that the gig was up.

She could hear her brother telling her to have more trust in their guys from Public Security...

Actually, would he still say that to her? He *had* been eyeing up the rest of the guys in the truck that night. He'd even been suspicious enough to suspect that chick and her sob story.

'I guess that's one more thing he doesn't need me for anymore.'

South Pyongan shook her head, springing up from where she'd been crouched in a makeshift woodshed, positioned to watch one of the marks' places.

Stakeouts gave her time to think. And she *hated* time to think.

Time to go get another officer so she could be more proactive.

South Pyongan spent the rest of the day pretending to look for a lead, so the go-between and anyone else involved wouldn't think she was on to them. Then she (begrudgingly) went through the process of getting permission to stay overnight in a resident's house.

Her hatred of paperwork was countered by the fact that, as an essential worker at the Nampo Smelting Complex, Pak Du-gil still lived in the city. *And* he still made a great chicken-ginseng soup, even when the meat was replaced by tofu.

South Pyongan missed meat. Korea had forbidden it from their rations, sending it all to the active soldiers. But so long as she was getting some sort of protein, she liked ginseng enough to make up for it.

The province lay awake in Pak's borrowed apartment in the worker's quarters, tapping her fingers on her chest and swiping the last traces of bitter ginseng aftertaste from her gums.

Before midnight, she sat up, her breath steaming in the cold underground as she went for the door, still fully dressed.

"Back in the room, comrade," one of her guards said as soon as she opened the door.

South Pyongan blinked at them blearily. "Oh, hey guys. Just going to use the latrines."

"You can use the inside ones," her shorter guard said, gesturing down the tunnel.

She scrunched her face. "Yeah, no. As far as I'm concerned, those are for if you've been trapped underground by planes for a week. And I'd still rather take my chances with the deathbirds."

She was *so* glad Korea had decided not to have a toilet room in the Jangsan bunker. Like most of the shelters, it'd been built in a hurry, so they didn't have real plumbing. They probably would've got stuck with a chamber pot, and *she* would've been stuck emptying and cleaning it, just like at their destroyed chosonjip. She would take digging and covering a trench over that any day.

"Then we'll be coming with you," her taller guard said.

Affronted, South Pyongan crossed her arms over her chest. "You can't seriously believe you can just spy on me while I piss, right?" Thinking of South Chungcheong's usual excuse, she added, "I *am* a woman, y'know."

Her guard blinked back, unimpressed. "And you're our Provincehuman."

"Our Provincehuman that Comrade Korea told us to never let out of our sight," the shorter one said.

South Pyongan narrowed her eyes at him. "You've broke your nose before, yeah?"

The man touched the bump in his sloped nose bridge. "...Yes," he said warily. "Why?"

The province bit her lip on, 'Good, so you'll be used to this,' trapping her hands behind her back.

She knew why Korea let her other cousins have full control over their guards, but not her. Because he thought they'd probably only ditch theirs for something they thought was necessary, and not just because they didn't like being watched all the time. He still didn't...

She clenched her fists. She couldn't even get mad. He was right.

She'd tried to escape her tails like, seven times. It was why she wasn't able to just slip away now.

Punching them out and running off wouldn't convince him she was responsible.

"No reason," she replied, marching past them. "Fine, come watch me pee if you want to so badly."

One of them sighed loudly. She didn't turn around, ignoring them until they got to the latrines out back of the quarters. She wrinkled her nose at the smell, even though the trench was freshly dug.

"Turn around," she ordered her guards. "I don't want you looking through the cracks."

They narrowed their eyes, so in sync it solidified the idea they were brothers and also creeped her out a little.

Rolling her eyes, she said, "What do you think I'm going to do? Dive into the trench and swim away?" She gave a real gag at the thought. "Now turn around or I tell Korea you're perverts and he won't be upset if I... toss you in the latrines."

There. That was less violent than 'throat punch you.'

Reluctantly, the men turned around.

Glad that she didn't actually have to go, South Pyongan brushed through the straw door that shielded the hut over the latrines.

Ignoring both the foul-smelling gaps between the planks set over the trench that she used to cross it, and the man squatting over one that quickly yanked his pants up at seeing a woman walk in, (and wishing she had a nose to pinch), South Pyongan immediately jumped up, catching onto the side of the open-roofed hut and boosting herself up, thrusting her head between the thin wood wall and the canvas tarp nailed over the top.

"Uh?" the guy below said, not following it up.

"Shh," his province hushed, forcing her shoulders through, the

roughly-sawed wood scraping against her chest through her tunic.

But as she arched her back, it lifted the tarp more, and the swishing sound of a layer of snow sliding off broke the night.

"Comrade South Pyongan!"

She heard the screen to the latrines burst open and the guy below say, *"Uh?!"* as her guards stormed in.

'Too late!'

Her top half slid free and her legs followed as she plummeted head-first for the ground before flipping like a cat in mid-air, landing on her hands and knees.

Not perfect, but she'd take it.

"Comrade South Pyongan!" Her guards' cries spit the night as they charged back out, stopping suddenly.

Their province smirked. "Well? Gonna cross it?"

The men eyed the trench between them hesitantly. It was only three feet wide. But those three feet looked a lot farther when the price for not making the jump would be getting covered in manure.

"Please come back," her taller guard said, stepping forward, but not tensing for the attack.

South Pyongan huffed. "Look, I'm not a nation-traitor. I'm not running off to sell us out. I'm just making sure my mission gets completed."

"Obviously you aren't a nation-traitor," her shorter guard said. "But it's our job to keep you safe. We can't lose our province to the enemy again."

He almost sounded... pleading.

Crossing her arms, she said, "I'll be fine. I'm just doing some recon. Just stay here and don't make a fuss or you'll screw it up."

Turning around, she waved, sauntering away. "I'll be back before noon tomorrow. Keep yourselves entertained until then."

As soon as she was out of sight around the side of the factory, she broke into a run before they could get brave enough to attempt the jump over the latrines.

Nampo was close enough to the coast to be prepared for a landing party, so most of its factories had fences around them. But they weren't barbed wire, so it was no problem for her to be up and over in less than five seconds. She hit the ground running.

'We can't lose our province to the enemy again.'

Seriously, did they think she was weak or something?

"You get kidnapped *one* time and it's all anyone remembers," she muttered to no one as she ran for the road out of Nampo, making sure her travel pass was still in her pocket.

She should tell Hwang and Korea to step their propaganda up so every single person in the country knew she hadn't been knocked out and taken like some wife in a bandit story, but had literally shot herself to keep the enemy from using her. She'd like to see her bodyguards do *that* when they couldn't even jump over a shit ditch.

'It's our job to keep you safe.'

No, it was their *job* to keep Korea's paranoia at manageable levels so he wouldn't wake up early one morning to lock all the provinces in the bunker until the war was over. She could take care of herself.

Even though she hadn't been able to protect-

She shook her head, sending herself staggering sideways without slowing.

She just wanted to find this traitor asshole and beat him until he spewed all his info out, then move on to the next thing to make her stop thinking.

After showing her travel pass to the Nampo checkpoint (she

could've just snuck out, but she was being 'responsible'), she left the main road, taking a country lane back towards Poseong-ri. But she didn't stop there, continuing on towards the dark mass of the nearest hill to the west.

It made sense the go-between had recruited kids in the village. If you wanted information, you went where people were. And tons of people passed by Poseong-ri- soldiers being sent back from coast guard duty, soldiers being sent to it, ammunition and steel and everything else flowing to the capital, and food and supplies flowing in.

Nampo's port was pretty much useless with all the ships and planes off the coast, but the Japs had turned it into a major military supply hub back when they'd controlled it, to send shit to the ports they held in Manchurian, and even though Korea had evened out the city's production after Liberation, they'd kept some of those factories around. Though now they were underground, too.

All the villages she'd hit up before Poseong-ri were on the main road, but she'd figured she'd run into her success there. With all the security measures around cities and towns, traitors could infiltrate villages easier. Especially if they knew people there beforehand.

'Fucking Taedong Youth Corps.'

But for Nampo, they'd need patsies that lived in the area, some of which had even fled from the city. And to keep in good contact with those patsies *and* Cho Island, they'd need to have a base nearby.

Honestly, South Pyongan thought she already knew where their headquarters was- somewhere in the Osok Mountains, whose foothills she was headed for right now.

They spanned from Nampo, up through Onchon County, all the way back to Pyongwon County, where the trap had been set a few nights ago. If you were a group of murdering, raping, nation-traitors who couldn't show your faces in public, all you had to do was cross a few fields, and you'd have stealthy access to almost all of her province. Plus they were right across the mouth of the Taedong

River from Hwanghae for their operations there. They just had to travel east towards the northwards course of the river, where it got thinner and was less heavily watched, and they could be in Sariwon by dinner.

South Pyongan flexed her fists, her teeth grinding.

Hwang had told her some of what happened during Hae's visit to Sincheon, and she'd seen the news reel. No one screwed with her cousins and got away with it.

And no one screwed with her and her province and got away with it.

But she wasn't heading off into the mountains to hunt them down right now. Even though she totally could. The Osok Mountains were, like she just said, really big. There were too many places to hide. And if they caught her or the militia or anyone else sniffing for them, they could disappear into them.

She was going to use this go-between to narrow the range. And to do *that,* she couldn't just capture him while he left his message.

First, she needed leverage.

South Pyongan found the place the kids had said the traitor would leave them their meeting place instructions- a gully on the oval-shaped hill between Poseong-ri and the Yonggok-ri foothills. Then she settled into the dirt for a long, cold night.

What was her brother doing right now? Probably sleeping. He took pretty good care of himself. Yeah, he was practically starving himself right now, but she got why.

The thought flickered across her mind again. Should she be doing the same thing as the rest of her cousins?

She shook the idea away. Unlike North Hamgyong, she really wasn't being selfish. She just needed every calorie she could get to get her body back in working order. And now she needed to keep it there. She had to.

Plus Korea would be pissed when he found out. And he would, he always did. Trust her, she would know. But her cousins didn't listen, and she wasn't going to tell them how to live their lives.

Maybe there would've been a point where she would bully North Pyongan into eating all his rations, or force him to take half of hers, plowing over his protests.

But she wasn't sure he'd listen now. She... kind of didn't want to find out.

South Pyongan clutched her submachine pistol harder, the cold from the metal seeping through her glove and into her hand.

She had always hated keeping watch without her brother.

By the time the sky had started to change from the colour of Chagang's skin to the colour of her brother's, the province had resolved to never think again. She was lying on her stomach, trying to eradicate all thought, when a twig cracked in the woods.

Her muscles tightened instinctively, getting ready to pounce.

Over the sticks and dead leaves tangled in the snow on the lip of the gully, she could see a man entering the dip. His face was a shadow under a grey hood, and his breath clouded the air in front of his face as he looked around. He didn't carry a light, just a tube rolled up in one hand.

'Ssi-bal.' She couldn't make out any facial features.

The dark shape looked around furtively, before he went to a tangle of skinny odong trees, kneeling at one in the middle and messing with something there.

He was alone, vulnerable.

South Pyongan's muscles wound tighter, her body quivering with the urge to attack, to put an end to this traitor that was working against their country, collaborating with the people that had tried to take her brother. There was no point in wasting a full day when she could knock him out and beat the information she needed out

of him *now*.

She clenched her jaw, knuckles creaking around her PPS.

She couldn't. He might not even have the information she needed yet. They'd agreed the go-between probably wouldn't receive the meeting place for his own orders until the last minute, in case he was captured while leaving a message for the boys. And if that was the case, then as soon as he was late, the reactionaries would relocate. They would already be on edge from losing their kidnapping unit. She couldn't risk letting them get away to continue screwing with her people. Beating this bastard could just give them a chance to kill more.

But it would feel *so* damn good.

*'If you feel responsible for it, then **be** responsible. Make sure it doesn't happen again.'*

She bared her teeth, and when the man stood, taking one last secretive look around the clearing before starting back the way he'd came, she let him go.

South Pyongan waited until the crunching of the snow under his boots had faded to creep out, her legs still telling her to follow him as she padded softly over to the odong tree, stooping to lift the rock below it.

There was a piece of tanned pig skin with directions written on it in charcoal, rock formations and a few place names that she didn't recognize from a map, or her and her brother's travels, or Korea's grand mapping adventure.

Probably nicknames that locals would recognize. He seemed to think the kids would, at least. And it meant he was probably local, too, not just some guy from somewhere else hanging out in a cave.

Now *that* gave her an idea that could make up for never seeing his face.

She narrowed her eyes at the leafless trees he'd headed off into.

If her legs wanted to follow him, why not do what she always did- what she wanted?

South Pyongan crept after him, following the footprints in the snow.

Stealth still wasn't her thing. But she definitely wasn't bad at it. Especially since in exchange for her Taekwondo lessons, Kangwon had given her stalking ones.

She might not be the best at being responsible or a politician or prot- some of the things she needed to be the best at.

But South Pyongan was *great* at hunting people.

She caught up and followed the man across hills and fields, winding in circles while he tried to throw off pursuit. But even when she lost his trail a few times in the places the snow thinned, she caught it soon after, and was able to watch from the treeline as he headed back towards Yanggok-ri.

She snuck across the fields of the valley before the sun could crest, just beating the farmers waking up to look over the winter crops and tend to their animals.

An ox lowed as she slunk through the narrow streets, her ushanka pulled down over her blue skin the way the Chinese trio wore them.

She watched from the shadows as the man reached a walled estate on the far end of town. Before he could pass through the carved doors, she quickly ran around the corner of the big house she was using as cover. Yanking her gloves off and biting down on them, she jumped up, the edges of the eaves biting into her hands, morning frost numbing them.

With a surge of effort and a grunt muffled by her gloves, she hauled herself up, sliding on her belly up the curved tile roof, until she could peer over the wooden spine that crested it, just in time to see an older woman hustle out of the main chosonjip, embracing the man. She peered around the courtyard, clearly paranoid, even though the province couldn't see her expression, then ushered him

inside.

South Pyongan's lips curved up, her canine teeth gleaming in the pale light flooding the over the eastern hills.

She still hadn't seen his face, but she'd got all she'd needed. Better, actually.

Sliding down, she landed lightly on her feet, rubbing her bicep. Lifting herself onto the roof hadn't been as easy it should've been. She still wasn't back to her old strength.

Even if she hadn't been at Sunchon, could she have-?

"Halt!"

She jerked to see a woman marching towards her, a red armband tied around where Tank 44's flag was on the province marking her as a militia member.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded. "Show me your identification card before I notify Public Security!"

Perfect.

"South Pyongan province," South Pyongan said, flashing her face at the woman. "And I'm kidnapping you."

Once she made sure the chick knew what she needed to know, she snuck out of the village with her (she really was spiriting her away; she couldn't trust she wouldn't tell anyone their Provincehuman had been sniffing around), and back to Nampo, where her guards made a big, boring fuss about her running off.

Whatever. Even if they thought she needed their protection, she knew she didn't. *And* she got to smugly wave the leather with the directions on it in their faces.

The kids from Poseong-ri still went to the hills at dawn, slipping out of their village and meeting up under the cover of the trees to keep up the illusion that nothing was wrong. They were watched closely by South Pyongan and her bodyguards. The boys had said

they didn't know where the man was from, but she didn't want them to start running around the woods screaming in the hopes he'd hear them.

They were clearly nervous as they ran through the motions of pretending to find the directions under the rock, then started back for their homes. Their crap composure just made her sure more than one of the mothers had known their son was up to something.

South Pyongan went around to their house and dug-outs afterwards, getting them to tell her where the place the directions led to was (making sure to ask them all separately so they couldn't lie to her).

Only one tried, the youngest one. He gave her a muttered, "I don't know," the scarred-over cleft in his upper lip making the words lisp together.

South Pyongan sighed, leaning over the low table set up in the dug-out, shoving the vase of flowers his mother had set up on it to try and pretend she wasn't living in a hole in the ground aside.

"Look, kid," she said. "Your friends already told me. And I know where this guy lives now. No matter what, I'm getting him."

The boy lowered his gaze. "Please don't arrest him."

"He's a traitor," South Pyongan irritably told him. "Which is what *you* would be if you were a few years older. As it stands, you're just an idiot."

Tears started to well in his eyes as his thin chest shook.

'Oops.' Kids usually liked her, but sometimes she forgot they were more sensitive than adults.

But that wasn't why he was crying.

"If, if he goes- to- to jail, or g-gets executed," the boy gasped through his sobs. "I'm- n-never going to see Abeoji again!"

He buried his face in his hands, redoubling his sobs.

South Pyongan leaned back, feeling suddenly awkward.

It was what the other boys had told her, too, along with the one kid's mother. The reason they were helping the traitors was because their fathers were in the south, either because they'd been taken prisoner as KPA soldiers or because they'd been one of the men taken by the enemy.

Korea had turned to conscripting every battle-worthy man between sixteen and forty-five that wasn't needed in the factories or mines. But there weren't many left- South's army had forcibly conscripted them all during their retreat a year ago.

Including this kid's dad.

"They- They *took* him!" he cried, his tears combining with the cleft lip to make his words almost impossible to understand. "But th- the nice man said if I did what he wanted, he'd b-bring him back. But if you lock him up or kill him, then Abeoji'll never come home!"

This probably wasn't something she should say to a kid. It was drastic enough that South Pyongan performed the rare action of thinking about the words about to leave her mouth. They were harsh.

But necessary.

"I hate to say it, kid," she said, averting her eyes from his tears. "But your dad's probably already dead."

He froze, shocked from his sobbing as he looked up at her. "W-What?"

Deciding she'd heard enough, the mother stuck her head into the dug-out, her own eyes teary. "Miss South Pyongan-"

"A lot of the guys that were taken south are dead," the province said, cutting her off. "They got sent on a deathmarch."

South Pyongan didn't read the news when she didn't have to, since it would just make her even more restless to be at the front. But Hwang had been giving them updates, and filled them in on

everything he knew back when the affair had wrapped up in August. In typical Korea fashion, their Countryhuman had refused to talk about it until October, when he had both the full story and the mood to talk.

They could've asked earlier, but... Even South Pyongan knew there were times when it was better to leave Korea be.

"All our guys from here, Hwanghae, North and South Kangwon, and Gyeonggi that got conscripted were forced to walk across the Peninsula back in January," she told the mother and son now. "Rhee's National Defense Force was training them for the youth leagues over on Jeju. But the government messed up who was supposed to feed them, they didn't give 'em any winter clothes or salaries, and the guys in charge ended up embezzling like, hundreds of millions of won instead of feeding people."

It had gotten so bad and impossible to hide that the National Defense Force was 'disbanded' (but the youth leagues that made it up were still active, clearly), and the southern National Assembly had actually had to hold a trial over it. Two trials, actually, since they'd ended up pardoning or giving just a few years in jail to the people responsible in the first one. Not even the other reactionaries outside of Rhee's faction had been happy with that.

"A bunch of them died."

Korea said the official trial records said between one to two thousand. But he'd also showed them pages from southern newspapers that said around fifty thousand could have, which meant he believed Rhee as much as South Pyongan did.

"And the ones that survived are messed up," she said. "I hear they can't get work and have to beg down in villages on the coast."

She'd been cold enough spending the last winter in the POW camp in Seoul, and SH had lost three toes just going from there to Pyongyang. Taking mountain roads over half of Korea in just your jeogori and straw sandals? You'd be lucky if a foot was the only thing you lost.

The boy's face had fallen, his skin paled from brown to ghostly white in shock. "N-No."

His mother looked away, wiping her eyes.

She didn't look rattled, just resigned. She'd probably heard already- their newspapers up here had had a field day with the whole thing. Not only had the bastards that had been accusing their army of press-ganging civilians and starving people since the beginning admitted to press-ganging and starving people, but now everyone knew that while they were struggling to afford groceries, Rhee's cronies were siphoning maybe billions of won into their own pockets.

"Yes," she said to the boy, her words becoming less awkward as rage flickered inside her. "And you know *why* they died? Because they expected the government down there to give 'em boots and coats and rice." She thumped her fist on the table, wishing it was Rhee's skull. "But they're *traitors,* and you can't count on traitors."

Leaning forward on an arm, she made him shrink back. "And that guy you've been helping? He's a traitor, too. If your dad isn't dead, then I guarantee you he has no damn clue where he is."

"B-But-" The boy's bottom lip wobbled, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he pressed his chin to his chest.

"The only way you ever see your dad again, dead or alive, is if *this* Korea wins," South Pyongan said, not taking mercy. "But you've been trying to stop that, just like the traitors that killed your dad. Is that what you want? To be just like them?"

"No!" the boy cried. "I just want- I just want my dad back."

"Then *tell me* where this bastard wants you to meet him."

With snot running down his face, the boy pointed a shaky finger at her map, the same place the other kids had indicated.

South Pyongan didn't relax. Her blood beat hard in her veins, and her nails dug into her palms.

She knew this kid was too young to know what he'd really been doing, but it was hard to remember that when she'd worked with children his age in Anju to sabotage the enemy, who seemed to understand fully what they'd been doing, and when a girl only a couple years older than him had once cast herself into the river in the fight against Japan instead of letting herself be captured.

"Good," she said, forcing herself to relax, leaning back as the boy shook with tears again. "Thanks for the help."

He just kept crying.

The province shifted awkwardly, wondering if she should... pat him on the back or something. She slightly raised a hand, then lowered it.

She didn't really know how to play 'good cop.' That was her brother's thing. And he wasn't here.

South Pyongan stood up, climbing out of the dug-out while the boy kept sobbing.

"You have him until the end of the day," she told his mother. "Then he gets taken for questioning."

The woman nodded, her brown eyes downcast.

"You'll get him back at least," South Pyongan reassured her, which she couldn't do for the other parents. "You'll have to put up with Party members breathing down your neck while they educate him, but he'll get to stay at home."

Whoops. Maybe she shouldn't talk about people in the Party that way.

The mother nodded again, not looking at her. "Thank you."

"Not my decision."

If it was up to South Pyongan, she'd be going to prison for having information about someone committing treason, and the kid would be spending a week in jail to scare him straight.

"Hear that?" she called back to the boy. "Your friends are old enough to go to trial. You're not. But if you ever do something like this again, you probably will be."

It wasn't like the other three were old enough to be thrown in prison or put up against the wall. They'd all end up with re-education and special attention paid to them, too. But this kid didn't need to know that right now.

"I w-won't," the boy whimpered pathetically. "I won't, I promise."

"See to it."

South Pyongan marched off, leaving them with their hidden minder.

She could hear her brother scolding her for how cruel she'd been. And yeah, he was probably right. But what would be *more* cruel would be letting the kid think he had a chance of seeing his father alive and well again. If he did, he'd just end up falling for the next reactionary making promises he couldn't keep. And one day he could end up with a bullet in his head.

She got what Korea meant about not just being able to kill everyone that went against them, even if she still wanted to. The solution to that was making sure stupid kids didn't grow up into people she wanted to kill.

With the location confirmed, the patsies back in Poseong-ri, and that uncomfortable business done with, all South Pyongan had to do was wait. Her favourite thing.

Continuing with her resolution of never thinking again, she headed back to Nampo to pretend to continue her investigation.

Actually, she really was looking for more traitors. She might be close to pinning down the armed gang's location, but that didn't mean there weren't more agents and proxies in her streets and hills, burrowing under the skin of her land like parasites. It pissed her off that some of the runaway traitors had came back to maraud around her countryside, but it pissed her off even more that some of them

had stayed, lurking in their ranks, biding their time even through the temporary occupation. They were benefiting from the ration system, from their housing material and clothing distribution, maybe from their worker-owned factories, all while scheming to destroy it all.

South Pyongan wanted to burn them all out.

Since she couldn't, she settled for intimidating any children she found outside Nampo, looking for weak links, though most of those she found belonged to the Young Pioneers, which meant half of them had been committing their own acts of sabotage against the enemy when their city had been occupied, though probably not as aggressively as the ones with her in Anju. The others were more impressed than scared by her, which meant they were probably in the clear (and had good taste).

But they all promised to look out for any of their friends hanging around with adults they didn't know. South Pyongan made sure they knew to watch out for them talking to *any* adult they shouldn't be, even if they knew them. Those were the really dangerous ones.

The 'Taedong Youth Corps.' Her lip curled as she thought about them again.

She sort of wondered if Korea was so harsh on her because so many reactionaries and factionalists came from her province. It'd make sense, since he really started cracking down on her after Liberation.

She'd like to still think that, anyway.

As the sun started to set (way too early; she'd always hated that about winter), she set out for the place the kids had marked on the map.

On the go-between's cowhide, it was called 'Kko-kki-o' Rock, after the sound a rooster made, and was located in the curve of the hills beyond the one the man had left the message at.

South Pyongan squinted critically at the outcrop jutting from the

slope.

"That doesn't look like a rooster to me. Do you think those kids were smart enough to coordinate a fake meeting spot ahead of time, or am I just not seeing the vision?"

"I think I see it." Her shorter guard pointed upwards. "That's the beak and there's the eye."

"But there's no comb. Doesn't that just make it Chicken Rock?" She thought for moment. "Or Kko-kko Rock?"

"Maybe it's just hard to see it in the dark."

The taller guard cleared his throat. "Comrades. We should get into position."

"Right."

There were probably more dug-outs hidden in the hills, but from here the only sign of civilization South Pyongan could see was a farmhouse out in the fields, lights already off.

The hills rose to the west, but here they were mostly gentle inclines and slopes, all the trees stripped for industry or burned away, which meant there weren't too many places to hide. The three settled for lying flat behind stumps, waiting in the dark.

If all the meeting places were this far from Poseong-ri, South Pyongan knew for sure the other mothers had known something was up. Your kid *might* be forgiven for staying out after the sun set in winter, since it was only eighteen hundred. But they'd been doing this since mid-summer, when it didn't get dark enough for the go-between to slink out of his hole until at least twenty hundred. There was no way the women hadn't noticed their sons not getting home until an hour later, especially while there were planes bombing the shit out of them.

South Pyongan could hear them now, that endless droning buzz farther to the south as they swooped in towards Nampo, and the dull explosions as they hit their factories for the millionth time. It made her nails scrape at the frost-hardened soil.

That was why she was done waiting. As soon as she saw the dark shadow crest the top of the hill, slinking like someone with something to hide, she pounced.

The man froze, hearing the rapid crunching of her boots on the frost. His eyes locked on hers from the shadows in his hood.

He didn't try to play dumb. He just took off back the way he came, legs pumping.

The province streaked after him, leaping over stumps and rocks instead of going around, blood singing with elation as she was finally able to move with *purpose* again, not just running or wrestling with Korea, but hunting an enemy.

She felt the urge to let him put distance between them so he would think he had a chance, but crushed the impulse.

This wasn't a game.

He laboured up one of the steeper slopes, then gave up and ran across it, his feet stumbling on the slanted ground. South Pyongan ran higher, her thigh muscles aching with the strain, and sped up, eating up the terrain as she ran parallel above him.

She saw his head swivel up, and knew his eyes must have widened as she flashed her teeth at him in a grin, just before leaping.

She flew through the air, aiming slightly ahead, and the man's momentum brought them crashing together before he could even try to reverse course. He hollered as she slammed into him with full force, knocking them both over and down the hill, rolling in a tangle of arms and legs.

South Pyongan did nothing to slow their fall. She actually wrapped her limbs around him, and put more momentum into it, intent on taking them down the entire hill.

She loved doing this to Korea because it annoyed him so much, though this time it was a little more painful than usual. She winced as her shoulder slammed into the ground, feeling the scabs from her

burns scrape off.

Yeah, she was going to feel this tomorrow. But this bastard was going to feel it more.

The world spun around her, and as she sensed the ground evening out, she flexed her spine, making them bounce higher the next time they struck it. She used the chance to flip on top of him so that when they came down, she landed squarely on his torso, crushing the breath out of him in an ugly wheeze.

They came to an abrupt stop three-quarters of the way down the hill. Not all the way, but close enough.

Everything swirled and spun nauseatingly, including South Pyongan's head and stomach as she tried to recover her own oxygen. But she had way more experience with this than the guy under her, so she recovered first, obviously.

Hillside still swaying, she sat up, forcing the man onto his stomach and pinning his wrists behind his back. She put her lips next to his ear.

"Caught you," she panted lowly, smirking as he stiffened.

And feeling *so* cool.

Her bodyguards reached her a minute later, luckily smart enough not to try scolding her in front of a prisoner. They just took the man's arms, forcing him to stand.

"I... haven't done anything," he panted, his eyes unfocused, head still spinning.

"I don't care." South Pyongan snapped her fingers as she started down the hill, totally not fighting hard to make sure she didn't cant forward and fall on her face. "Come on, boys."

She tossed a menacing smile back at the traitor. "It's interrogation time."

South Pyongan was great at interrogating people. Korea thought

he was too good for it or something, so when the KPRA had caught a Jap or a collaborator, he'd usually set her and North Pyongan on them to do their carrot-and-stick routine. And if that didn't work, then he'd send in South Chungcheong. The one time the Southern Pyongan and Chungcheong got along was when they were making men cry.

Well, South Pyongan *had* been good at interrogating people. Back when she had free rein.

They'd never been allowed to beat up POWs, let alone torture them. The Japs had actually praised them for it (which to her meant they'd definitely been doing something wrong). But she could push them around a little, and if one got too bold and thought two girls would be easy to escape from, then she got to have fun.

But she couldn't do that now for sure. If this guy hadn't personally killed someone, then he was looking at what, treason? That was hard labour, not death. Though his punishment would likely be harsher since they were under wartime laws, and he'd dragged minors into it.

But on the off chance he *wasn't* executed or sentenced to a lifetime in prison, and just got ten to fifteen years of labour, then she knew Korea wouldn't want him going back into society able to tell people that one of their Provincehumans had gotten handsy with him. She wasn't even sure she could get mouthy.

General, she missed just being a soldier.

Well, she'd never been just a soldier. But she missed being able to *act* like one.

South Pyongan swung open the door to the interrogation room in the Nampo Public Security headquarters, strolling in.

The man was sitting at a flimsy wooden table, his hands bound behind his back.

He was twenty, in the age range of most of those in the youth groups, though they'd started conscripting above and below it to

bolster their ranks. His brown hair was styled in the worst mushroom cut South Pyongan had ever seen, and he was still dressed in the white-collared undershirt he'd had on under his coat when she brought him in. Chickenskin pebbled his exposed flesh.

He lowered his grey eyes from the ceiling to glare at her.

"Worried about getting bombed?" South Pyongan asked casually as she strolled over to the chair opposite him. "But I thought those guys up there were your buddies?"

The building shuddered again as the industrial district was hit. Probably the same factory South Pyongan had been at last night.

Pak Du-gil had better be okay. If she lost his chicken-ginseng soup, there was going to be *hell* to pay.

"I don't know what you're talking about," the man growled. "I hate those Yanks as much as the next man. And you've got no right to hold me here."

"No?" South Pyongan asked, slapping the pigskin down in front of him. "Recognize this?"

He was a better liar than the kids. His eyes barely flickered to the thing he'd been holding just over twelve hours ago.

"No. What is it?"

Trying another angle, the province asked, "What were you doing in the foothills?"

"Looking for food," he grunted. "We're starving, if ya haven't noticed."

*'Starving because of **your** foreign friends.'*

She tried to calm herself. Good cop could easily switch to bad cop, but once she did, there was no going back.

"Y'know, it's weird that you just so happened to be foraging in the same place I was told an enemy agent would be coming to give out

operations orders to a bunch of kids."

A muscle in his cheek ticced, and she pressed on it.

"Yeah, I rounded up all your little helpers," she said, leaning back in her chair. "They told me everything. So you might as well tell me where you met with your handlers today."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He stood, his chair scraping back on the cement floor. "And *you* have no right to keep me here."

South Pyongan didn't flinch. "I kind of do, actually."

Now his face darkened, contorting in disdain.

"This is why I can't stand you Communists!" he spat. "You walk around thinking you're in charge of everything."

"One- not a Communist. Two-" South Pyongan held up another finger. "You might want to watch what you say."

"See?" the guy scoffed. "A man can't even criticize you anymore."

'You've obviously never been a Plenary Meeting.'

The fourth one had been back in November. The General (Chairman in this case) had stayed true to his closing speech strategy of a few lines of praise, followed a half hour of pure criticism as he went back over every way the Party was failing, ending with a 'I know we can do better, team!'

South Pyongan wasn't even a Party member (Korea just liked to torture her by making her go; it made her miss being a prisoner last year), but even she'd been squirming during it, and during the earlier criticism.

"I mean, you can do whatever you want," she said to her interrogatee. "I'm just saying maybe be careful what you say about the State's ideology when you're being suspected of treason against it."

"Treason?" the man said scornfully, then flinched as the building shook again.

And all of a sudden, South Pyongan was angry.

People like this bastard were the reason so many had died. It was people like him that had sold out Worker's Party and People's Committee members when the enemy controlled their cities, that turned over the neighbours they knew supported them to be tortured and buried. Those people she had stopped from being marched to their death in Anju had been betrayed by bastards like him. All the corpses she had seen swinging on the forest's edge had been because snakes like *him* were lurking in their ranks. The ones that had welcomed the Yankee deathbirds coming to bomb their country, the ones that would already have lost if they hadn't.

He wasn't like that farmer back then. He wasn't doing this for his family or any bullcrap like that. He wasn't a civilian that cared more about making a few won than anything else. The only reason bastards like him didn't pick up a gun and murder their people themselves was because they were *cowards.* Instead they stuck to the shadows, using others to do the risky shit, telling the enemy where their supply caches and warehouses were, telling them when their trucks would pass down a certain road.

She could at least respect traitors that did their own dirty work. They were idiots, but they were idiots that were willing to die for the things they wanted.

People like this dog's son weren't. They'd hide in the dark and use others, never risking themselves. If the enemy won, they'd slither out and take all the glory, and if Korea won, they'd pretend none of it had ever happened, and continue reaping the spoils of the country they'd fought to turn into a slave again.

And he had the fucking balls to stand here and act *scared.*

South Pyongan slammed the table aside with a loud crash, flipping it so hard a leg snapped off. The bastard flinched back, stumbling over his own chair as she marched towards him.

The province caught him by slamming him up against the wall, forearm pinned to his throat.

"Tell me where you met your handlers!" she spat into his face, pressing down on his windpipe.

"Or what?" he panted, enough of his composure regained to twist his lips in a smirk that South Pyongan wanted to punch off. "You'll beat me? Kill me? I'm sure that'll show everyone how 'just' you people ar- *Gak!"*

He made an ugly gagging sound as South Pyongan shoved harder against his throat.

"Get it through your head," she growled. "I'm not a damn Communist. *They'd* play nice with you and wait for you to cave. *I'm not like them."*

"Then... *what?"* he gasped, unable to even pull at her arm to lessen the pressure with his bound hands crushed between the wall and his back. "You're going to torture one of... your own people?"

"You aren't mine," she said coldly. "No matter what the courts decide to do with you, South Pyongan province disowns you."

The look on his face was almost hurt, even after he'd been so dismissive of her. It made her even more glad her brother had said it to Paik Sun-yup before he'd died. She wished she'd got the chance to say it to Jo Man-sik.

"And I disown your family."

His smug mask broke, fear flashing across his face.

South Pyongan smirked. "You thought I didn't know who you are? Ri Jong-hyok. Your mother's name is Ko Un-sil. She's unemployed. Your uncle's name is Ko Un-gol. He owns a supply store in Nampo. It's his estate you live on."

Ri paled as she recited his exact address back to him, along with everything else the militiawoman had told her.

"Your little brother is called Ri Jong-soon," she continued. "I notice he wasn't one of the kids you recruited to do your work for you."

"Stay away from them!" he growled, trying to lunge forward, but only crushing his windpipe more.

"Y'know, your neighbours aren't very fond of your family," she drawled. "Seems when your dad took off for Pyongyang, he made some big claim about being better than all those little village bumpkins, and how much money he was going to make working for the Japs. Only for your mom to come crawling back with you a few years later. I don't think they'd mind if they disappeared again, especially if your uncle went with. I bet that big estate's a hot commodity right now."

Ri suddenly relaxed, the corner of his lip turning up. "You won't do shit to them."

"Oh yeah? Why not?"

"Because it doesn't matter if you're not a commie- I bet a Provincehuman taking out an entire family doesn't exactly fit in with the State's propaganda."

"Nope," South Pyongan admitted easily. "But the State doesn't know you're here."

He looked wary again, pleasing her.

"Look around." She jerked her head at the cracks running through the plaster walls. "Public Security moved shop. They have no clue I took you in. The only people that know you're here are me and my bodyguards. And they're loyal to *me.* And none of us gives a damn about what happens to a traitor and his family."

His smirk erased, Ri said, "You wouldn't," like he knew her personally or some shit.

"I would." She pressed harder, heat filling her throat. "There is *nothing* I'd like more than for you to give me a reason to off you. You're a traitor. And if your family knew, then *they're* traitors, too.

"And I kill traitors."

"Jong-soon is just a kid-"

"You didn't care that those Poseong-ri boys were kids," South Pyongan reminded him. "And you're a fake Nationalist. I'm a *real* one. You think I would?"

"You-"

"I already know that gang is in the Osok Mountains," she interrupted. "I'm going to find them, whether you make it easy or not. But if you *do* make it easy, you can screw off to prison and your family can keep leeching off the State. If you don't, well."

She shrugged. "'The Ko-Jong family fled south, just like the collaborator of the house did after Liberation' doesn't sound too unbelievable. I doubt Korea would care enough to not buy it, if he even found out."

"So what's it gonna be?" she asked, lowering her voice. "Easy? Or *hard."*

She punctuated the word with more force, her forearm bearing down on his throat as he bared his teeth in pain and fury. The province held his gaze with her own, pressing harder, even after he started to cough and sputter like he was trying to speak.

He deserved to die. And it would be so easy to do it. The blood pounding through his veins beat against her arm, and it would be so *easy* to stop it. To punish him for the damage he'd already caused, to stop him from ever causing any more.

South Pyongan bore down with all her weight, his windpipe creaking under her pressure. His eyelids fluttered.

Then she stepped back, releasing him as he fell forward, unable to catch himself. He smacked into the floor, gagging and choking as he was able to breathe again.

South Pyongan didn't give him time to recover, yanking him up by his ugly ass mushroom cut.

"Sorry, what were you trying to say?" she mocked.

Her glared at her spitefully. When he spoke, his voice was raspy.

"Easy."

"Good boy." The province ruffled his hair like a dog's fur. "Now sit and speak."

He did, grudgingly and hatefully enough that she was pretty sure he wasn't lying. She got a few other things out of him, too- the sort of information the reactionaries (and so America) were interested in, people he'd been planning to rope into the sabotage, and the orders the kids had been supposed to receive this week. Those involved cutting the phone lines again, rooting out the relocated warehouses for the planes to target (though the boys wouldn't be told that), and keeping an eye out for her.

More proof that the Yanks had known she and her brother were going to their provinces. South Pyongan just *knew* they had a leak, even if Korea refused to confirm it.

"If you're lying, you all die anyway," she informed him when he was done.

"I'm not lying," he said through gritted teeth. "I'll swear on a Bible of that's what ya want."

"Yeah, like I'd trust that." If a religious nut like her brother swore on that book, sure, maybe. But this guy? No way.

She crossed her arms imposingly. "One more question."

He glowered. "What?"

"That rock you set as a meeting point, Kko-kki-o Rock."

"What about it?"

"It's called that because there used to be trees growing on the ridge above, yeah? So if you saw it from below, it looked like a rooster's comb?"

Ri narrowed his eyes, like he was trying to guess her game. "...Yeah."

'Knew it.'

South Pyongan spun on a heel, heading for the door. "Thanks for you willing cooperation. Your province would appreciate it, if you still had one. And I'm sure it'll look great in court. Oh, and one last thing."

She looked over her shoulder. "Maybe next time don't get ten-year olds to do your dirty work."

He bared his knee, still on his knees against the far wall. "Screw you."

"You wish." South Pyongan stepped out, calling back, "And get a haircut, loser."

She slammed the door before he could say anything else.

"Hear that?" she said to her guards, standing in the dark lobby of the currently empty Public Security headquarters.

They nodded and she said, "Guess 'Kko-kki-o Rock' makes sense after all."

They stared at her, lips not even twitching, continuing to not have a sense of humour.

"And you got the information," the tall one said bluntly.

"Yeah yeah," South Pyongan sighed. "Let's get those Security guys in here right away. I've got to send a message to Korea and get back to Pyongyang."

The reactionaries had definitely taken off as soon as Ri had been given his instructions. They had to get a task force on their trail as soon as possible.

Korea might not be happy with the kinds of threats she'd used. But it had got them the information quicker than playing nice

would've, if it even had.

And besides, she thought, dusting her hands off as she stepped out into the cold night.

Playing bad cop was *way* more fun anyway.

There's this scene in Mass Effect 2 where you're interrogating this guy and you and your one friend/coworker/assassin working for you as a charity case decide who is good cop and who is bad cop. I play my character as a Paragade, which means she's mostly a good person, but she's also very fond of knocking people out, lets her friends kill and maim when she thinks they deserve to, and will occasionally sacrifice ships with ten thousand civilians on board to win battles. I have a much higher Paragon score, which means she should be good cop. She can never pass the intimidation check to make the guy tell us what we want to know immediately. But she would never choose to be good cop, so she is instead left punching this guy three times in the face while he insults her until he breaks down and confesses. This is South Pyongan.

There's this argument that Israelis use when they say they deserve Palestine because they lived there thousands of years ago, and barring the fact that modern Palestinians tend to be more closely related to those ancient people than modern 'Israelis' are (never ask why ancestry tests are pretty much illegal in Israel), I think it's funny when Americans or Canadians parrot that. You can see them repeating that online, but it's like, okay. Let's say the land *did* belong to the Israelis thousands of years ago. So you think people that live there currently should be forced out of their homes so the indigenous people can reclaim them? Interesting. I wonder how *you* would feel if a Navajo family showed up at your door with an eviction notice. Not happy, I assume. And just to be clear, it isn't the same thing at all because the Americas actually *did* belong to the indigenous people there, and far more recently, plus Israelis are moving from other countries. But if you're American or Canadian and someone tries the 'But the land belonged to the Israelis!' thing, please bring that up and tell me their reaction. I bet it's the world's most impressive

feat of mental gymnastics you'll ever see.

Don't even *mention* the name Takaichi Sanae to me.

Protectors' Onus

1911

"Sister!"

The foot about to smash down on the unconscious man's skull halted as South Pyongan heard her brother's voice, cutting through the red haze like the blade her opponent had been clutching.

'Alive. He's alive.'

She let him wrap his slender arms around her, pulling her away from the guy whose head she'd just bashed off the side of the foundry wall.

Realizing she was still holding the torn ear in her hand, she dropped it.

"Are you okay?" she demanded, grabbing and spinning North Pyongan, looking for tears in his worn workshirt, for blood, in the dim alleyway. "Did he get you?"

The bastard had had a knife. A knife! Did he seriously think he needed a blade for some scrawny fifteen-year old not-even-a-year old?

Well, clearly he needed it for *her.* Actually he probably should've brought a gun. But that was her! Her brother was harmless.

"I'm alright, sister," he soothed, laying his hands on her forearms. "He didn't touch me. You got here before he could."

Something inside her eased, and she tugged her arms out of his grasp.

"Of course I did. South Pyongan to the rescue, count on it."

She spun away, perfunctorily rifling through the guy's pockets. It

wasn't like she'd knocked tons of people out (outside of in the ring, and robbing your opponent in front of an audience was sort of looked down on), but she was a kid on the street, so she'd had to defend herself before. And instigate things. And taking shit from unconscious people was pretty much the same as stealing from laundry lines or chicken coops. So long as they couldn't fight back, they were just like containers.

And *this* container had a shiny knife, probably something he'd spent months scraping up the funds from at the Taegu steelworks, and that he'd cry blood over losing.

'Shouldn't've screwed with my brother then.'

Her heart was still pounding in her chest. *God,* that had been embarrassing. She'd totally lost her cool.

Her eyes flicked to the ear lying on the ground, the lump of cartilage looking like some kind of weird, fleshy... thing. Gross. Awesome, but gross. She didn't even know how she'd done that. She'd just seen this bastard slipping down the alley her brother had gone down to piss, her vision had gone red and bam- next thing she knew she had his ear in her hand and was cracking his skull off the bricks.

She'd been giving her all in these street fights for the past few months, from Chuncheon to Taegu. But she'd never felt anything like that before, no matter how often the men she was fighting said she had nice tits (hey, she wasn't gonna complain about that) or mocked her by saying a girl couldn't beat them. It just made victory even sweeter. And the prize money spend easier.

But when she'd rounded the corner to see her brother pressed against the alley gate, his hands raised in pacification, her body had just moved on its own, filled with a heat that drove the thoughts from her head.

South Pyongan pocketed the yen she'd found and tucked the knife into the rope belt on her oversized men's trousers, peeved that the asshole didn't have a real belt for her to take.

'Guess the types that get into underground fighting rings aren't the ones that can afford leather belts.'

His shirt was one of the sleeveless kinds factory workers wore, sweat-stained from the summer heat and the fight.

Yeah, she wasn't taking that. Underclothes had to come from the line. Socks, too, preferably.

Winter was the exception. They couldn't be picky then.

South Pyongan raised her head, looking out at the darkness beyond the mouth of the alley. None of the street lamps cast their glow far enough to reach here.

It was summer now. But winter was lurking just around the turn of the season. It couldn't go the same way as last year.

She guessed she *had* felt that way before. On Mount Kumgang. Not when the Japs had been hot on their heels. She'd been pissed, yeah, and wanted to get them away from her brother. But she'd mostly been excited to take them on a run.

No. She'd felt that blinding heat later, when her feet were numb from the stream she'd fallen into, and cold leeched into her marrow as her brother desperately tried to carry her on, in the last moments before the blackness had crushed her, knowing that they were going to freeze to death, that the Japs were going to dig them out of the snow like potatoes and haul them off to be tortured or killed. Her brother was going to die in the cold and be carved up by some foreign bastard or traitor and there was nothing she could do about it.

Fury. And something worse.

"Sister." Her brother put a hand on her shoulder. "What's troubling you?"

"How we're gonna spend this money," she replied, popping up. "We've got extra now. Want to put on a hood and buy a steamed bun tomorrow? Wait, no. We should buy a sack of grain. We can just steal the buns."

Her brother eyed her disapprovingly, and she huffed. "If god hates stealing so much, maybe he should magic us up some food."

"That isn't how He works."

"Yeah yeah. Ask him for pheasant." Kicking the guy in the ribs, she said, "We should get out of here. And *you* should let me kill this guy."

Her brother placed a hand on her arm. "He didn't do anything, sister."

"He tried to *kill* you."

"I doubt he was going to kill me," he said, looking down at the man almost sadly. "He likely just wanted your prize money. We can't blame him for that. And he didn't succeed."

"Ugh, fine." South Pyongan brushed him off, heading for the gate set halfway down the alley. "You win. Let's go."

She definitely could blame the bastard for that, but she knew if she kept arguing, he'd probably just bring up how killing was 'a sin.'

Curse that priest Pak for putting that crap in his head. It was all well and good for him to hunker in that little mountain church of his and preach about 'Thou shalt not lie, steal, or kill.' But the Pyongans were literally wanted fugitives who had to live on the streets when they weren't roughing it in the mountains.

Seriously, when one of the guys she'd become chummy with in Chuncheon said the Kempeitei were in the area, her brother hadn't been able to get anything useful while they gathered stuff to flee because he couldn't bring himself to steal. He'd always been a bit 'eh' about doing it, but at least he'd been able to. Now he was all guilty over it, even when *she* was the one stealing.

She'd asked what the point was of joining a religion that would just make him feel worse about the stuff they literally had to do to survive, but he'd just given her some answer like *'It gives me peace knowing God is watching over us.'* Even though it clearly didn't.

With a few effortless motions, South Pyongan swung herself over the gate, landing lightly on the other side. She hadn't taken too many hits tonight. One guy had gotten a good punch to her ribs in, but it didn't feel like any broke this time. Buddy on the ground hadn't got any in.

'No wonder he wanted revenge.'

Her smugness died as she watched her brother struggle his way up the gate.

Was she going to have to watch out for that all the time? It wasn't like the guys in the other cities had taken losing to a physically fifteen-year old girl well. But they'd come after *her*. She actually liked that they did- it gave her another chance to beat them.

But her brother... He couldn't fight. He'd only barely agreed to her teaching him some self-defense moves, and she knew that if it came down to it, he would have trouble using them. Not because he was weak or anything, but just because his conscience wouldn't let him. He didn't like hurting people, even if it meant he'd be the one to get hurt. He hated the Japs as much as she did, but he'd asked her before if she thought he'd killed the one he hit with a rock when they first met, and she could tell he'd been a little relieved when she said 'no.'

That thought flickered across her mind again.

It probably would've been easier if they'd never met. If it was just South Pyongan. She could steal whatever she wanted to and kill whoever tried to screw with her, and she'd never have to feel anything but excited for the next fight. There would be no one to have to watch out for, no one to feel guilty about what she had to do.

No one to fear losing.

North Pyongan reached the top of the gate, smiling at her as he swung his legs over.

And no one to sing her songs. No one to wipe her brow when she

got sick or to split a bun with her or to lie with on the rocks and watch the waves roll in while they talked about a nicer future.

South Pyongan reached up, making her brother yelp as she grabbed his waist and lifted him safely to the ground.

It might've been easier to survive without him. But life wouldn't have been easier. It didn't really matter if she had unlimited steamed buns if she didn't have him to split them with and she was going to kill herself before she ever said that out loud.

"C'mon, Sailor Boy," she said, turning to march down the alley. "I think we've worn out our welcome here. Why don't we spend the rest of the summer on the coast?"

"Really?" her brother asked, perking up like a street dog you'd mentioned beef around.

"You'll swim in the ocean if I have to beat up a coast guard for it."

"Maybe let's not beat anyone up we don't have to."

His sister clicked her tongue dramatically. "Ungrateful brat. Fine. We'll have a nighttime swim."

"If we spend autumn in Busan, we could head to the Jeollas for winter," her brother suggested as they made their way through the cramped alleyways of the industrial district. "It will be warmer there, and grain should be cheaper. Then we could go north next summer."

South Pyongan snapped her fingers. "Good plan. Busan, here we come!"

The port city would have a fighting scene, at the very least. There'd be a ton of foreign dock workers (Japs galore for her to wale on) and it wasn't like they had money to spend on anything else. And when men were bored and poor, they fought. And when South Pyongan was bored and poor, she won.

Ugh, she was going to have to put up with a new slew of 'Oho, so the little lady thinks she can fight, does she?' It wouldn't even

bother her that much if they'd just get new material. Two cities in and she'd already heard it all.

"Before we leave..." North Pyongan ventured. "Could we visit the First Presbyterian Church?"

It was this huge chapel up on Cheongra Hill, which she'd caught him eyeing a few times during their four months in Taegu.

"It's in the middle of the city," South Pyongan reminded him. "Y'know, in richie territory. We'll kind of stick out there."

She plucked at the hem of her dirty checked shirt.

"We are leaving after," North Pyongan pointed out. "But you're right. We shouldn't risk it."

"Why do you want to go anyway?"

Sounding embarrassed, her brother muttered, "I want to be baptized."

His sister clicked her tongue again. "Can't I just shove your head in a bucket and say a prayer?"

"I don't think that's how it works. And do you know any prayers?"

"Nope. Do you?"

North Pyongan shook his head. "Just the one. And Father Pak said a priest needs to do it. The water has to be blessed."

South Pyongan heaved a sigh. "Fine. We'll go check out the church. But if they tell the Japs on us, we're out of luck."

Her brother was quiet as they reached the edge of the district, making her huff.

"If no one's home, we'll find a church on the way to Busan."

"I don't want to get us-"

"No complaints, Choir Boy," his sister declared, finger pointed in the

air. *"I* make the decisions around here. Most of the time. When I want to. But I'm making the decision right now for sure. We'll get you dunked or whatever if I have to kidnap a priest to do it."

"Please don't kidnap a priest."

"No promises!"

South Pyongan peered out from the alleyway, looking both ways down the side street. The ramshackle worker's quarters were dark and quiet, all the boozers and scrappers back home for the night.

Not the Pyongans. So long as they had each other, they were always home.

Right. Her brother was her home, as disgusting as that sounded. It didn't matter that Pak had made him believe shit that could get him hurt, or worse. He wouldn't, because his sister would always be there to look out for him, no matter what.

"You're not allowed to piss by yourself anymore," she informed her brother, then darted out into the street.

"What?!" he hissed after her.

"And when I'm doing it, you have to remain in audio contact the whole time," she whisper-shouted as he scampered after her. "You'll need to go a street over and sing a little song or something."

"Why do *you* get a bit of privacy and I don't?"

South Pyongan didn't answer, taking them through the maze of cramped, smog-stained buildings towards the church.

If her brother wanted to go there, she would. And if he wanted to go to Busan or the Jeollas or the damn Russian Empire, she'd follow him there, too. She'd go wherever he did and take down anything that got in their way so he could get to his destination.

Despite how his morals made things harder, she was glad she'd ran into him. As corny and embarrassing as it was, even though they hadn't even known each other for a whole year yet, she couldn't

imagine life without her brother.

And if he hadn't met her, he might be dead. Just like if she hadn't came fast enough tonight. That couldn't happen.

South Pyongan needed to get stronger. She needed to be able to win not just most fights, but *all* of them. She needed to be the best warrior that ever lived, better than Ri Sun-sin, Kim Yu-sin, or any gunungsin or janggunsin. They'd had the advantage of money and ships and armies. All she had was her fists and her brother, and she wasn't going to lose either of those things.

She would protect North Pyongan no matter what. She'd never leave him, even if he took a vow of monkhood and refused to even eat stolen food or lift his hand in self-defense. If he didn't want to, he shouldn't have to. *She* was the one that could fight, she was the one that had been formed without the burden of guilt or a soft heart. She was the one that would steal and lie and kill (or at the very least maim), so that he could stay 'sinless.' It was *her* job to protect her brother.

He needed her.

—

1951

South Pyongan still didn't feel satisfied. She'd completed her mission in record time and with zero casualties, but she still just felt... off.

She knew she could've handled the four boys and Ri better. Or she knew someone else could have. Her brother might not have been able to get anything out of the man, but he could've done something for the kids, like the ones she'd dropped off in Anju for him. Found a way to make sure they stayed out of trouble *without* telling them their dads were probably dead and lowkey threatening them.

She'd been too aggressive with all of them, and even if she'd been bluffing about hurting Ri's family, she knew it wouldn't look good if

he told someone. She wouldn't get in trouble for it- she was trying to save lives by stopping the Taedong Youth Corps. They were at war.

But what about once they weren't?

And her brother was still bothering her. And the fact that she was bothered at all was still bothering her. And she just wanted to-

"Gahhhhh!" She buried her head in her knees in the back of the truck as it sped back towards Pyongyang.

South Pyongan hated thinking and she hated sitting still. She wanted to throw herself out of the moving vehicle and run next to it. She wanted to be at the *front,* not having to deal with interrogations and politics, where all she had to do to keep her brother safe was keep one eye on him while she fought.

"Comrade South Pyongan?" one of her guards ventured.

"Shut up," she muttered, pressing her face into her legs, pain shooting through her cheek as her knee ground into her cheek.

She *despised* these burns. They made her feel even more-

South Pyongan gritted her teeth as the itching under her charred skin became unbearable.

—

North's nails scraped roughly at the scar over his eye as he shifted on the thin wooden chair in he and the General's office. He usually sat with his spine as straight as a steel pole, but was having trouble tonight.

"Namsi?" his Premier's voice asked from across the room.

North's jaw clenched. "Or Taechon or Samchon."

He now knew which burns correlated to the airfields there as the Yankees hit them nearly every single night, trying to make it harder for the MiGs to operate. One of them was on his lower back, and

had been spreading down. It was this forcing him to abandon his perfect posture as the pressure sitting straight put on his spine made the scabs leak, and his bandages and shirt cling uncomfortably to his skin.

"You're drinking plenty of fluids?" his Premier asked casually.

North pointedly reached out to grab his canteen from the desk, tossing back the last of it.

'Kangwon.'

His General leaned back in his chair, flexing his broad shoulders, the popping of his spine echoing in the small underground room. "Get some rest, comrade."

"We need to send out a search party as soon as South Pyongan gets back."

His province had sent a telegram, using the code North and the provinces had developed. Unlike the theoretically crackable unique codes he had with each of them, this one was more like the pictorial one he and his General shared, relying on phrases that meant something only to them, and whose meaning could change depending on the context.

This one had been simple- *'COUNT ON IT. GYEONGGI'S FEAR.'* 'Count on it' being 'South Pyongan always wins, count on it,' the last thing she had said before toppling from her successfully stolen Japanese horse with a sword wound in her stomach, and 'Gyeonggi's fear' being heights. So in this case, North knew it meant she had accomplished her mission, and the reactionaries were hiding in the mountains. The Osok Mountains, since the telegram had came from Nampo.

Now he just had to wait for her to get here for the rest of the details before he sent soldiers to eliminate them.

"I think myself and our comrades can handle that task." The man's dark eyes squinched up. "If our country will allow us."

North grimaced, looking away.

He knew they could. All they needed to do was to send operations orders to a task force already in the area.

"There's other work to do."

His General didn't protest, but gave his Countryhuman a look that let him know he didn't want to find him sleeping on the thin folding cot tomorrow morning, before bending his neck back over his papers.

North didn't see the point in returning to the bunker to rest. He wouldn't be able to try to sleep until China did, and even then...

He hated sleeping on anything other than his back. It felt too... He didn't like it. And right now it felt like his back was made of ground meat.

Saliva flooded his mouth, and he slipped the stone in his pocket between his lips when the Premier wasn't looking.

He was going to be in pain either way. He might as well get work done while he was.

North set aside casualty reports from the front, taking another paper from the pile. His eye scanned it, his mood growing worse.

Another stray bomb had hit near Camp 3, north of Sinuiju. No one had died this time, the POWs being evacuated to the bunkers on site in time. But he knew that could change tomorrow night. And *he* would get blamed for it.

It made him think of the ceasefire talks again, the anger he had been fighting for the past... while coiling in his chest.

America’s newest way to postpone peace was over prisoners of war. The talks on them had been supposed to start yesterday, but America’s man- a Rear-Admiral with the family name ‘Libby’- had refused to participate, which had carried into today. North knew the pattern would continue.

Thirty days. That had been the time limit set on November 27th. If the ceasefire was signed in thirty days, the current line would

remain. But if it wasn't, then they would have to negotiate a new one with any changed territorial gains or losses. Libby would stretch the POW issue out until at least then.

There shouldn't have even *been* a discussion. It should have been nothing more complicated than passing each other lists of the names and ranks of the prisoners they had, something North had Hwang assist compiling weeks ago, then discussing how the first exchanges of wounded and ill would be made. North's negotiator on the matter- General Ri Sang-cho- and China's had already made their only demand clear- repatriation of all their soldiers.

And that- the due course for every other war- had been rejected.

The Yankees hadn't said why yet, but North already had his suspicions about what they were planning. Something America had already tried with CCCP after the World Anti-Fascist War. Something that went against the laws codified again in the Geneva Convention only two years ago. Something that wouldn't even be entertained if it wasn't *Korea* it was being used against.

And even if he was wrong about that, he *knew* he wasn't wrong about America and his puppets trying to waste time until the thirty-day limit was up. They would drag their heels and refuse to cooperate until time ran out and they had to negotiate a new line, wasting even more time, and all the while North's people would be *dying,* his northern provinces would be starving, his southern provinces would be imprisoned, and his brother would be under America's control.

And there was nothing he could fucking *do* about *any of it.*

"Comrade."

North felt a touch on his wrist, and realized his pencil had snapped in his hand.

"Ssi-bal." He dropped the pieces like they'd given him another burn, guilt flooding him as he stared at the broken lead protruding from the jagged wood.

He knew exactly how much it had cost to extract those resources, exactly how much it took to transport them and assemble them and get them to market, how much the labour of the workers that made it was worth. How much he had just wasted.

Numbers flashed across his vision, the ones he'd been staring at all night- the amount it took to feed his soldiers so they wouldn't starve like Rhee's, the amount it took to feed workers and government officials, to give loans to the peasants and build the factories and shelters and houses just to watch them be destroyed again, the enormous debt he would owe China and CCCP when this was all over and the rapidly mounting cost of rebuilding, what it cost to feed POWs that he'd rather put a bullet in instead, the amount it took to make that *fucking* pencil and get it in his hand.

"I can fix it." He snatched at the halves like he could force them back together with his bare hands.

"No need," his Premier soothed. "If you take a knife to one end, you'll have two pencils."

North bared his teeth, knowing that the man wouldn't be so lax if some other assemblyman had damaged State property like this.

"What matters is that we have pencils at all," Kim Il-sung said, gently pushing his one hand down to the desk. "Get some rest, comrade. I'll find some glue. If I can put it back together, I will."

North's eye dipped to the broken halves, then away, his shoulders slumping. "Fine."

Exhaustion rushed in to take the guilt's place, not erasing it, only pushing it to the margins. Black particles fizzled across his vision, obscuring the corners of the office.

"You sent our Comrade Provinces off with your transport, didn't you? I can drive you to your base," his General offered.

"No," North said, his tongue feeling like more lead in his mouth. "It's too dangerous."

He could feel the burns over his heart eating away at his skin.

Pyongyang could be being bombed above them.

"I'll be fine," he told him, standing straight, trying to disguise the pain it made shoot through his back, and that he couldn't see past the darkness shrouding his eye.

His General didn't look as if he bought it. But all he said was, "My country needs to consider his own safety as often as he considers others'."

What was the point? The bombs couldn't kill North. So long as it wasn't a direct hit, he could just carry on to the bunker.

"Goodnight," he muttered.

"Sleep well," his Premier advised, returning to his desk with the broken pencil. "And try not to dwell as you walk, comrade."

There was nothing else to do.

The idea of hiding out in a dark meeting room until his General went to sleep crossed his mind, but North tossed it out. The only thing worse than the long walk to Jangsan would be standing still waiting.

So he grudgingly slunk out of the complex, and into the frigid night.

Immediately his blood pressure rose as that all-too-familiar drone hit his ear slits, followed by a distant array of explosions.

North stared out at the dark treeline, his eye piercing through those last dark sentinels all the way to the rail lines that led to Hwanghae.

He should *be* there, protecting those that lived nearby from the bombs, helping his Rehabilitation Corps fix the tracks. He should be beyond that, at the front. If the Yanks were going to make them have to renegotiate the line, then he should be tearing back what pieces of his country he could before then.

His palm ached where the broken pencil had split his burns. The cold metal of the Tokarev at his hip soothed it.

"Comrade Korea? Is something wrong?"

North tore his eye from the horizon.

"Keep close watch tonight," he clipped at the guard standing outside the red brick building that shielded the entrance to the underground.

The man saluted, not questioning the order as North strode away, subtly removing the stone from his mouth.

There wasn't any particular threat about tonight. He didn't expect any reactionary gangs to be capable of making it to the heart of the country to storm Moran Hill. He just needed to give an order, to *do* something.

He had told his General his intention to return to the front if he was needed, and the man had said it was his choice. But he wasn't needed right now. His comrades were focused on holding hills and retaking heights recently lost. Engagements were sparse.

The bulk of the casualties came from those damn planes. And it was clear by now that he couldn't protect his people from those.

His teeth ground together, his strides lengthening as he remembered watching that TNT bomb plummet towards Pyongyang, thinking it was an atom bomb, the only thing he was capable of doing using his own body to shield two people, knowing it wasn't enough, that it was-

He wanted to be at the front. But he knew right now he could do more here, behind a desk or a podium.

And it *burned.*

North stretched his legs, ignoring the blood he felt trickling down his thighs as his skin tore, just wanting to make it back to the bunker without working himself into a fury.

It was hard. Even the two good things he could focus on came with barbs.

An agent had reported in from the south two days ago. Not Choi Jung-nam. But he had passed on the news that an officer in the National Defense Army had been found dead outside the base in Taejon. Authorities suspected foul play, but no evidence had been found.

Rim Gun-hon had been eliminated.

Hae could rest easier, once he told her about the fortunate 'coincidence.' And it meant that his agent's handler was still alive and active.

And it meant his agent still believed in him.

His hands balled into fists, his breath trailing him like clouds of steam billowing from a freight train as he was released from the security checkpoint, marching on towards the mountain.

The other good news was that an article about SH's past seemingly hadn't appeared in a southern newspaper in over a week. North didn't know why- he couldn't imagine America had decided his silence on it meant it wouldn't successfully interfere with the talks. And from what SH had said about him, he didn't think the foreign country would grow bored with the idea of getting revenge on her. His pride had been scratched- a country like America wouldn't just forget that.

It was more likely he was saving it to bring back if the repatriation issue ever got settled. Either that or he hoped it had served its purpose already by getting in SH's head, and North's.

It had. Because how could he even view the articles stopping as good news when they had already came out? They had been being printed for weeks, and even if they weren't in mainstream papers, they still would have been seen by thousands. *Thousands* of their people would know what had been done to his province, thousands of them could bring it up to her even after Reunification, and even if they only meant well, it would bleed her, the same way it would have bled him.

He hadn't been there to protect South Hamgyong, to stop North

Hamgyong from getting sick or to keep her from being sold, and he couldn't force the reactionary papers to stop spreading the story. He hadn't been the one to make them halt, and he couldn't stop them from starting again if America pleased. All he could do was shield her from knowing that people knew. And he couldn't even do that reliably.

And there was *nothing* he could do to protect his agent. Nothing but win.

He had to. He had to save her and the southern provinces and their people and-

North's teeth creaked, the pressure inside him reaching an almost unbearable point-

Then it froze, his insides stilling even as his feet kept moving. Something else joined the anger as a prickle itched between his shoulder blades a second before he heard the crunch of dirt on the road behind him.

Someone was coming.

—

South Pyongan came down from her jog as she caught sight of the figure in the distance, catching her breath as she stormed towards him.

The hour-and-a-half-long truck ride had done nothing to make her feel better. It had just given that niggling feeling time to grow, going from a piece of corn stuck in her teeth to a canker sore in her mouth, rubbing raw and bloody, and she still didn't know what it was, and it was *pissing her off*.

The near-full moon let her see the exact moment he sensed she was coming, the subtle shift as his body language matched hers, filled with tense anticipation, and the moment he realized it was her, and his hand strayed away from his gun.

Korea didn't turn until she was right behind him and her fist was flying at his head. Then he whirled, catching it with one hand and

dodging the other.

He didn't ask any questions or tell her to screw off. He just hit back, bringing his knee up into her stomach. South Pyongan let the blow land, then seized the arm gripping hers, sinking her fingers into his skin and wrenching herself free, only to strike again.

They scrapped on the open road, throwing punches and kicks, the only sounds the crackle of frost under their boots and the occasional grunt as one of their hits landed.

South Pyongan threw herself into the combat, her thoughts finally silent as her body dodged and lunged, though that irritating feeling was still there, still building.

A strike against her collarbone sent pain through her chest, and she launched herself at Korea. He caught both her hands this time as they met in the grapple they usually ended up in, each one fighting to overpower the other.

South Pyongan was the only province that could reliably win against him, but it still wasn't enough. He still beat her too often.

Her leg lashed out at his groin, but he blocked her by twisting his hips, then almost knocked her off balance with a blow to the ankle. Only gripping tight to his hands saved her.

"What's wrong with you?" he growled in her face.

South Pyongan bared her teeth at the betrayal of their usual agreement, and he curled his lip.

"I *mean* you're being *sloppy."*

He punctuated his point by slamming his forehead into hers, knocking her back and breaking their grapple. South Pyongan's head spun, but she threw herself at him again, slamming into him with her full force, her hands gripping his sides, and he finally went down with a snarl.

She knew he hated being pinned, but she did it anyway, straddling his hips and raining blows over his shoulders and chest, tanking the

battering he gave her in return, driving his elbows into her thighs and fists into her sternum.

It wasn't enough and since she didn't really want to hurt him it wasn't going to *be* enough.

Her open palm struck his chest as her frustration mounted, and she burst out, "What if I never figure out how to be a politician?"

Her own words surprised her, enough that Korea's fist catching her right in the place she'd shot herself almost knocked her off him. But she kept her grip, squeezing his hips tight and slamming his arms back over his head.

"What if I never learn how to lead?" Now that the dam had burst, the words kept coming. "What if no matter how responsible I am, I'm *still* not good at wearing a suit?"

Korea growled, managing to free one hand and clamping it over her face, digging his fingers into her jaw. *"You* are saying you're not good at things?"

Tearing his hand away, South Pyongan spat, "I'm a damn good soldier, I'm awesome at football and Taekwondo and ssireum, and no one's better than me at fighting! But none of that *helps* us."

Being able to tear a man's ear off his head didn't make her capable of guiding their people, being able to intimidate a guy into handing over intel didn't make her able to set an example. And as for protecting-

Korea arched his back off the ground, and his knees slammed into her back. South Pyongan lost her grip, pitching over his head, and he seized her, rolling her over into a full-body hold, her throat squeezed between his chest and arm.

"I told you I need you," he growled in her 'ear' as she struggled to free her arms. "Do you think I'd say empty words just to make you feel better?"

"I don't *need* to feel better." South Pyongan's words were muffled by his arm. "And you said you need me because you think I can

change. But what if I can't?"

"I don't want you to change. I want you to *adapt."*

"What if I *can't?!"*

With a violent twist of her body, she exploded from his grasp, rolling away across the cold grit, scrabbling up just in time to meet her country as he pounced on her.

"I don't know how to be diplomatic!" she cried as they tussled, jabbing at each other's weak points. "I don't know how to be polite or magnanimous or forgiving or any of the other crap a politician has to be! What if I never know?

"What if I'm never going to be anything but a soldier!?"

South Pyongan was proud of her skills, she was proud of her strength and marksmanship and ability to take down an asshole twice her size, and kill whoever needed killing. Her earliest memory was bull rushing a Jap and running him through with his own sword. She'd been *formed* fighting and she didn't regret that. It had kept her safe, it had kept her brother safe, and her cousins and people and Korea.

But they weren't always going to be at war. Even though the Yank and his Imperialist friends would definitely keep trying to get their grubby claws on her country after they were Reunified, she wouldn't always be able to fight them off with a gun. Already she had limits- she had to stay her hand if an NDA soldier surrendered in the hopes they could be re-educated, she had to tolerate landlords and capitalists being integrated into society, they couldn't head to the front without jeopardizing diplomacy, and she couldn't just kill whoever she wanted.

One day there wouldn't be a battlefield at all. And South Pyongan didn't know what she was going to do then.

Korea had gone limp in her arms, but she was keen to that trick, and wrapped herself around him tighter, forcing him back onto his back as she straddled him again.

"I want to be able to protect our people!" she cried down at him, the words spilled out of her like air from a punctured football. "But the only way I know how is by fighting for them! Fighting's the only thing I'm good at and *I still couldn't save them."*

The flag around her arm burned like a brand as the faces of her tank crew flashed through her mind. Her voice cut at her throat like jagged glass.

"So how am I supposed to keep them safe as a politician when I can't even do it as a soldier? How can I protect them when *I can't even protect my own brother?!"*

She almost screamed the admission down at him, her chest heaving as she fought to catch her breath, more out of breath than she should be as she realized that was what had been lodged inside of her for the last few days.

For longer.

Her eyes darted up, catching Korea's, and she froze, heat flooding her face as she realized what she just said.

South Pyongan scrabbled off him, trying to jump up and escape before he could try and read into that. But Korea lunged after her, getting his arms around her legs and pinning her face-down, his knees pressing into her sides.

"So this is about North Pyongan," he said, and there was disappointment in his voice.

"No," she muttered into the soil, getting ice crystals and dirt in her mouth. "It..."

Now that she'd got her self-awareness back, she didn't want to say it. But... Ssi-bal, she didn't want him to think she was just obsessing over her brother again. He was part of it, but so was her tank crew, so were the militia she'd lost in Anju, so were those kids, and the couple gunned down in their wake in her capital. So was that farmer.

"I really mean that other crap," she said grudgingly. "It's just... He's

my *brother*. If I can't protect him, who *can* I protect?"

Korea was silent on top of her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, cursing herself.

"Shit, I didn't-"

"He can protect himself," he interrupted. "North Pyongan isn't helpless anymore. He doesn't need you looking after him."

"That's the *problem."*

South Pyongan hadn't been able to look out for him when their army was back against the Amnok, she hadn't been able to stop that Pak from almost getting him kidnapped, or been able to keep him safe when he went to Guk Island, or stop him from walking into that trap.

And he hadn't needed her to.

'I don't need you to protect me anymore.'

"What do you mean 'That's the problem?'" Korea demanded. "I- *We* have been trying to get him to be able to take care of himself for decades. Isn't that why we broke him of his pacifism back then?"

South Pyongan nodded shamefully into the dirt.

She knew it was stupid. She knew this was what she'd always wanted for her brother- for him to be able to protect himself when she couldn't be there. But it still- Ugh, it still *hurt*.

What was that thing Kangwon had said to her when she was moping about North Pyongan leaving her to South (like she'd wanted)? *'The feeling is unreasonable, but it's not unreasonable to feel that way.'*

But it *was* unreasonable. It was stupid. It had been stupid then and it was even stupider now.

With a surge, she got herself flipped around, but wasn't able to escape before Korea repinned her by her shoulders, glaring down at

her.

This was worse. She couldn't meet his eye as she said, "He doesn't need me to protect him anymore. And that's- It's *good.* But..."

'What am I if I'm not my brother's protector?'

The traitorous thought made her grit her teeth.

North Pyongan was so many things to her. He was the person that took care of her when she got sick, he was the one that thought their flight path through and kept her from taking on Japs when she really shouldn't. He cooked the food she'd stolen and mended the clothes and kept her and Korea from getting under each other's skin even more than they already did, and did her chores for her, and had even done some of her paperwork before she'd started trying to be responsible.

And she was his protector. That had always been enough. But if he didn't need her to protect him anymore...

Then what *did* he need her for?

Her people could protect themselves, too. Like that guy in the church shelter in Anju had said- *'We **have** done alright these past few years.'*

Her people didn't need her. And if her people didn't need her, then *Korea* didn't need her. And if her own brother, the one person that she had thought would need her no matter what *didn't...*

Who did?

Her face burned under Korea's gaze, and she turned her face to her shoulder, trying to hide from her shame. Her insides felt hot and squirmy and she just wanted to run away so they could pretend this had never happened.

But her Countryhuman kept his weight on her, staring down at her like he was trying to get under her skin in a different way than usual.

Then he sighed. "Did you give the Supreme Commander your report?"

South Pyongan should be pleased he was already pretending he hadn't heard her. But her stomach twisted at not getting an answer. Another stupid thing.

"No," she said, trying to sound normal. "He said to bring it to you."

Korea closed his eye, then heaved himself up, freeing her.

"Come on," he said, walking away.

South Pyongan stayed on her back. "I'll catch up."

No way she was walking back to bunker with him with all that mining the air between them. She already wanted to shove the barrel of her pistol in her mouth.

"I need your report now if we're going to make an operation plan."

The province lifted her head, intrigued despite herself. She'd figured Korea would just pass her information off to a task force. "Operation plan? We're joining the hunting party?"

"We are the hunting party," he tossed over his shoulder. "Hurry up."

South Pyongan got up on her knees. "'We' like 'the unit?'"

"You and me," Korea clipped, not looking back. "Alone."

Excitement surged in her, even if that uncomfortable, gross feeling still clogged her pores. She didn't need any more encouragement to trot after him, launching into what Ri had told her, trying not to look or think in Korea's general direction.

It'd been dumb to think he might say anything anyways. That talk by the Raktong had definitely been a one-time thing, and that sh- didn't bother her.

And it wasn't like he could do anything about it. He couldn't make her brother need her, or their people. Eliminating the reactionary

gang was the only thing that could make this feeling go away, even just for a little bit.

When the war was over, and they had peace, South Pyongan might be useless.

But right now, she could still turn traitors into paste.

I think writing the piece about South Pyongan tearing a man's ear off affected me as after writing it I had a dream I was on a large man's back, pinning him to the ground and chewing his ear off. The texture was unpleasant, like when you shovel too much old holodets in your mouth and you're stuck with a mouthful of tough jelly. I gagged. But the taste was neutral. He was very displeased with me.

South Pyongan is the type of person to need you to be in an entirely different building when she's using the toilet, but if you are peeing, she's right outside the door saying loudly, 'Damn, are you frying chicken in there?' I have a friend like this. She's also the type to have memorized the entire criminal code so she knows exactly which law she's skirting. South Pyongan, not my friend.

I know many in my audience are young, so some advice- at your current age if someone ever wants to do something sexual with you, say no. And in the future if someone ever wants to hurt or humiliate you in some way and tries to justify it by saying it's a kink for them, DO NOT DO IT. I hate when people try to say sex positivity involves letting people do horrible things (usually to women). As an example- consensual rape enactments. I think there are a few reasons a woman might want that- the fear we have to live with of it happening for real, so it's like experiencing it in a safe space to make the possibility less terrifying, or because we've been groomed by a lot of media to view sexual assault as something more taboo and exciting than one of the worst things that can happen to you (because a lot of media is focused towards men). But there is only one reason a man would want to pretend to rape a woman- because he really does want to rape a woman but is too scared of the consequences. There are a lot of

psychological reasons someone might want to be treated awfully, but I don't think the solution to that is to lean into it. And there aren't *any* good reasons for someone that gets sexual gratification from hurting people. If you ever find someone who claims to love you, question why they would want to pretend to violate you or why they would enjoy actually hurting you. I know this seems all of a sudden, but it's related to something happening to someone I know right now. No matter how nice someone seems, if they want to hurt you in the bedroom, they want to hurt you outside of it, too. The only reason they don't is because they don't have an excuse. And if you let them get away with too much, they'll probably stop thinking they need one and so will you. Sex positivity should be about consenting adult women not being shamed for having a sex life, and sexual safety for teenagers if they insist on having sex with other teenagers, not perpetuating even more violence against us under the guise of being 'open-minded.'

Cast Your Own Rope

The ride to get back to Nampo was *way* too awkward for South Pyongan's liking.

It didn't take long to sketch out a basic action plan, but she felt like she had to keep talking after that so Korea wouldn't think about all the embarrassing crap she'd said earlier. But he just did that thing where he stared out the windshield and said nothing, not even glancing at her, and his stonewalling made her want to babble more.

"Y'know, SH is going to nag you when we get back," she said as they neared the mountains, kicking her feet up on the Jeep's dash. "She told you to stop stealing pretty boy's ride."

Korea swatted her legs down without looking, speaking his first words in over half an hour. "I don't care."

"She's probably going to be pissed we ran off like that, too," the province pointed out.

Her cousin had been on watch when they'd left. Korea had refused to tell her where they were going, and South Pyongan was more than thrilled to speed off without another word. If SH ever found out she'd been… ugh, *vulnerable,* she was going to start trying to get her to open up to her, too. *Not* happening.

"I still don't care."

The wheels of the Jeep crunched over the uneven ground as they drove into the foothills north of Nampo, pulling into the mouth of a wide gulch. Korea cut the engine, and two men in uniform appeared, popping out of the terrain like moles.

"Comrade Korea," one hailed, snapping a brisk salute as he saw who it was. "What brings you here?"

“Classified,” the Countryhuman said, tossing him the keys. “I need this hidden until I come back for it.”

“Yes, comrade.”

Ohhhh. So *that* was where all their surviving vehicles were. They must be hiding them in ravines outside cities. That made sense. South Pyongan had thought they must just have like, only five left.

'North Hamgyong's going to have work for years.'

Dammit. That meant even *he* would be useful.

Korea started off into the darkness, and South Pyongan slunk after him, grateful that the General had told her guards she could walk back to the bunker alone. They'd get in the way of her fun, and she’d kill herself if she had freaked out like she did in front of them.

She kind of thought the man might’ve known Korea was going to take her off to do this. He’d had that look on his face, that enigmatic little smile he'd worn back in their guerrilla days whenever he was scheming.

Or maybe he just knew about their shared hobby of beating the crap out of each other.

“You know, if you said we were going into Nampo to talk to the People’s Committee or something, it would be less suspicious,” she told Korea. “Now they’re going to be gossiping about what we’re doing.”

“Coming from an army general, ‘classified’ should be all they need,” Korea clipped. “We need to eradicate the tendency for gossip in the ranks.”

He shot a glare over his shoulder, making her blink innocently.

“Yeah, gossip’s counter-revolutionary. ‘S'why I don’t do it.”

He gave her an unimpressed look. “Don’t speak unless necessary.”

South Pyongan mimed punching herself in the throat, and he

rolled his eye.

The place Ri had said he'd met with the reactionaries was high up on Kuksa Hill, on the ridge directly north of the maple leaf-shaped lake nestled at the foot of it. South Pyongan could see the sheen off the water below, and the silver expanse of the sea to the west, black spots speckling its surface.

Cho Island was hidden by the curve of the coast, but the ships were enough to make her fists clench as she threw herself into looking for a trail.

"This would be easier with a light," she whispered, eyes straining to see the snow under the shadows cast by the spindly branches above them.

"And if they're still nearby, it would be easier for them to see us," Korea replied, squinting at the skeletal bushes, looking for caught scraps of fabric or hair.

At least the moon was big tonight, and it wasn't too cloudy. Even if they weren't the only ones taking advantage of that.

South Pyongan bared her teeth as the sound of bombs falling over Nampo echoed behind them, and a burn on her side widened.

Neither her or Korea had went over their wounds after their brawl. Kangwon was going to be pissed. Again.

Her eyes caught something, and she moved a few paces into the trees, brushing aside brittle strands of dead grass.

"Korea."

He crouched by her, and she moved to let the moonlight illuminate a half-print in the scattering of snow, the toe pointed northwest.

Her Countryhuman nodded in satisfaction, standing up and unslinging his Type 49. South Pyongan readied her PPS, even though they wouldn't catch up for hours, grinning as they followed the scent.

The traitors probably wouldn't move around once it was bright out, otherwise the aerial batteries they had on a few of the heights might see them. But it was only around midnight, which meant they had about six hours of darkness left, and a head start of a few hours. Every minute wasted trying to find a sign that they were still going the right way, or doubling back when they lost the trail made South Pyongan antsy.

The good news was that the duo knew these mountains like the back of their hands. The entire reason she knew how easy it'd be for the reactionaries to use the range to cross her province was because she'd done it before, both with her brother and Korea. They both knew where the easiest to traverse paths for groups that wanted to stay hidden were, and she guessed Korea knew the locations of their outposts or supply dumps, since he'd occasionally lead them off in a random direction without a new track.

South Pyongan made a mental note to go around her province and find out the local names of places, like Kko-kki-o Rock. Even if they knew all the physical features, it'd be useful for situations like with Ri's directions.

Maybe that was what she could do once she no longer had a use. She could strap on a jige, find a staff, and travel around the country like some kind of Buddhist monk, collecting charcoal and picking up niche regional slang for Korea, or something.

The thought had been joking, but it made her uneasy enough that she went back to trying not to think about anything but hunting.

The other good news was that unlike the yellow-bellied bastards (one of South Pyongan's favourite Haeisms), they didn't have to creep around in the dark. Once the sun came up, her and Korea would be able to move faster, and keep the trail easier.

But before it even started to get bright, after only around four hours of climbing over icy mountain ridges and doubling back, Korea froze. In hunting mode, South Pyongan didn't need an order to do the same, listening.

Nothing. Just the slight shiver of branches in the mountain

breeze, and the distant sound of small paws through the snow.

She looked at her Countryhuman, raising a brow, and he made a flapping motion with his hands.

Right, she'd almost forgotten about his whole bird thing. It had been awhile.

They'd been able to hear nightbirds all night, little chirps and the occasional *bueong-bueong* of an owl. They only got quiet when they got too close. Actually, just when South Pyongan got too close.

But now it was quiet.

The province slowed her breathing and held as still as possible, trying to emit good vibes, like her and the others had used to do when the Japs were chasing them. But as non-menacing as she tried to be, the only call was a warbling trill far back the way they'd came.

Korea looked back at her, nodding, as he adjusted his grip on his Type 49.

South Pyongan tipped her head. *'Too soon, yeah?'*

She'd thought the gang would have a few more ri than this on them, even if they were being lazy.

Korea jerked his chin at the trees. *'Definitely someone nearby. Keep your guard up.'*

Yeah, they didn't exactly want to stumble into some poor family's dug-out. Two soldiers with guns waking you up by falling into the kimchi pit was bad enough, but it was worse when they had huge, creepy white eyes. South Pyongan knew from terrorizing more than a few recruits.

Hey, if you had to look like a freak (albeit a hot freak), you might as well have fun with it.

The two prowled through the woods, moving more slowly than before. South Pyongan held her firearm tightly to prevent it from

clinking off the buckle on her cross-body belt.

As they neared the base of a cliff, a soft call sounded from off to their right, a hollow two-toned noise, and Korea quickly motioned her back into the trees as a branch rustled nearby.

Another call sounded from above, followed by a closer one. They sounded just like cuckoos, but thanks to Kangwon being incredibly anal about what bird sounds the KPRA used as signals, and when, South Pyongan knew that the birds only spent the summer in Korea, not winter.

She pressed herself to a tree trunk, listening as a perimeter guard moved slowly past, his boots crunching on the thin layer of snow that coated the ground.

Once they couldn't hear him, Korea darted through the trees in the opposite direction, silent as a shadow, and South Pyongan followed, keeping her steps light as they searched for a way up the cliff.

They needed the high ground to scope out the competition. Ri had said he'd only ever met with a couple men, but the group was definitely bigger than that. They just didn't know *how* big.

She was a big fan of 'take out the sentry and wring the info out of him,' but since there could literally be thirty guys or something, they couldn't risk losing the element of surprise if their captive decided to be brave.

Korea found a craggy part of the wall with enough handholds to make it up, and they waited for the sentry to come back their way.

He made another cuckoo call before he did, and the two above echoed him. South Pyongan figured that meant their camp was up top, and there was another sentry sounding off up there, too.

The one down with them meandered by, cuckooing as he reached the end of his route, then came back their way again.

As soon as he passed, South Pyongan slid from cover and ran over to the rock wall, launching herself up it. She tossed a grin over at

Korea, who'd been just behind her.

'Too slow,' she mouthed, starting the climb.

The cliff wasn't too tall, maybe only twenty, twenty-five metres. If she wasn't trying to be stealthy, South Pyongan probably could've made it one-handed. And if she wasn't covered in burns.

The rocks bit at them, even through her military-issue gloves, and she could feel blood soaking through the bandages. She grit her teeth, soldiering through the pain to grip the next handhold.

The cuckoo cries came again.

As they neared the top, Korea climbed into her peripheral, moving faster, rapidly gesturing for her to do the same.

'Ssi-bal.' She bet he'd been counting the seconds between the signals. The sentries must be coming.

They'd be screwed if the one above was too close to the cliff edge, or if there wasn't any cover. But they'd be screwed for sure if the man below even looked up, so South Pyongan made herself move faster, reaching the top just before Korea.

She threw herself over it, springing into a crouch with her PPS ready, prepared to have jumped right into a traitor.

Nothing. But no cover either, just bare rock and dead scrub.

Korea lurched up next to her, taking a brisk assessment before sprinting for the shadow of the ridge above them. South Pyongan followed. The cuckoo call echoed from down below.

Once they were concealed, the two paused, taking brief stock of their position.

They were on a broad, almost flat slope. To their three was scrub forest, too isolated to have been hit by bombs or harvested yet, and to their nine the ground gradually tapered until it merged with the ridge behind them. One of the signals had came from up there.

Korea signalled towards the forest, and they started to slowly creep along the ridge, pressed up against the cold rock. But no matter how close they got, if the sentry above looked down, he'd see them easily. This was probably as much high ground as they were going to get.

South Pyongan could hear voices now, but only the vague murmur of them. They grew more audible as they finally entered the darkness under the trees, where they bounced off of the trunks.

"-hate winter," a man (she was kinda betting they were all men) grumbled. "Wish we could light a fire."

"You think this is cold?" another snorted. "Try living in my village. The wind comes in off the sea like a goddamn knife."

"You're from Seoko-ri, right?" the first asked.

"Yeah."

Ugh, one of hers.

'Not after tonight.'

South Pyongan came to a stop with Korea, crouching down as they listened, trying to get a read on how many there were.

"God, I miss home," the Seoko-ri man sighed. "The way the sunset looks on the West Sea? Nothing like it. I can't wait to see it again."

"Screw that," another said. "I can't wait to see my family. I haven't seen my little sis in three years."

"Should've taken 'em with you." Four and counting. "Would've been safer than leaving 'em with the commies."

"It felt a little unfair making my mom and dad pack up and leave," the man replied. "My family's owned that land for six generations. If they left, those bastards would have taken *all* of it."

Seriously? A landlord family's son had ran off to join the traitors, and they'd let them keep a personal plot?

She side-eyed Korea, who glared back at her. She huffed silently, looking back into the shadows.

'Whatever.' They didn't know whether or not the family approved.

"What about you, Mun?" the Seoko-ri guy asked. "Your village is nearby, right? Ryongwol-ri? Did you manage to get in touch with your folks?"

The next man that spoke sounded younger, and his voice was flat. "When me and my brother joined last year, my mother told us we'd better never come home. A few months ago, I tried to tell her she got her wish for Son-jo. She told me if she ever saw me again, she was going to make sure I ended up against the wall, and letting me go then was the last thing she was doing as my mother."

'Ha! Loser.'

The other men didn't share South Pyongan's amusement.

There was an awkward silence before one said, "Shit, man. That sucks."

"I'm sure she'll come around," the Seoko-ri one assured, followed by the sound of a back being slapped. "Once we free Korea, she'll see you were just doing your job as a patriot."

South Pyongan felt Korea shift next to her. Since he was disciplined enough not to growl at that, she couldn't either.

"As soon as divorce was legal, she cut my dad off," Mun said flatly. "She said it was because he'd called her a useless bitch. Once. Eleven years ago."

One of the guys tried the bold approach of, "Hey, you're seventeen, aren't ya? You're a man- you don't need a mother anymore."

That… Actually that kind of sounded like something South Pyongan would say by accident. Never mind.

The men continued bantering, a couple more voices joining in.

After another minute of eavesdropping, South Pyongan held her hand up in a strip of moonlight that made it through the trees, putting down her thumb and four fingers.

Korea nodded, holding up his own hand and folding down two more.

Nine, plus two sentries and maybe a few that were sleeping or just not chatty. That was easy as eating tteok lying down. She would've said the number seemed a little small for the harm they'd been doing, but North Pyongan *had* taken out those others, so it seemed reasonable.

Speaking of…

"Think there's a chance anyone will be there?" Seoko-ri asked.

"Not one," Mr. 'A Man Doesn't Need A Mother' snorted. "You think if they got the province, they'd take a week delivering him? The Yanks want him ASAP."

That got South Pyongan's attention. If they'd known her brother was going to be on the truck, they should've known she was, too. But they'd only wanted him?

"What if they're being hunted? They might have to hide for a bit."

"If they had North Pyongan, the Reds would've locked down the entire coast by now. This place would be crawling with 'em." A spitting sound made South Pyongan scrunch her face. "Trust me- the boys are dead."

"Are we gonna try again?" a sleepy-sounding guy asked.

"Depends." It sounded like the gruff man was in charge. "We'll get to the rendezvous, confirm they really failed, then radio in for new directions."

"I still don't see why we're going for North Pyongan," Seoko-ri said. "South Pyongan is most of ours."

South Pyongan winced. Really? *Most* of them? Come on!

She could feel Korea side-eyeing her, and hunched her shoulders.

"I'd rather be saving *her.*"

"Orders say the Northern one is easier to trap," one of the others told him. "So long as the unit can separate them, it's a done deal."

The landlord's son snorted. "Yes, well, clearly not."

Despite her... complicated feelings, South Pyongan felt a little glow of pride on her brother's behalf.

"And get it through your skull," the gruff man said. "South Pyongan is a Communist like the rest of them. She will be until she gets all their teachings undone."

That'd be nice. She got the feeling they weren't talking about helping her achieve her goal of never thinking about anything, though. Probably more like making her read and write *'I WILL KILL BABIES'* a thousand times or something, until she went outside and drop-kicked the first two-year old she saw into the sun.

"I'm telling you she's not," Seoko-ri insisted. "I've seen her speak a few times, and she's nothing like them."

South Pyongan shifted uncomfortably, determinedly not looking at Korea. Usually she'd like hearing that she was nothing like him or the more serious Party members, but… not when it came from traitors.

The guy didn't say it outright, but she knew a big part of why he thought that was probably because of her absence before the war.

General, she'd been so *stupid.* How many of these bastards could she have caught if she'd just been around? Could she have caught Jo Man-sik?

She really did get why Korea had been harsh on her after Liberation now, and why she wasn't allowed to have the same control over her bodyguards the others did. And it wasn't because most of these reactionaries came from her. She wished she could still just write it off as him being unreasonable like that. But she

knew it wasn't about her province having more farmland for landlords, or Pyongyang and Nampo being wealthy enough to churn out comprador capitalists, things she didn't have any control over.

'I need to know I can trust you,' he'd said. She knew what these bastards were saying wouldn't make him question her loyalty- he trusted her for that.

But she knew he still couldn't fully trust that she was responsible.

"She personally confiscated my father's friend's land," the landlord's son was saying scathingly. "I'd say she's *just* like them."

Taking shit from landlords was the one part of running her province she'd never neglected.

It didn't feel like it made up for it.

"I bet she has to," Seoko-ri muttered. "Korea would kill her if she didn't go along with them."

Next to her, Korea tipped his head in acknowledgement. South Pyongan shoulder-checked him, shoving her thoughts aside with her Countryhuman.

There was a thump, then the gruff man growled, "The *North.* There is only *one* Korea."

'I wish,' South Pyongan mouthed, then snuck a glance at the Korea she meant. It was probably a good thing she couldn't speak out loud right now.

He started to signal her back so they could coordinate their attack, then froze.

There was a moaning sound coming from the camp, in a softer voice than the others.

South Pyongan's teeth clenched. Ssi-bal. She'd lost the bet about them all being men.

She hoped it was some stupid reactionary bitch, but those were

kicked aside as a bleary voice murmured, “I’m c-cold.”

“Did you have to lose her jacket?” Seoko-ri complained to someone.

“I was thinking about other things,” a man replied idly.

“P-Please,” the woman said, her teeth chattering. “P-Please just let me g-g-o home. I promise I w-won’t tell anyone I saw you.”

“You’ll be able to go home soon,” Seoko-ri soothed her, and he sounded way too nice for what South Pyongan was sure was going on. “We just have to get far enough away, then we’ll set you free, alright?”

“I’m-m c-c-*cold,”* she repeated, choked by tears.

Footsteps moved across the camp. “I can warm you up again, if you’re desperate.”

“N-No!” Life filled the woman’s voice again. “No, please, I’m sorry, I won’t complain-“

“I’m sure you won’t. Your mouth will be busy doing other things.”

“Hey, man, leave her alone,” Seoko-ri protested. “Earlier was enough, right?”

South Pyongan made a face. And there it was- why they hadn’t made as much ground as they should’ve.

At least their dicks were going to get them killed.

"You’re just gonna make her want to turn us in more.”

“Then she’ll already want to,” the man replied. “If I’m gonna have to spend the next week being hunted by commies, I’m making sure it’s worth the trouble. Or you could just let me off her.”

“No!” the woman burst out. “No, please!”

“No one’s killing you,” the gruff unit leader grunted. “We’re not

the Reds. We're fighting 'em for folks like you."

"Right," Seoko-ri confirmed. "So just leave her alone."

"I'm just making sure she doesn't freeze," the lecherous bastard mocked. "Unless you want to give her your coat?"

The frigid night air of the mountains pressed in on them, sharp and merciless as the tearing fangs of wolves.

"That's what I thought. C'mon, let's get you out of those ropes and go warm you up."

South Pyongan tensed as the woman shrieked, there was a short scuffing sound, then Seoko-ri snapped, "Don't hit her! Christ, she's just a woman."

In a quieter voice, he said, "You'll be okay. Just don't be too loud, alright?"

His answer was a choked sob.

"You had better bring her back," he said to the man. "I mean it, Yung-sun."

"Yeah, yeah," the man muttered. "Anyone else want a turn?"

"I'll go," another said, and the soft sound of muffled cries filtered through the trees as he and the other man, the one with the little sister he hadn't seen in years, dragged the woman off.

Korea was like a statue beside her, and South Pyongan jerked to look at him, eyes flaring.

He nodded grimly. *'Go.'*

The province pointed at herself. *'Just me?'*

Curling his lip, he jerked his chin aggressively in the direction the bastards were headed. *'Go!'*

South Pyongan immediately slipped away, off into the trees, her

heart pounding as she tried to move as fast as possible without giving herself away. She couldn't follow the wall of the ridge since it sounded like the men were right next to it.

"I don't like this," Seoko-ri muttered as she crept past. She could see his shadow through the trees, dark on dark.

"Neither do I," the unit leader said, and a match scratched before an ember flickered to life. "But he's a man with urges. And he's already a bastard. You really want to deal with him while he's all pent-up?"

Seoko-ri didn't answer.

South Pyongan moved faster, making it past the camp, picking up her pace slightly as she followed the trail in the snow. It was brushed down in a wide swath, and she pictured the men holding the woman between them, her skirts dragging as she stumbled along.

Ohhhh yeah. Killing them was gonna feel *good.*

More light streamed through the trees as the scrub forest thinned. Far enough away now, South Pyongan broke into a jog as she heard a struggle, the woman's cries growing louder. Hoping she wasn't about to see something fucked, she tore around the trunks, seeing shadowy figures up ahead.

Her thoughts raced. Did Korea expect her to do this silently? Or burst in guns blazing while he used the distraction to do the same at the camp?

South Pyongan followed her instincts, not slowing. One of the figures half-turned as he heard her footfalls, but was too late. Her fist caught him in the side of the temple, sending his eyes rolling back in his head as his body hit the ground, landing on the woman.

She screamed, and the second guy tried to shout. But South Pyongan had already body-slammed him into the frozen earth, knocking all the breath from his lungs with a *'whoosh!'* She didn't waste a second before her knife was plunging into his throat, hot

blood soaking her hands.

And she was right- it felt *great.*

She'd meant what she said to her brother months ago- it wasn't really the killing she liked. It was having a problem (guy that deserved to die) and being able to fix it right away (kill him). Instead of having to fill out forms and crunch numbers and debate things for days, all it took was a little bit of force, and she had saved one of their people directly.

She got that passing laws saved even more- the Law on Gender Equality that let that reactionary's mother divorce her bitch husband, the Labour Law that stopped workers from having to work for half the day or longer in coal-choked mining tunnels, the Agrarian Reform giving peasants the land they deserved.

But there was so much waiting, and it didn't feel like *she* was the one doing it. This was *hers,* the knife in her hand and the blood on the snow. This was her protecting her people the only way she knew how.

She jammed her blade into the throat of the man she'd knocked out, wrenching it sideways as the woman screamed again.

South Pyongan pounced on her, clamping a blood-soaked glove over her mouth as she listened intently, then relaxed.

No sound of alarm from towards the camp. They probably expected to hear this chick screaming.

'Perverted bastards.'

"I'm not going to hurt you," South Pyongan whispered to the woman under her. "But if you've lost it, I'm going to have to knock you out. So when I get up, stay quiet. Got it?"

The young woman nodded, the sheen of her eyes just visible under the canopy.

Slowly, South Pyongan got off, lifting her hand from her face, ready to muffle her again.

She just sat up, touching a hand to her cheek and looking numbly at the blood on her fingers.

South Pyongan winced. *'Whoops.'* Thanks to her glove, it kind of looked like she'd decided to snack on one of the men's necks.

The woman lifted her eyes to her, voice shaking. "Who are-?" Her blink was hidden by the shadows. "South Pyongan-do?"

"Just Comrade South Pyongan." The province leaned over to body closest to her, stripping its jacket.

She wasn't a Communist, but 'comrade' had always been better than the stuffy 'do.' Or 'miss.'

She shuddered as she tossed the man's upper layers at the woman. "Put those on. And the pants, just give me a second."

She was dressed in winter skirts, but only had a long-sleeved blouse above them, and her shoes were the simple fleece-lined winter ones distributed to refugees. Warm, but not so good for long hikes in the mountains.

South Pyongan guessed she'd been out looking for firewood or headed home after foraging. The bastards had probably ran into her, and taken her with them so she 'couldn't give away their location.'

Whatever. It was clear what *these* dog's sons really wanted.

Startling the woman, South Pyongan smashed her fist into the dead man's face, satisfied by the spurt of blood that was still able to come from his nose.

She helped the chick dress in the drab pants, working them on under her skirt, but left the soldier's boots. They'd be too big, and couldn't be used once she got home.

South Pyongan squinted at one, holding the heel in her hand. It actually looked the same as the woman's, just with a size difference. It wasn't a Yank shoe, or one of the crappy ones Rhee's guerrillas got (if they got them at all).

She knew the bastards had been looting. They must have stolen their winter boots from peasants in the hills.

Dropping it on the corpse's face, she jumped up, helping the woman to her shaking legs.

"How many are there?" she demanded, then backtracked. "I mean, you're good, right?"

The woman nodded, still trembling in her new clothes.

The province brushed at a splotch of blood on her shoulder. "Yeah, you look good."

There. Let it be known South Pyongan wasn't *entirely* insensitive.

"So how many are there?"

"I d-don't know," the woman stuttered past her chattering teeth. "I thin-n-nk maybe… Eight-teen?"

Bigger number than she'd thought. South Pyongan raised her head, sharp eyes scanning the trees around them.

"A f-few of them left to sc-c-cout ahead," the chick said, wrapping her arms around herself. "B-But I don't know how m-many. I was-They were-"

"You're good now," South Pyongan interrupted before she could start sobbing. "South Pyongan province is here, so now all these guys are going to die. Just hang tight… not here."

It looked like this cliff stretched to the right until it ended in a steep slope that was part of the ridge above. If the sentry got changed out or those recon guys came back, they'd come right through here.

So South Pyongan scooped the woman up in her arms, and took off, running lightly out of the trees, keeping low as she skirted across the open rock face, tense as she waited for an alarm.

But she made it down the slope and back into the forest below

before the cuckoo calls came again, more distant here.

She found a rock formation, and set her passenger down on one of the shattered boulders scattered at its base. The trees growing around it were thick, and the moon barely pierced through them.

As the dazed-looking woman instinctively curled into a ball, her province nodded in satisfaction. “Stay here. If you hear anyone coming, crawl into the rocks and stay quiet. Bite your arm if you have to. We’ll come get you when it’s safe.”

“You brought soldiers?” the woman asked hopefully.

“Nah, just me and Korea.”

“Comrade Korea’s here?” Her face fell. “B-But there’s so many of them…”

Clearly she hadn’t heard the enemy’s broadcasts about Seoul. Or South Pyongan’s more awesome exploits during the Occupation.

She snorted. “Eighteen isn’t a lot. Trust me, we’ve got this. Just don’t go running away. You might lose your feet.”

Without another word, she took off again, leaving the chick huddling on the rock.

She had to hurry. It wasn’t smart to leave Korea alone with an enemy for too long. He might decide to have fun without her.

As she clambered up the slope again, springing up to the top, a chorus of cries split the silence of the night, and her heart started to pound in indignation as she broke into a run, sprinting back for the camp.

*‘Oh that **bastard-**‘*

“Got him!”

South Pyongan screeched to a halt, freezing. The scream had been filled with such pure triumph that ‘him’ could only be one person.

She waited for the terror that should come after the traitor realized he was wrong, and Korea eviscerated him, but there were only crows of triumph and a shout of, “Grab the rope!”

‘Ssi-bal.’

South Pyongan fought the urge to charge in blasting. She couldn’t risk Korea getting caught in the crossfire. Switching back to stealth, she prowled towards the clearing, seeing shadows flicker through the trees.

“What’s going on down there?” the sentry called in alarm from above, and one of the men shouted back, giddy with nauseating delight, “We caught Korea! We fucking caught *Korea!”*

***‘Really,** Korea?’* The guy was as slippery as her, but the *one time* he got captured was when they were out here in the middle of nowhere, alone?

“You’re shitting me,” the sentry echoed her own thoughts.

“Dead fucking serious!”

“I want to see.”

“No,” the unit leader said sharply. “Stay in position. If he’s here, more rats might be.”

Great sentiment. Unfortunately her and Korea were *insane,* so there was no back-up.

The only other rat for ri around got down on her hands and knees, slinking as close to the camp as possible. The reactionaries had lit a lantern, like they needed a better look at what they'd caught to believe it. Through the spindly clumps of dead undergrowth, she could just see them clustered around something.

And of course that something was Korea.

He was on his knees with his hands behind his back, definitely bound, as he glared defiantly up at them. South Pyongan was surprised he wasn’t throwing himself at the nearest traitor, even

with his handicap, until she realized they'd wrapped a rope around his torso, too, binding his arms to his body.

That wasn't good. If Korea hated being pinned, he *despised* being tied up. She'd definitely picked that up in their escaping handcuffs/other bondage classes. She'd never seen a guy dislocate his own wrist with such immediate brutality, even her.

"Get a rope around his legs, too," the unit leader ordered.

"That's a little much, don't ya think?" one someone asked, leaning on their rifle.

"Did you hear what he did in Seoul?" It was the Mun guy, and he sounded scared. Which he should. "Over *four hundred people* offed, just him and some other commie."

"Enemy broadcasts exaggerated the toll," Korea said. He sounded cold, but South Pyongan could hear the tension under his voice, and see how deliberately slow his chest was rising and falling under the restraints. "It was only over two hundred."

An uneasy silence fell over the camp. It was still an insane number for two people.

General, it should've been South Pyongan with him, not the pretty boy.

"And it would have been more." Korea tilted his chin, managing to look like he was sitting behind a desk instead of on his knees in the dirt. "But I accepted surrenders. And I will accept yours now."

The traitors looked at each other, stunned by his audacity.

"If you lay down your arms and confess your crimes, I will make sure none of you are executed for them," Korea said flatly, still with that arrogant set to his shoulders. "You can see your families again."

He singled out the man whose mother had said she never wanted to see him again, and the traitor shrank bank.

The Countryhuman lifted his chin further, strafing them all with an icy glare.

"If you don't, you die screaming."

South Pyongan felt a shiver run down her spine (because it was *cold),* and not for the first time in her life was *really* glad she was too amazing to be a Jap collaborator or a fake Nationalist. Her pride would've never let her surrender to Korea when he gave her the option. And as amazing as she was at fighting…

She had a feeling she would die screaming.

Well, she liked to think she'd go out with dignity, have some really cool last words that would haunt him forever. *'You couldn't even save your own province.'* That would definitely screw him up.

The unit leader recovered first, snorting. "You still think you're in control? That's a Red for ya."

He flicked his cigarette into the snow, stalking towards Korea.

"This war isn't over," he growled. "But it will be soon. It doesn't matter how badly the Yanks want to make peace- the Republic of Korea will never bow to *you."*

Korea snorted derisively. "You think the Americans want to make peace? They *want* this war to continue, they want Korea to be torn apart. They couldn't conquer us, so now they want to destroy us. And *you* are helping them do it."

"I'm working with them to free our country from *you."*

Korea's lip curled in disdain. "You're working *for* them. You're being a good little colonial slave, just like the collaborators that sold us out to Japan. Just like-"

South Pyongan watched his face go blank, then fury shattered his icy expression as he bared his teeth at the men.

"*None* of you are Korean. And you're all going to die stateless."

‘SMACK.’

Korea went reeling back as the man’s fist connected with his jaw, and South Pyongan’s nails dug into the earth as rage surged through her.

Hell no. She was the only one allowed to hit her country in the face.

The traitor’s stern expression wavered as he looked at his hand, shaken, like he couldn’t believe he’d just hit his Countryhuman.

Korea didn’t stay down, surging back up onto his knees. As his tongue swiped blood from his split lip, he glared up at the man with a light in his eye that meant South Pyongan was going to get to see a human turn into a cloud of red mist.

Well now she *really* wanted to untie him.

“Bind his legs,” the unit leader ordered again, backing away from Korea.

South Pyongan had been scoping out the camp the entire time. There were two more guys than they'd thought, so ten traitors here, plus the one up top, and the sentry at the foot of the cliff who wouldn’t be an issue for a few minutes. She didn’t see Korea’s weapons anywhere, but she knew all she had to do was get the ropes off him and it wouldn’t matter. But it’d be easier if his legs weren’t bound, so she had to move fast.

She knew she could take down twelve guys easily. She was a little less sure she could do it without Korea getting shot.

‘Oh well,’ she thought, and Korea probably felt the hairs on his arms stand up. *‘Take the initiative.’*

The spray of submachine gun fire hit those standing farthest from Korea, and the traitors burst into cries, scattering or hitting the ground, dead or alive. The lantern burst in an explosion of glass, plunging the camp back into darkness.

Immediately fire was returned, and South Pyongan rolled behind

the cover of a tree, shards of frozen earth raining on her as she pushed herself up, back against the trunk.

"Ambush!" the unit leader bellowed. "Pak, covering fire! We die before we lose the North!"

Bullets penetrated the canopy as the sentry fired from above, wood chips showering the province.

She couldn't let herself get pinned down. If these bastards got desperate they might execute Korea. It wouldn't kill him, but-

Another shiver ran down her spine. The war effort needed him.

"Ssi-bal!" someone cried. "Get him off me!"

South Pyongan took the chance to burst from cover, throwing herself into the camp, barreling straight at a man reloading his submachine gun.

His eyes widened as he saw her coming, jamming the magazine in and trying to get the barrel up. She went right by it, throwing an elbow into his throat before heaving him aside into another shooter.

She whirled, catching the gun barrel swinging for her skull and wrenching it from the traitor's hands, plunging her dagger into his neck. His eyes widened as he clutched at it, trying to stop the fountain of blood that sprayed into the air.

"It's South Pyongan!" one of the men screamed, and she grinned as she threw herself at him, sticking the blade into his eye, forcing it in as bones ground and snapped.

"Shoot to disable, but kill if ya have to!" the unit leader shouted. "And get the North out of here!"

South Pyongan caught a glimpse of Korea on the ground, squeezing a man's neck between his thighs, then had to spin to dodge two losers charging at her, slamming backwards into a fucking brick wall of a guy.

He tried to wrap his arms around her waist, but she dropped to the

ground, balancing on her palms as she swept her legs out, swiping his from under him, before leaping gracefully up and coming down with both feet on his face, producing the world's most satisfying *'crunch.'*

The man screamed as she bounded off, landing lightly to face the next attack.

Four men were out of the count, the sentry couldn't shoot while she was so close to his pals, two were hustling Korea off under the trees, and the other five were coming straight for her.

South Pyongan caught Korea's eye as he was dragged away. He wasn't struggling as hard as he could, which was good for what she'd intended, but was surprising enough to almost give her pause.

Almost. When the first bastard hit her, she was ready.

She checked his shoulder, and spun him around, sending him sideways, unable to finish him off as the others tackled her.

'There we go.' Seriously, sometimes men would come at her one at a time, even on the battlefield. She didn't know if it was some sort of subconscious pride thing, like they didn't want it to take more than one to take a woman down, or if a lot of soldiers just happened to be youngest children.

She went down under their weight, slamming into the hard ground, and her excitement rose.

Unlike Korea, she *loved* being pinned. She loved the rush of taking on more than one enemy at once, fighting wild as she dug her nails into eye sockets and broke whatever bone she was presented with, the total comeback when it looked like she was done for.

They brawled across the camp, slamming into tree trunks and the ridge, a roiling mass of limbs and blood. South Pyongan got her knife up through a guy's ribcage, and he relied back, taking her blade with him.

Didn't matter. She had her fists.

She got a man on his back and seized his arm, bending it back then wrenching it forward, brutally dislocating it. He screamed and someone piledrivered her, slamming her into him. Crushed between the men, she threw herself sideways, jerking her head up and catching the bastard on top of her in the chin. She rolled over, but before she could get up, someone else seized her throat with a callused hand, sinking his fingers into her carotid artery.

South Pyongan gagged as her air was cut off all at once. She shot her leg up, striking the guy in the groin, but he must've had balls of steel because he tanked it with a grunt and added another hand.

She was *not* going to do something lame like try to pry his fingers off, so she went for his own throat instead, striking her fists into his neck over and over. He made a gross sound as his hands released.

Oxygen rushed back in, but before she could get up, hands were seizing her limbs and forcing her onto her stomach as the four other men all jumped on her at once, piling their hundreds of pounds of weight onto her back.

The one whose face she'd destroyed was back, and he screamed, *"Rope!"* voice gargled from the blood sheeting from his shattered nose and cheeks. "Get the fucking rope!"

"I've got it!" Footsteps pounded towards them as someone- the sentry from below- slid into the clearing.

South Pyongan thrashed and writhed, but more weight bore down on her as the man she'd throat-punched joined the dog pile, grabbing her skull in his hand and slamming it over and over into the hard-packed dirt.

Her brain rattled in its casing as her vision swam, her head dropping to the ground when he released her. She still had the strength to move her body, but the hands gripping her wouldn't let her, forcing her legs together to try and tie them.

'Ssi-bal.' She *didn't* like getting pinned if it meant she was going to lose.

The first fight she'd ever lost flickered through her throbbing head, the way it throbbed back then as the beefy factory worker had cracked her skull off the floor of the warehouse, holding her down in front of all the other men, and her brother. The shame that flooded her as they'd jeered, and how they hadn't even been excited by her loss because she was just a girl and they *expected* her to lose.

North Pyongan's eyes had been wide with worry, and even though he'd just fussed over her after, South Pyongan knew she had let him down. She hadn't won the prize money. They wouldn't eat that night. She was too

'Weak.'

Her glazed eyes strayed towards the darkness under the trees as her arms were bent behind her back. Through the ringing in her head, she could hear yelling, like it was coming from underwater.

Korea.

All of a sudden her clarity came rocketing back.

He'd brought her out here alone because he thought she could do this with him, because even if she couldn't protect her brother, even if she never learned how to be a politician, she *did* know how to be a soldier.

When she'd lost that first fight, she'd came back three days later with her concussion still pounding in her temples and she'd put that bastard through the *floor,* followed by all the spectators that said it was a fluke. She'd won the prize money and everything in their pockets when they tried to put her in her place after. But South Pyongan *knew* her place.

'On top.'

Her strength came flooding back, and she threw her head back and roared, arching her back and thrashing side to side with all the violence and flexibility of an eel.

The man on her back went sprawling, and she freed an arm from another's grip, twisting her body so hard she gave herself whiplash,

but regaining her arms and legs.

She might not win every fight against Korea, but he was the *only* one that was allowed to beat her. And no matter how many times he did, she'd keep trying until she won again.

Grinning ferally, South Pyongan sprung to her feet, yanking her blade from the man she'd left it in, heart's blood geysering out.

She was only weak if she gave up.

The men went scrambling back, one reaching for his submachine gun. She bowled him over, seizing it, since hers had been torn from her while she fought. Without hesitation she opened fire, peppering his chest with bullets and catching one of the ones behind her in the chest, sending him jittering to the ground. The others dove behind the cover of the trees.

South Pyongan grinned, readying her gun, and-

Whirled and ran off into the woods.

Her instincts said to finish them off, to make them pay for making her doubt herself even for a moment, to make sure they didn't think she was running scared.

But Korea was getting taken. And he was expecting her to come after him, and to save that woman. She couldn't let either of them down.

This wasn't about enjoying killing or revenge. It was about saving their country.

She followed the sounds of snarling and cursing, fleet-footed as she wove around tree trunks and over rocks, dodging the storm of bullets behind her.

Korea was being enough of a nuisance that the men stealing him had only managed to reach the slope. South Pyongan charged them, undeterred by the crack of the rifle and the bullet that whined by her head.

One man was hauling Korea towards the slope while the other tried to cover him, his eyes wide and frightened in the moonlight, reminding her that these weren't real soldiers, just traitorous idiots that'd been handed guns and a crash course on how to kill.

South Pyongan had used to be like them (not the traitor part). She'd been a killer to the Japs and a fighter to everyone else, just looking for the rush of victory and the prize money that came with it.

Korea had changed that. He had taught her how to be more than just a fighter, to be a *soldier*. Soldiers had causes. And he had given her hers.

And part of it was obliterating this idiot.

South Pyongan flew at him, weaving to dodge his shots as he held his ground, lowering his bayonet so she'd impale herself on it.

At the last second she canted forward, stretching out her arms. She winced as her burnt palms met the ground and her stolen gun swung against her chest. Her back bent as the world spun around her again, this time as she went upside-down in the air. When her boots hit the ground again, she used the momentum of her front handspring to leap up and over the thrust of the traitor's bayonet.

His mouth fell open as she vaulted over him, her spine curving as she soared through the air like a spear, landing behind him, pirouetting gracefully to grab his head between her hands. Before he could even turn, she cracked it to the side, breaking his neck, and he dropped like a sack of potatoes.

She could *not* believe that had worked. But she wasn't done yet.

She turned just in time to see Korea smash his head into the skull of the man holding him, sending him staggering back.

'That's got to hurt.' Hers still ached from earlier. Screw the reactionaries- Korea's skull really did have reinforced steel in it.

The traitor stumbled back, raising his gun, but tripped on the steep slope. He yelped as he went over, shouting as he tumbled all

the way down until it abruptly cut off.

South Pyongan didn't waste time admiring the spectacle as she darted for Korea, already working on the rope that bound his wrists before the loser even stopped screaming.

"You *had* to show off, didn't you?" her Countryhuman griped.

South Pyongan smirked. "C'mon, even you have to admit that was super cool."

"If the idiot holding me hadn't been stunned, he could have shot you in the middle of that flip."

"Yeah, but he was too shocked by my beauty and grace. That's part of the strategy."

The rope fell away, and she started on the one that wrapped around his torso, frantically sawing at the fibers as the calls of the rest of the men came closer.

Korea aggressively thrust out his arms, tearing through the last strands, and lunged for the rifle of the man with the broken neck.

The four men left from the camp burst from the trees, and Korea's shot took one right between the eyes.

There was a brief pause as those left realized Korea was unbound, and their faces paled as white as their foreign masters'.

Then, *"Scatter!"* one screamed, and two went flying in opposite directions, one up the ridge and the other back into the trees.

"Don't scatter you idiots!" the third- the unit commander- hollered, but it was too late.

Korea streaked across the open ground like a tiger on a deer, ignoring the bullets sent by the sentry above. The unit leader stood his ground, his submachine gun sputtering. South Pyongan thought one of the rounds might have hit her country, but he kept going, colliding with the man and knocking him back into the forest, dragging him kicking and screaming into the dark.

His province followed, arriving just in time to hear the last wet splattering sound and the gurgle as the traitor died. His face was an unrecognizable mass of torn flesh and white bone.

Yeah, she could've told him that would happen. Korea *really* didn't like being tied up.

Her Countryhuman stood, grabbing her arm and hauling her towards the cliffside, out of the line of fire of the shooter up top.

"Injured?" he demanded, eye flicking over her. Blood dripped down his cheeks, soaking the front of his tunic.

"I'm good," she said, spotting the hole in his own arm. "Need my PPS, though."

Korea nodded, covering their movements as they prowled back to the camp and his province grabbed her weapon.

Yeah, the traitors were using stolen Soviet loot, too. But the Yanks hadn't been giving out the good stuff. And South Pyongan *loved* her PPS-43.

Korea disappeared into the dark where they'd been hiding, and re-emerged with his firearms, strapping that shiny tiger knife of his (that South Pyongan totally wasn't jealous of) to his hip.

'Wait a second.' She narrowed her eyes.

"Well done," he said, nodding to the bodies. "You got the civilian to safety?"

It was weird. But she had more exciting things to think about.

She nodded. "She says there's a unit on recon. Maybe four more."

Korea nodded, unfazed. She actually thought she saw a spark light up in his eye.

"Ready?"

His province grinned, brandishing her submachine pistol. *"Formed*

ready."

Korea inhaled, then shouted, "REACTIONARY SOLDIERS. YOUR UNIT HAS FAILED. BUT NO ONE ELSE HAS TO DIE TODAY. SURRENDER AND YOUR COUNTRY WILL SPARE YOU."

His voice echoed over the mountains, crashing off the rocks. In response, gunfire sprayed blindly into the forest from above.

South Pyongan was a little pissed. She knew Korea had to try to be above vengeance, but she also knew what he'd told her at the Raktong.

"You *heard* what they were going to do to that chick," she hissed. "Why would you let them surrender after that?"

Korea looked at her, moonlight glinting off his eye the same way it glinted off the barrel of his gun. "Because I know they won't.

"Now come on." He gestured towards the dead end ledge, where the one traitor had fled towards, cornering himself.

Her country had a look on his face that she hadn't seen since the Occupation, back when they'd chase kempei and their puppets over mountain peaks, when the outcome of a battle or fate of the war didn't depend on them winning- just the lives of their enemies. With the dark anticipation in his voice, it made South Pyongan's pulse kick up.

"Let's go hunting."

Explaining the chapter title not out of mercy, but out of respect for North Korean storytellers. The story of Haenim and Dalnim is about a brother and sister whose mother is eaten by a tiger, then the tiger comes to eat them (there's a lot of versions, but this is a basic one). The children pray to the sky and a rope comes down to save them, lifting them up to become the sun and moon. The tiger also dies in most versions. But in the North Korean version, their mother is sick, and there's a man bringing her medicine. To comfort them, she tells them to make a wish to the sky, and it will come true. They wish for

her to get better, and tell the guy they don't need medicine anymore. But the mother is still sick, so she pretends to be healthy and goes to gather medicine herself. While she's foraging, a tiger attacks her, and she falls off a cliff. He goes to the home to eat the children, who end up trapped in a tree. They make a wish to the sky to be saved, a rope comes down, and they get lifted to safety. The tiger also gets a rope, but his drops him in the well. But the ropes didn't come from heaven- it was the guy who was helping their mother, standing on the cliff over their home. Then he, ah, tells the kids they should have used the axe to kill the tiger because the more afraid you are, the more you should fight. Which is a good moral, but probably couldn't have been taught that way back when tigers were an actual threat in Korea. Then again, I'd probably want my nine-year old to go out swinging. But the meaning is 'don't just look at the sky and do nothing, solve your own problems.' I really like that version because it's clearly the principle of self-reliance.

Things my cat will eat: anko (LOVES it)
Kkwabaegi with cinnamon and sugar on it
The non-chocolate part of chocolate chip cookies
Cream roll

Things my cat will not eat: meat of any kind

I think I have raised him wrong.

Once A Soldier

The traitors never stood a chance.

The first guy went down when they flushed him from his hiding spot in the trees, driving him towards the dead end cliff. He took one look at South Pyongan and Korea, then threw himself from the twenty-metre drop, his leg breaking with a snap they could hear.

South Pyongan swept an arm in offer, but her Countryhuman graciously declined with a tip of his chin, spraying covering fire at the men atop the ridge and leaving the honour of the killing blow to her.

She trotted to the edge of the cliff, sighting down her rifle at the wounded man dragging himself away, and yelled, “Hey, loser!”

He looked up in terror, then never looked at anything again.

She and her Countryhuman fought their way up the ridge, taking turns covering each other as they sprinted up the open slope, launching themselves directly at the sentry on top, dividing his attention. He swung his submachine gun at Korea, and South Pyongan took him in the side with her PPS.

No sooner had he fallen than gunfire came from the other side of the ridge, forcing the two to hit the ground.

“The recon unit is back,” Korea noted as he slapped a new magazine into his Type 49.

“Good,” South Pyongan said, smirking. “I was worried we’d run out.”

He chuffed, then they burst up, charging down the slope in wordless agreement, even though it would’ve been safer to keep the high ground.

South Pyongan leapt nimbly over obstacles, jumping boulders and

depressions, not even feeling her burns anymore past the invigorating rush of adrenaline and night air. The bullets whizzing by her meant as much as mosquitos.

She threw her head back and howled like a wolf with wild elation, the way the provinces had done to terrorize Japan and his puppets as they hunted them over Paektusan.

She tossed a grin at Korea as they barrelled down the ridge, but he only yelled, “No!”

“Spoilsport!”

The men scattered as they hit them, like marbles getting vomited from the triangle in a game of tohaki, disappearing into the rocks around them.

South Pyongan and her Countryhuman pursued.

It looked like the recon unit had actually been nine people, plus the one soldier left from the first batch, something that only made the province even more excited.

They hunted them over ridges and gullies, stalking through trees and across streams, eliminating them one by one, using hand-to-hand whenever possible. South Pyongan leapt down from a tree, breaking a man’s neck on impact. Korea shot one through the leg, then closed the distance to tackle him, shoving his head back into the icy creek and holding him there until he stopped struggling. And when the others attempted to regroup and overwhelm them, they met them gladly, forcing them into melee.

South Pyongan slammed a man back into Korea, and his long silver knife burst from his chest, blood glistening in the moonlight as it slid *up*. She didn’t stop to admire it, whirling to catch the blade coming for her, snapping the bastard’s wrist before charging the one trying to use his gun, leaving Korea to slit her opponent’s throat as she threw her own knife with deadly accuracy, right into her new target’s heart. His gun clattered to the ground as he gasped and twitched, and she pounced on his chest, wresting her blade free and plunging it into his neck, hot blood spilling over frozen stone.

The others fled, and she watched Korea let himself be shoved off the man he was grappling with, letting him go. There wasn't any risk to it. There wouldn't be any peasants so high in the mountains on a winter's night.

And no matter how many chances they had, none of the traitors would be escaping.

It was freeing to fight this way, to not have to worry about her cousins or keep an eye on her brother or watch out for other soldiers. There was just enemies, her, and Korea. And she knew he could take care of himself.

This was it- the crisp winter air that filled her bloodstream with adrenaline, the feeling of her blade piercing through flesh and her knuckles cracking against bone, and the smooth motion of every muscle in her body working together to make her a deadly weapon.

South Pyongan had always lived for fighting. But it wasn't until after she'd killed that farmer that she realized why. It had chafed at her in that prison, the feeling of his skull shattering under the rock in her hands. It had stayed with her in a way none of her fights or the Japs she'd offed had- the first Korean she had killed.

She'd been worried that somehow it had killed her passion for violence, no matter how much she told herself he was a traitor. That when Japan came for them, she'd find herself like her brother- unable to lift a finger to defend either of them.

But Korea had swept those doubts away. Him and his cause had made her understand *why* she liked fighting, why killing kempei and real traitors felt so different than killing Guk Gun. It wasn't the violence- it was being able to protect. Herself, her brother, her cousins, their people. And having that cause, an entire country to Liberate and defend, had taught her not just to live for fighting, but to *love* it.

And Korea had never judged her for it. He'd never tried to tell her it wasn't something women should love or acted like it was wrong, or thought it was a sin. He'd treated it like just another weapon in their arsenal, one of the best, until after Liberation.

And she knew now that that wasn't the part of her he'd taken issue with.

Blood sprayed across her face as that tiger-hilted knife went flying past her head, embedding itself in the throat of the man she'd been about to uppercut. South Pyongan yanked it out as she spun, heaving it with deadly accuracy into the skull of the man charging Korea, stealing his kill like he'd stolen hers.

He bared his fangs at her, eye alight, and she beamed back before they whirled apart and away from the gunfire sent at them.

One day it wouldn't be like this. One day every enemy, every traitor and bastard that hurt their people would have to be charged, tried, dealt with by a court. And plenty of them would never die for their crimes. They'd have to let them live, even if it was in prison, because it was what their people wanted, or what they needed to want.

Like Korea had said at the Raktong- they would have to follow the Party line, to re-educate, to forgive. Even if it didn't feel like they were protecting their people the way they wanted.

It wasn't the killing South Pyongan liked. But she knew when the world was more like the one her brother wanted, and they could lay down their guns, she would miss it.

For now, at least, she knew how to protect her country.

South Pyongan prowled along a ravine, hunting for the traitor she'd heard come this way, but was met with only a dead end, a small frozen waterfall clinging to the rock.

'Blegh.'

"Turn around slowly."

The voice made her smirk. "Or what?"

"Or you know damn well *what."*

The province turned to see one of the men standing farther along

the ravine. It looked like he only had a knife and his pistol on him. He was holding this in a shaking hand, the other hanging limply, blood soaking his jacket from shoulder to elbow. A wild light gleamed in his eyes as chest heaved with ragged gasps.

"Weapons down," he panted. "N-"

He didn't have time to say anything else. Korea hit him like shrapnel, exploding down the ravine and right into his back, seizing his gun arm and wrenching it back so his shot went into the sky. With one hand he slammed the man's face into the rock, while the other forced his arm towards him until the joint ripped free from his shoulder with a tearing sound. The traitor screamed as he dropped the gun, and Korea smashed his face off the stone until he stopped.

He dropped him on the ground, then curb-stomped his head, splattering it on the snow like a melon.

Korea looked up, barely winded, his eye flicking over her. "Uninjured?"

South Pyongan raised an eyebrow. "Uh, yeah. Dude got like, two sentences out. Don't think he had time for a bullet."

Her Countryhuman nodded curtly, tension easing. "I eliminated my target. There should only be one left."

"Think he's smart enough to cut his losses?"

"Doubtful." Korea picked up the dropped pistol. "The camp had a radio. I bet he's doubled back to try and make contact with the Yanks."

South Pyongan spun her pistol around her finger. "Let's go show him Daddy Yankee can't save him now. And by the way- you totally stole my kill. *Again."*

"Be faster next time. And stop keeping score."

"You just don't want me to win," she teased, and he shoulder-checked her into the wall.

They made their way back up and over the ridge, listening for any sign of the final traitor.

As they neared the camp, South Pyongan heard a faint, “C’mon, *c’mon.”*

She grinned sharply at Korea. He narrowed his eye with as close to mischief as he got.

The man was crouched over the radio, frantically fiddling with dials. After a second, he groaned in frustration and went to lift the entire thing.

“Heyyy.” South Pyongan’s tone was easy, but she was ready to dodge as the traitor spun around with his rifle.

But he didn’t shoot. He immediately dropped it, raising his hands.

“I surrender.”

South Pyongan paused, disappointed. “Really?”

“I…” He blinked. “Yes, really.”

She recognized his voice. It was Seoko-ri.

“Korea said he would spare us if we surrendered.” His voice wavered. “So I- I surrender.”

“You surrender *now,”* she said tightly, not lowering her gun. “After we’ve already killed everyone else. After you were actively trying to contact the Yanks again. You’re only surrendering because you know you’re fucked.”

“Yes,” he readily admitted, making her blood burn. “I don’t want to die.”

“Do you know what your little squad of traitors has done?” she hissed. “I’m sure you do, since you were just fine with letting those two dog’s sons rape that woman earlier.”

He flinched. "I didn’t want to-“

"Shut the fuck *up,"* she growled, stepping forward. "She isn't the first chick you freaks have taken. I've been seeing all the reports about the random rapes and looting you've been doing. And the murders."

She might not read the news unless she had to, but reports were different. She needed to know what was being done to the people of her province so she could avenge it.

"Not me," he denied. "I never hurt a woman, I promise. And I only stole to survive."

"You stole from *refugees."*

Even at her lowest, South Pyongan had never stolen from someone that didn't look like they could afford it (unless they deserved it). She'd never know if that wasn't just her brother's influence, but she hoped it wasn't.

"And the only reason you have to 'survive' at all is because you're letting the Yanks treat you like a trained animal to sabotage our country," she accused, stalking forward until her pistol was pressed to his chest. "And I know there's no fucking way you were just sitting with your thumb up your ass while the rest of your squad murdered our militia members."

His eyes darted for his gun on the ground, but he didn't move for it.

"You are a *traitor."*

"I surrender." His voice wavered as he squeezed his eyes shut. *"Please."*

South Pyongan waited for Korea to emerge behind her and stay her hand. But the trees were silent.

She bared her teeth, grip tightening on her pistol so hard it was painful.

'CRACK!'

Seoko-ri slumped to the ground, his temple bloodied where the butt of her gun at struck. South Pyongan's frustration surged, and she kicked him in the ribs, then did it again.

"Bastard!" she hissed as Korea's footsteps finally padded towards her.

He looked dispassionately down at the man as his province breathed heavily.

South Pyongan glared at the traitor's unassuming, average face, then sucked in a breath.

When she spoke, she managed to sound casual. "He probably has information we can use."

Korea nodded.

She didn't know whether he had been testing her. She didn't know if she'd passed. His face gave nothing away.

"Tie him up," he ordered, then added, "Hogtie him. Tight."

But she *did* know he was still pissed about being tied up.

Which was why it was so weird he had been.

South Pyongan pursed her lips as she watched Korea walk over to the radio, crouching to examine it. But she was distracted from her suspicion by the machine crackling.

"-come in," a male voice said in English, heavily distorted by static. *"You- not to contact- set date."*

Korea fiddled with the dials, getting a slightly clearer signal, though the trees and mountains between them and Cho Island still made it choppy.

"Come in, unit."

Korea narrowed his eye in thought, but South Pyongan didn't have to think. She clapped her hands, rubbing her palms together

vigorously as she pouted her bottom lip at him like Hae.

He rolled his eye, but sat back, allowing her to swoop in and pick up the transceiver. South Pyongan pounced on it, clearing her throat and readying her best English.

"I'm afraid your traitors are all dead," she said, smirking at the sudden silence on the other side. *"Tell America he's next."*

With that, she smashed the transceiver on the ground.

Korea *'tch'*ed in irritation as he switched off the radio. "Did you have to do that?"

"Did you want to take a turn insulting their mothers?"

He *'tch'*ed again, and South Pyongan grinned in realization.

"Wait. You want to give this to Pretty Boy, right? So he can use it for whatever he's working on."

"Don't call him that," Korea grumbled, packing the radio away into its case. "He's arrogant enough." He suddenly glared at her. "Were you snooping in my quarters?"

"Just in China's things," she assured him.

If only because Korea took his with him when he didn't sleep in the bunker.

South Pyongan tied Seoko-ri up, his arms and legs bent behind his back, maybe just a *liiittle* more uncomfortably than necessary. As she tightened the ropes, her eyes settled on his face.

Blood smeared his temple. The ground around them was soaked with more of it from the traitors that hadn't been as lucky, freezing into the rock and snow, glistening like spilled oil in the moonlight.

"Korea?"

"What?"

She shouldn’t bring it up. She should just let this wipe the slate. Let it go.

She sat back, not looking at him as she tried to keep her tone light and impersonal. “This was fun, and I'll never say 'no' to offing Yankee dogs."

She *really* didn't want to get into another awkward conversation with him. But his silence from earlier was becoming another canker in her mouth. If she didn't speak now, she might end up doing something even more embarrassing later.

"But I kind of said I was… stressed about not ever being able to be anything but a soldier, and you brought me out here to massacre a bunch of guys.”

Korea sighed, setting down the radio to look at her. “Because you *are* a damn good soldier, South Pyongan. Look at what you did.”

He jerked his chin to the bodies scattered around the clearing. “You eliminated most of the enemy combatants, freed me and our civilian, and did it all without a scratch on you. That is three people you protected. And more by getting rid of these bastards.

“You can’t save everyone,” he said, and South Pyongan realized she’d been twisting the flag around her arm again. “But you saved people today.”

If only she could have saved them then.

She wasn’t dragging her tank crew around. She was carrying them, and she would keep training that muscle until she could do it with ease.

She just wished she didn’t have to.

South Pyongan could feel Korea’s gaze burning into the back of her head as he said, “The *only* reason you couldn’t protect your brother is because you weren’t there.”

Her Countryhuman padded over, crouching on the other side of the hogtied man, his voice getting firmer. “And if you truly want to

be responsible, then you are not going to be able to be there for him more often than not. Your provinces come first. Our people come first. *Korea* comes first."

South Pyongan lowered her gaze, murmuring, "There are more important things."

Korea nodded grimly. "Yes."

They were silent for a moment, the wind picking up, rustling the branches above. A thin skin of ice crept slowly across the puddles of blood.

"North Pyongan can take care of himself now," he said after a moment. "He doesn't need your protection. And that is good. You shouldn't have to *need* to protect him. You should only have to want to."

"I want to," she said, finally lifting her head, then dropping it again immediately. "And I want to protect our people, too. But…"

She gritted her teeth, forcing the words out. "I'm not sure I can if it's not with a gun in my hand."

"There are always going to be people like this." Korea nodded to the traitor between them. "Self-serving, cowardly, violent. And even if there weren't, there will always be countries like America trying to tear us down and make us slaves again. Korea is always going to need soldiers."

She still didn't look at him. "But that's not all you need *us* to be."

"No," he admitted. "I need you to be politicians. I need you to be able to champion our people, and guide them towards the future with me. And I know you are capable of that."

South Pyongan flicked her eyes to his.

His expression was serious. "You are aggressive, willing to skirt the law, and usually know how to get what you want."

Those… didn't really sound like compliments. Not when they

came from him.

"And you attract people," Korea continued. "You know how to rub elbows. Those are all part of being a politician."

South Pyongan raised a brow. "Even the 'skirting the law' part?"

"We are bound to the same laws as our people," her Countryhuman said. "But our enemies aren't. And even after this war is over, we are still going to be fighting a class war. Without national interests to protect, our patriotic capitalists will turn to their class interests. Factionalists like Jo Man-sik will seek to disrupt us."

For once, it didn't sound like he was using the man's name as a 'gotcha.'

"And if we want to win, then we need at least a few comrades willing and able to fight dirty." Korea inclined his head at her. "And so long as you continue to curb your liberal tendencies, that can be you."

She was definitely willing to fight dirty.

"I can't trust that other comrades won't fall prey to the lure of money or power," he continued. "But I *know* you won't."

It was... kind of surprising to hear that. South Pyongan obviously never would, but she would have thought that if someone asked Korea which Provincehuman was most likely to take a bribe or embezzle, he would have said her.

Korea stood, looking down at her. "You are *already* adapting, South Pyongan. You aren't the same province you were last year. And if you don't grow lax in your efforts, you won't be as you are now next year. I'm sure of that.

"Politics is just another battle. Learn new tactics."

He didn't let her look away, holding out his hand, and she reluctantly took it, even though she didn't need help up. The blood frozen to both their gloves crackled.

"And you *are* capable of being more than a soldier." Korea sounded suddenly fierce as he crushed her hand in his grip. "The Premier trusts you to contribute to the rebuilding of our cities, your sports expertise can easily get you a position in coaching our athletes, and you could even go into law, if you wanted. You're the only one that can recite the Criminal Code to me."

She had to be able to, just in case he tried to pin a crime on her as an excuse to get rid of her for a few months.

Korea stepped around the unconscious man so he was standing next to her, the look in his eye uncomfortably open, just like back at the Raktong.

"You are *always* going to be a soldier," he told her. "But one day, the war will end. And it won't be the first thing you are anymore."

South Pyongan had never yearned for a peaceful life. Even in her and her brother's most idyllic visions of the future before they'd met Korea, she'd still been beating up Japs that came to bother them, or annoying nobles or politicians in a free Korea. The life of the past five years that her brother had described with yearning- the attending meetings and doing paperwork- had been boring for her. Once it became obvious the Yank and Rhee weren't going to peacefully Reunify with them, she couldn't wait for the war to start again so she could get back to making a difference, doing what she was good at. She wasn't sure she could ever see a world in which she wasn't a soldier first.

But it would be nice to never have to see friends die in front of her again.

Korea's grip tightened so much it hurt as he pierced her with his fervent gaze. "I promise."

South Pyongan finally looked him fully in the eye. The blood on his face had dried, staining his eyepatch and crusting to his cheeks like bloody tears. His tunic was stiff with it, and neither the cold cut of the wind or the bullet wound in his arm seemed to affect him.

Something in his voice and the look in his eye made her have a

brief, rare moment of outrospection.

"And what about you?"

He blinked, like he didn't understand what she meant.

"Are you going to be able to, y'know." She gestured awkwardly with her free hand. "Not be a soldier first, too?"

Korea released her, straightening his shoulders. "I am not a soldier first. I am Korea."

And that couldn't exactly change.

South Pyongan looked down at her hand, rubbing her gloved fingers together, watching the flakes of rusty blood shed from them.

"You really think I have what it takes to be a politician?" she asked eventually. "You're not just trying to make me feel better?"

"I know you do," Korea said, back to assured, no longer with that almost desperate edge to his voice. "And even if you didn't, I would find another use for you. You're a valuable asset, South Pyongan. Korea will always need you."

South Pyongan crossed her arms, looking away. If she'd had fuzz in her chest at the Raktong, she had full-blown kittens in there now.

She wanted to throw them in a sack and drown them. She *hated* that he could do this to her.

'Gross gross gross ***gross.'***

"Also," he said, turning to hoist the radio and its generator into his arms. "I have never once wanted to make you feel better in my life."

"Good," she muttered, nudging the unconscious traitor in the ribs. "Because I've never needed you to."

"Good." Korea gave a military nod, starting off. "Pick him up and let's go."

“Why do I have to carry him?” she protested, relieved that their agreement to pretend these kinds of conversations had never happened remained firm.

Even if she couldn’t pretend to herself.

“Because *you* knocked him out.”

Huffing, South Pyongan heaved the man into her arms. All four of his limbs being hogtied behind his back made it a little difficult. She had to hold him in her arms like he was a huge dressed chicken. She *really* hoped he didn’t wake up while they were like this.

Actually, he might not wake up at all. He’d been out for a pretty long time.

“You just don’t want me to drop your little buddy’s radio,” she muttered, stepping over a body.

She guessed they’d come back after to gather the corpses and the weapons up. Getting the civilian woman home had to take priority right now.

“He is not my ‘buddy,’” Korea replied icily.

“So you just let him sleep in your room for fun?”

“I am *keeping* an *eye* on him.”

South Pyongan hummed skeptically, making him growl at her.

She snorted, her eyes straying to the ropes she’d cut off Korea as they started down the slope.

“General, this guy is heavy,” she said casually.

“Maybe you're still out of shape,” he deadpanned.

She clicked her tongue. “Says you. You’re wasting away of old age as we speak.”

“I am not.”

“Oh yeah? Then how’d those bastards catch you so easily?”

Korea *‘tch’*ed, not answering as he picked up his pace.

Her smirk lost its sharpness as she felt a little burst of-

‘Ugh, ***grossssssss.’***

Korea had always been her biggest critic, even during the Occupation. But he’d trusted she could get him out of there, and more meaningfully, that she could save that woman. So if he trusted that she could learn how to be comfortable in a suit instead of a uniform…

She guessed she could.

And also she was amazing at everything she ever did ever. So obviously she could be amazing at that, too.

Even if she wasn’t *as* amazing at it, and it would never be as exciting as nights like this. She knew her thrills weren’t as important as creating a world where no one drowned trapped inside a tank or was dragged into the mountains and raped by enemy guerrillas. A world where people that didn’t want to fight, like her brother and so many of their comrades, wouldn’t have to.

She would put down her gun, if it meant they could, too.

If politics was a fight, South Pyongan would learn to conquer it, to protect their people. She *was* the best at fighting, after all.

“General,” she said again as they passed by the guy that had fallen down the slope. “That had to hurt.”

Korea gave a long-suffering sigh, *finally* taking her bait. “Stop saying that.”

His province grinned victoriously. “You want us to cut religious language out, right?”

“Comrade Kim Il-sung would hate that.”

“He’d find it funny.”

“He would *tell* you he is a man, not a god, and not to use his name as an oath.”

“Yeah,” she said. “After he chuckled.”

Korea scowled at her over his shoulder. “Don’t say that around him.”

“I’m gonna.”

“And *I* am going to put *you* up against the wall.”

“Before or after I have to dig latrines?”

“Before. You’re getting buried in them after.”

South Pyongan hummed thoughtfully. “Making me dig my own grave. Rhee would be proud.”

She laughed as he hip-checked her, dramatically stumbling, laughing again as Korea short-circuited trying to figure out how to catch her without dropping the radio before shoving her again as he realized she was faking.

Even if politics wasn’t as exciting as war, at least she’d always have annoying Korea to keep her entertained.

North Pyongan: Hate the sin, love the sinner.
South Pyongan: That's fucked up, bro. You can't say that to Kangwon.
North Pyongan: I'm talking about you, and the sin I'm referring to is murder.

Takaichi Sanae deporting foreigners to protect our sovereignty. How about instead of doing that to poor people fleeing from countries that have been subjected to wars and poverty by nations that Japan supports and also cause no harm at all to national sovereignty, we protect it from THE LITERAL COUNTRY THAT OWNS OUR MILITARY AND HAS BASES IN OUR BORDERS. Then there’s the right-wing American freaks

saying ‘based Japan’ while talking about visiting and moving here. YOU ARE THE UNDESIRABLE FOREIGNERS. Sometimes it is so clear when a white gaijin views Japanese people as white. I know it wouldn’t solve systemic issues, but it would be nice if she got to meet her idol’s fate. And then everyone else in the LDP.

Soldier On

North allowed South Pyongan a rest day once they got back to Pyongyang. She'd earned it. Asking if he was sure proved that.

It made him uneasy to leave her sleeping alone in the bunker when her cousins were either in their provinces or Pyongyang. He considered locking the door, then decided against it, settling on keeping watch for an hour while she was in the deepest part of her sleep, before setting off for the capital to send her bodyguards over and make his report to the Premier.

The man said nothing about his impromptu extermination mission, or on the lack of support he'd taken with him. He only gave him that fondly resigned look and reminded him to be more cautious.

"The guerrilla unit was large," North reported. "Larger than a unit operating in stealth should be. I believe there's a chance the reports of multiple units operating in South Pyongan province were all this one, and they converged either for new orders, or the attempt to abduct North Pyongan."

Kim Il-sung nodded thoughtfully. "We will monitor incidents in the area, and see if they decrease significantly. In the meantime, our comrades will get what they can from the prisoner you brought in."

"South Pyongan brought him." North should be pleased his province had shown restraint.

His Premier's lips lifted in a small smile. "Comrade South Pyongan is developing quickly."

North glowered at him. "It's because you say things like that that she's always going on about being your favorite province."

"The Chairman of the Worker's Patty can't engage in

provincialism," the Chairman said solemnly. "I am simply stating a fact about my birth province."

Damn it. He probably *would* laugh at her 'General' exclamations.

North shook his head, standing. "I'll be delaying my surprise on-the-spot guidance at the ammunition factory until tomorrow. I should be at the hospital for most of the day."

He'd put his heavy winter officer's coat on over his uniform to hide the blood and bullet wound. But he still had to get it stitched up. His arm likely wasn't going to work right for the next few days.

"I would never presume to order my country to do anything," his Premier started, clasping his hands on his desk. "But I would advise he takes a rest day as well. As he hasn't slept in over twenty-four hours."

Which was why he was delaying his on-the-spot guidance and spending the day visiting the sick and wounded. It required less clarity than viewing production manifestos and going over quotas.

"I'm fine," he clipped, adding before the man could counter it, "When South Pyongan gives you her report, tell her to conduct a personal survey of Pyongyang for you, and all of the provincial capitals in the north eventually. There's been more destruction since we went over the drafts in May. Don't tell her the order comes from me."

His Premier didn't ask why, just shook his head and agreed.

North worked his jaw, then said, "And the proposal for showing leniency to voluntary surrenders has my full support. If the unit we encountered had been given an option like that beforehand, I think we could have seen more surrenders."

He went for the door, adding, "And have one of the interrogators tell the prisoner the name of the woman he was letting his compatriots violate was Kim Su-hwa. She was nineteen, and taking care of her sick father. He died of hypothermia trying to find her."

Grim now, his General assured him, "It will be done."

North let out a subtle breath as he left the office.

He should be glad South Pyongan was mature enough to take prisoners now.

"There you are." China peeled off the wall as he rounded the corner of the underground tunnel.

"You were eavesdropping on me," North said flatly, not stopping.

He still didn't entirely know what China did when he wasn't around. He'd stopped having agents attempt to tail him. No matter how loyal they were, it was still a risk.

'Not that they ever managed to.'

And he suspected the other country's actions were mostly... beneficial anyway. *Aside* from the eavesdropping.

"On matters of foreign state? No, never." China padded after him. "You know, I would have come with you on your little mission. But you were out the door and in what used to be my Jeep before I could even grab my rifle."

North tossed the keys over his shoulder, hearing a jingle as China unfortunately caught them. "It was a classified mission."

Neither he nor South Pyongan could have said what they needed to with someone else around. It had been hard enough with just the two of them (and the unconscious reactionary).

"I'm looking forward to hearing about it from your province."

The Korean huffed. He'd told her to tell the others they had brought a squad with them, but hadn't said not to talk about it at all, like he would have a real classified mission. He knew trying to stop her from bragging was an impossible task.

He spent the day in the hospital as planned, going over sign language materials with Gangwon and speaking with patients. He even caved to Kangwon begging on his knees to treat his wound (mostly because he'd cornered him again while North was waiting

for Kim Yong-hwan).

The fight- one-sided slaughter, really- had eased the tension in him somewhat. It shouldn't have, but it did.

He still didn't let his province clean his burns, or even look at them, only shrugging his tunic off the injured shoulder. His tension might have eased, but his skin still felt prickly from being tied up. He knew any fingers on his skin where he couldn't see would set him off, even Kangwon's. And he was exhausted enough that he knew his reaction wouldn't be proportional.

And even if he was more relaxed, the war was still ongoing. They were still stuck on a stalemate America was making impassable. Kangwon had enough burdens to deal with.

North gave him one more by asking him to visit South Pyongan's province to speak with Kim Su-hwa.

"It doesn't have to be immediately," he told him. "Take the chance the next time you deploy with the Mobile Medical Corps."

Kangwon set aside his used scissors and spool of surgical thread as his Countryhuman shrugged his coat back on. "Of course."

North lowered his voice, though they were alone in the room. "And keep an eye open for suspicious cases."

It was winter. People got sick. Their completely destroyed infrastructure made that worse. But after last year, any aberrant illness had to be identified immediately.

Kangwon was the only province that knew about the strange flights that had been taking place over the northern half of the north since last month. American fighter jets would drop bombs in Chagang and the Hamgyongs, not near the electric plants or military installations, but seemingly just near isolated villages. Some of them were real, but most of them were pamphlets. It made sense the Yanks wanted to try and turn the villagers against them, but something about it sent a prickle of premonition down North's spine.

Most alarmingly, one woman had hiked all the way to Kanggye to purchase stationary and a pencil, and send him a letter about what her and her son had seen in the Kangnam Mountains- a bomb that had dropped a swarm of beetles.

North had sent her back the cost of the letter, as well as the expensive paper and writing tool, scraping into his funds to give her a bit of extra, too. But she couldn't have known he would do that. She had spent her limited savings to send him a letter that either held a lie too outlandish for her to think he'd believe it, or because what she had witnessed had worried her enough that she thought her Countryhuman needed to be told directly.

And he knew her. She had said she was the mother of the boy 'your comrade' had given goji berries to this time last year.

He didn't think it was a lie. Which *meant* it was a threat.

Kangwon solemnly nodded. "No one's caught anything out of the normal yet. But the Ministry of Health is making sure everyone's on high alert."

The anti-epidemic measures had been distributed and were being reinforced vigorously. The feats of healthcare workers were being lauded in magazines and newspapers, mass hygiene operations were being carried out, and they were rebuilding as many clinics as possible.

But they couldn't produce enough medicine, and they didn't have enough doctors. Most of the ones they did have were underqualified, with no formal training. Their best had been killed when the hospitals were bombed, or by the reactionaries during the temporary withdrawal.

"Korea."

Kangwon interrupted North's grim thoughts, and he realized his hands were balled into fists.

His province smiled at him reassuringly. "Let us handle the medical stuff. You have enough to worry about."

"I *need* to worry about all of it," North clipped.

Kangwon sighed like the Premier, but left it at that. "I've got to get back to work. If you're going to talk to more patients, could you talk to Sip Tal-sun?"

He had mentioned the name before. "The one with the broken back?"

"Yeah."

North's jaw clenched. "No."

Kangwon moved subtly between him and the door. "Korea, he's getting discharged tomorrow, and I think he's a suicide risk. I'm going to keep checking in on him, but I can't do it every day. And I've already said everything I can. Hearing it from his Countryhuman might make it stick."

Crossing his arms, North said, "Kangwon, I am the *last* person that can give advice on how to live permanently crippled."

"You've done it before."

"For missing limbs. Not *lifelong paralysis."*

A missing hand or arm was almost nothing. A leg, too, could be adapted to with a cane or wooden replacement. Someone could still walk around that way, work the fields or in a factory, go to the store, even serve in certain military positions. North knew how to temper that loss with words.

A broken spine was different.

"Just talk to him," Kangwon said pleadingly. "Please."

North almost denied him again, before exhaling. "Fine."

"Thank you," Kangwon said, picking up his medical tray. "He's in Room 5."

North found the door, then stood outside it, grinding his teeth,

considering just leaving. Eventually he steeled himself and went in before a nurse could catch him lurking.

Sip Tal-sun was lying on his bed, the only thing he *could* do. His cheeks were sallow and his brown eyes listless as he stared at the wall. An aboveground portion of the military hospital had been rebuilt, but rooming the man there likely couldn't be risked. If the hospital was targeted again, he wouldn't be able to get to the shelter in time.

His head slowly turned to face North. "Comrade Korea," he croaked.

His arms pushed at the bed as he tried to sit up. But the dead weight of his remaining leg didn't allow him to move more than an inch. His shoulders slumped as he uttered a shaky breath, raising the edge of his hand to his brow in a bitter salute.

He looked thin and haggard, even with the rations and exercises the doctors would have been making sure he got.

"At ease," North said, shutting the door. He took a few steps in, but kept his distance from the bed.

Sip Tal-sun's hand lowered to the bedsheets. "I already received my discharge from the army."

"There is nothing dishonourable about a medical discharge," North told him, hearing the current under his words. "And that isn't why I'm here."

The man's lips twisted in a humourless smile. "Let me guess- Doctor Kangwon sent you then?"

There was no point in lying. "Yes."

"He's worried about me."

"Yes," North admitted. "Should he be?"

Sip Tal-sun's eyes fell on the flat part of his sheets where his other leg should have been. He didn't respond for a long moment.

He hadn't even been allowed the dignity of being paralyzed, but remaining whole. North's scar itched under the skin.

"I don't have any plans to kill myself," Sip Tal-sun said eventually. "But I don't see how I'm supposed to keep on living."

"You have a family," North reminded him. He had gotten Kangwon to give him a situation report on the man before he left. "Your wife and mother visit you almost every day. And you have a son."

"A family I can't defend," the man said bitterly. "Look at me." He cast a hand at his useless lower half. "If a Yank or some reactionary kicked down the front door, I couldn't do shit to stop him. I'd have to watch as he-"

He bared his teeth in anguish at the thought, lowering his chin to his chest, his eyes squeezed tight.

North tried not to shift in place.

He shouldn't be the one in here. Not when the idea of being unable to move, unable to protect himself or his provinces or people was his worst nightmare. Not when even looking at the bedbound man made his chest grow tight.

Being blinded entirely was one of the worst things he could imagine happening to him. Being paralyzed was worse than that. The idea of being unable to fetch his own food and water, of needing someone to bathe him and take him to the toilet, being completely dependent on someone while knowing he could never make up for it, being unable to work or govern or *fight*...

North would rather die. As Korea, he wouldn't be able to. He would have to persevere. But if he was this man, he couldn't say he wouldn't throw himself into the river as soon as he was discharged.

'He couldn't even do that.' Even his suicide would have to rely on someone else leaving a knife too near his bed.

North didn't let any of his feelings or the vice around his lungs show on his face.

"You wouldn't be able to defend them," he acknowledged the truth. "But that isn't the only thing a man is good for to his family. Was your marriage a chosen marriage?"

"It was a match," Sip Tal-Sun said. "But we love each other."

North nodded. "Then your wife shouldn't leave you just because you can't wield a gun anymore."

"She's going to have to take care of me for the rest of my life," the man rasped, and North could tell he was fighting tears. "How is that fair to her?"

It wasn't.

"You took care of her and the rest of your family, and families like yours all across Korea by fighting," North said firmly. "You drove the Japanese from our country with the Anti-Japanese People's Guerilla Army, fought Rhee's goons during the skirmishes at the Parallel, and without your Unit 256, our army wouldn't have held Height 1211 for as long as we did. Your wife should be honoured to take care of a veteran of the People's Army."

Sip Tal-sun looked down at the sheets.

North knew it was the 'take care' that was the problem. But there was no other way to spin it. The man wouldn't be recovering. Whether it was his wife, his mother, or his son and his future family, Sip Tal-sun would need to be taken care of forever. The head of a household, the one that should be responsible for safeguarding it, reduced to someone that couldn't even chop wood for the fire. All because of a bullet that would have done next to nothing if it had struck just a centimeter to the side.

One bullet. That was all it took to end a life, even if you were lucky enough to survive it.

"You don't need to be a soldier to have worth," North said, and South Pyongan flickered across his mind. "You can serve your country in other ways."

Even as he said it, he knew he was lying. For others it could be

true. As instinctively horrified as he was by the idea of being immobile, North knew that it didn't make any of their comrades that were worthless. He knew people that had lost both their legs during bombing raids and were still contributing to the war effort. They wrote articles or patriotic poems or stories, or made art to bolster morale and hatred of the enemy. Some even taught classes, some on subjects they could no longer perform.

But Sip Tal-sun wasn't like that. He wasn't a creative, a teacher, or any kind of intellectual. He was a soldier, a factory man, according to Kangwon. The only way he knew how to live was by fighting and working. Neither of which he could now do.

Sip Tal-sun echoed his thoughts, looking up at him with glistening eyes. "I don't think I can."

Fighting his body, North stepped closer to the bed, looking the man in the eye. *"Try.* If not for yourself, then for your family. And if not for them, then for your country."

He made himself place a hand on Sip Tal-sun's thin shoulder, wasted not from starvation or illness, but from despair.

"Korea has lost enough comrades," North told him, seized now with the opposite urge to dig his nails into the man's skin. "We can't afford to lose another loyal soldier, no matter what state he's in. You didn't give up when the Japanese drove our army from Korea. You didn't give up with the Yankees had us up against the Amnok, and you didn't give up defending Height 1211 until the end."

It was easier not to give up when you could fight back.

"Don't give up now," he said fervently, giving in to the desire to grip him tight. "Try to find another way to live."

Sip Tal-sun's fingers twisted in the cotton sheets, his face screwed up. He only responded with a choked nod, and North knew it was because he couldn't speak without crying.

He released him, stepping back, the discomfort seeping back in. He didn't say anything else. Sip Tal-sun was a soldier. The most he

could do now was leave before he saw his tears.

North fled the room, then the hospital, unable to stand the way the walls had started closing in on him.

He would go to City Hospital One instead, where the bulk of injuries were less grievous, and a broken spine was less likely to mean the end of everything you had been.

And still it was an endless flood of missing limbs, ruptured organs, and burns more severe than his, if only because they could never truly heal. Women caught in bombing runs on their way home from the factories, their bones crushed under rubble; men filled with shrapnel from the rail lines they'd been fixing as the bombs hit; children with charred, dead patches of flesh from the napalm used to carpet the hills in an attempt to wipe out their storehouses. One boy couldn't stop crying, no matter how much his mother hushed him. His cries still echoed in the halls, even after the nurse had used some of their precious sedatives on him.

By the time it had grown dark, and North stepped out into the shadowed, empty streets, any hint of relief that last night had brought him had been beaten from his body.

He shouldn't have been eased at all. The reactionaries had been small, in the scheme of things. Killing them hadn't ended the war or even gotten them closer to it. All it had done was save a handful of his people and resources. He shouldn't feel relief at simply doing his duty.

There was a drone in the distance. It should have been barely audible, but North's ear slits had become attuned to the sound. There would be another run tonight.

The burns on his body all throbbed at once in anticipation, making him grit his teeth as it felt like the edges of that gash tightened.

Kangwon had scolded him for not telling Kim Yong-hwan that he'd been shot, giving her and his province time to see other patients while he walked around with a hole in his arm. But even if

North hadn't known they had more important matters to attend to, it wouldn't have been a priority.

He couldn't feel it. The round had struck a burn. He'd had to dig the bullet out of dead flesh. Every time he thought he almost felt a sting from the good nerves, it was swiftly drowned out by the sea of fire the rest of his skin had become.

North attempted to go to Jonsung complex to work, but he caught his Premier just as he was leaving the office, pointedly locking it while looking him in the eye.

The Countryhuman had his own key, but he didn't bother. The man would just come back in an hour to try and convince him to sleep, and he needed his rest.

So North left the underground again, back into the night where the bombs had started to fall.

Wearily, he realized that Chagang would have driven the others back over an hour ago, and that he had returned the Jeep keys to China.

Sighing, North started off down the road, trying not to think about Sip Tal-sun in that hospital cot.

He'd only gone a hundred metres before he heard tires on the dirt behind him. He looked back as he moved to the side, hand drifting to his gun.

Then he dropped it, glaring as the Jeep pulled up beside him.

"Need a ride?" China asked, leaning out the window. "I think we're going the same way."

North wanted to deny it, but with the planes circling, he couldn't afford to. If China got airstruck, he'd have to drag him go the hospital, which meant he wouldn't have time to wash and sew his tunic tonight.

"I'll drive."

"I'm already driving."

North yanked open the driver's door, shoving China over on the bench so he could get behind the wheel, immediately pressing the gas.

"I was waiting at the rendezvous, but you didn't show up," China hummed, watching the bombers out the open window.

"Don't talk."

He of course didn't listen, nattering on about nothing while North tuned him out.

SH was unfortunately on watch, so as he pulled in and started to cover the Jeep with the tarp, he was already being chided.

"I can't believe you just took off like that," she huffed, pinning down the final corner of the tarp. "South Pyongan says you were fighting reactionaries. You could have brought me with you."

If anyone needed an outlet besides him and the female Pyongan, it was the Southern Hamgyong. But she also would have pestered him into taking a squad.

"We had it handled," he said.

SH put her hands on her hips. "South Pyongan says you got shot."

'Snitch.'

"It was a minor wound," North said, walking by her for the door.

She followed. "Give me your tunic. I can wash and mend it for you."

North gave her a sharp glare over his shoulder.

Blowing a puff of air from her lips, SH said, "I'm not being a slave to tradition. But I bet you haven't slept in around two days. Am I right?"

"No," North muttered.

"Sources would say yes," China hummed, and North snapped, "Get out of here!"

"Very well," the other man signed. "I'll see you in our room."

"My room."

China was already gone.

North couldn't *stand* him.

SH crossed her arms. "I'm just offering to do your laundry so you can get some rest."

North eyed the open-air kitchen. "Who did dishes tonight?"

His province pursed her lips.

"I'll do my own laundry." He turned to go, but SH caught his sleeve.

"Korea," she said, her attitude gone. "Please be more careful. For some reason, you and South Pyongan running off in the middle of the night makes me feel like you didn't really have a plan."

"I always have a plan." Even if some were more... developed than others.

SH hummed doubtfully. "Also you know South Pyongan's a terrible liar. I don't think you really had a unit with you."

"Good thing it doesn't matter what you think."

His province sighed, releasing his sleeve. "Just please take better care of yourself. We need you."

"I'll be fine," North muttered, hauling open the bunker door.

"Goodnight."

"I'm not sleeping," he tossed over his shoulder. "I have laundry to

do."

When he opened the door to his room, he saw that China had already discovered what he had left next to his pile of dissembled electronics this morning. He had the main receiver/transmitter in his lap, and the portable generator deployed in the corner.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked excitedly.

"A radio," North deadpanned, dropping his bag of personal items in his corner, and picking up his summer uniform.

China's enthusiasm was undimmed. "A GRC-9! It has far better range than my SCR-300, and it's incredibly durable. The only issue is the low power supply- you have to crank the generator almost continuously, and it's a two-person job, inconvenient for the field. And it's heavy."

North knew that well. With the radio, the generator, and the accessories bag, he had to have been carrying over a hundred pounds down through the mountains, along with Kim Su-hwa clinging to his arm.

"But I could strip it for parts for my handheld radios," China continued enthusiastically. "It's a shame the handheld portion is smashed, but I can still finally seal up the battery casings, *and* this might be just what I need to finish increasing the range. The generator might have given me an idea, too, if I can implement it right."

"And who said you could strip it for parts?" North asked coolly, his spare clothes and bag in hand.

China smiled. "It's for me, isn't it?"

The Korean *'tch'*ed, turning his back to him. "One of the soldiers in our unit found it. I don't have any use for it."

There was a knowing lilt in China's voice. "Well, make sure to tell that comrade I say thank you."

North snuck a look over his shoulder before he left. For once,

China wasn't already looking. He was absorbed in examining the foreign radio, running his fingers over the tubes and dials, eyes alight.

Smug, North went to do his laundry.

Basically how South works is that he's claustrophobic, so will have panic attacks if put in small spaces. His manor is almost entirely an open floor plan because of this, with wide windows. While North just can't stand being trapped. He would be okay crawling into a small tunnel or hiding in a box, so long as he can get out. But if you put him in a windowless, doorless room, he would freak out, even if it was the size of a warehouse. It's why he doesn't like tight clothes or being restrained in any way.

By the way, the Americans using island bases to communicate with reactionary guerrilla bands in the North is real. There's a book on it called 'White Tigers, My Secret War In North Korea' by Colonel Ben Malcolm from the US Army. I've only been able to read excerpts, but they were operating up to 125 miles into the North. The Yankees would give the gangs limited training, then send them in as basically suicide groups to save Yanks downed from their planes, conduct sabotage, and (the author admits this) assassinate Communists and village chiefs that didn't support America or the South. These orders came directly from American officers. They also largely fell apart in January 1952 because the leader 'became a dictator,' started using nepotism, and got assassinated by his fellows, leading to mass infighting and defections, including likely one of the most formerly loyal to the group. The KPA chased most of them off the mainland and fucked up their island headquarters soon after. Shocking!

Also while looking at a board where some American men were discussing the GRC-9 being used in the war, one man makes a comment like, 'I didn't know we were operating guerrilla units. I thought just the commies were. I heard about one of our tanks gunning down an entire group of refugees because they couldn't 'sort out the NK in it.' Not apparently the only incident

of this kind, but I don't have any interest in investigating that further.'
And isn't that something? These men who are so obsessed with identifying the exact makes of radios being used during the war, not interested in the slightest about the kinds of crimes their army used that technology to commit, or the lives lost to it. In his eyes, the value of a radio is higher than that of Korean refugees.

He also calls the reactionaries 'primitive agents who may have otherwise never had contact with a radio.' Yes Korea was 'underdeveloped' at that point. I am still fairly sure the majority had heard at least one broadcast in their lives. Even being charitable and assuming he means they never *operated* a radio before, the word primitive sort of cancels that out.

Butterflies Take Wing

“Can we talk?”

Liaoxi turned to North Pyongan, tilting her head. She didn’t look entirely surprised he was asking.

“Verily. Shall we go elsewhere so no one has to listen involuntarily?”

North Pyongan nodded, and they departed the bunker they had just arrived at. With the American bombers hitting the bridges they had built over the river again, People’s Committee members that had been working late were taking shelter inside.

The Premier was insistent that political workers not work overtime, since the State couldn’t afford to pay them for it right now. But North Pyongan knew more than a few stayed in the office far past their eight hours, not reporting the extra time they laboured. He gently reminded them not to burn themselves out when he could, but didn’t outright order them to stop. He knew it gave them comfort, and let them feel like they were contributing as much as they could to the war effort.

As they headed along the river, downstream of the bridges, North Pyongan could still hear the bombs falling.

A bit of guilt tightened his chest. His province was being bombed, crossing guards, airfield workers, and soldiers were likely being killed even as the sounds grew more muted with every step they took out of Sinuiju.

They were at war, and he was worried about confessing his feelings to a woman. It felt petty.

If one of his people had said that to him, he would have told them that they should do what their heart willed *because* they were at war. Anyone could die tomorrow, whether from a bomb, illness,

enemy guerrillas like the kind his sister was hunting, or, as hard as the Party worked to stop it, starvation. This wasn't the time to save feelings for a better day, when you couldn't know if there would be another at all.

But North Pyongan was a province. If he wanted to guide their people instead of follow them, he had to hold himself to different standards.

By the time they reached the place where the Amnok split, flowing around islands as it curved south, he had almost talked himself out of telling Liaoxi the truth.

They stopped at the same time without discussing it, staring out at the broad band of the Amnok, glimmering like black silk under the moon. From here, North Pyongan would have been able to see Dandong, if it wasn't for the blackout the Chinese border villages and cities were observing with them. America wanted an excuse to bomb across the border- they couldn't give him one.

Liaoxi's eyes shone like moonstone as they roamed over the far shore of her sister's province, before flicking to him.

North Pyongan hurriedly looked away, opening then closing his mouth.

Would it be… unprofessional? What if she didn't feel the same way, and he made her uncomfortable? He really didn't want to lose her as a friend.

With no prying eyes around, Liaoxi had taken off her mask. Bathed in moonlight, her citrine skin looked almost silvery-blue, like the scales of the graceful greyling fish that swam in their shared waters. Her slender eyes were squinched expectantly, and a hint of amusement lingered around her bow-shaped lips.

North Pyongan looked away again, out at the sand bars that dotted the river.

Like the islands, many of them had no clear owner. Even after securing their borders after Liberation, both their people and the

Chinese came and went to fish and trade, used to the small mixed communities set up decades ago. Some day Korea and China would likely have to sit down and discuss territorial claims, and decide firmly who they belonged to, and who was allowed to tread on them. But right now, even under the blistering firebombing, Koreans and Chinese still left their island homes at dawn in small sampans to feed their families alongside each other.

North Pyongan knew that there was a very good chance Tae-min was right, and even if Liaoxi did share his feelings, any relationship of theirs would be doomed. It might not even make it past Korea's veto. If it miraculously did, things could become difficult after the war was over, and the Chinese province went home.

But he knew if he didn't say anything now, he would lose out on the chance of there *being* anything to become difficult.

He turned to Liaoxi, who was still patiently waiting.

"Can I ask why it seemed like you didn't want to talk to me ever since you returned from your country?"

The Chinese woman's lips curled up. "You know that I'm not honest. Do you think the truth I would confess?"

"I think you felt badly about hurting me," he said. "And I'd like to know why you did."

Even if he was imagining some of her other signals, he was sure he hadn't been imagining the way her eyes would slide to him as she followed her sister to bed, or the regret in them.

Liaoxi stared into his eyes, and it almost seemed like she might waver. Then she looked out at the river.

"The truth I cannot say. But rest assured 'twas only me getting in my own way." She turned back to him and dipped her head. "I'm sorry for hurting you. It hurt me, too. On that, I speak true."

"So it… didn't have anything to do with me?" he ventured.

She shook his head, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He was glad to know for sure he hadn't offended her somehow. And he hadn't truly expected to get the truth on her cold-hot actions, either. He had just needed to know that she had missed their time together, too.

North Pyongan gathered his courage and doffed his hat. Then he felt foolish for doffing his hat, but realized he couldn't put it back on without looking foolish to match. So he held it tightly to his chest as if passing on condolences to the family of a fallen soldier.

"Comrade Liaoxi," he said, heart fluttering nervously. "I'm not sure if I should say this, but I think if I'm not honest with the both of us, I'll regret it."

"Speak freely," she lilted. "I do like your honesty."

North Pyongan took a deep, calming breath, stifling his urge to pray. If he couldn't even confess to a woman without looking to the Lord, he would never be able to lead their people.

"I like you," he said, squeezing his cap to his chest. "As a friend and… more."

Liaoxi stared at him, and the corners of her lips wavered. North Pyongan went to hastily apologize before he realized her entire face was changing colour, darkening visibly.

It looked like she was trying to remain composed, but then her expression broke and she ducked aside, hiding her face in her hands.

"Too honest!" she squeaked, her real voice breaking through.

The apology bubbling on his lips burst from them as he took a step back. "I'm so sorry. I don't expect anything and it's alright if you don't feel the same way. I just…"

He wrung his hat in his hands, looking at his boots.

"I admire your combat abilities, and how hard you've been working for my people, even though they're not your own, and how you handle Han-jin and Tae-min, and how you can stay composed

enough to recite your cí even on the battlefield, and-“ He cut himself off before he could list the other hundred qualities of hers he admired. “And… I think you’re very beautiful.”

His cheeks warmed as he admitted it. The words sounded too pale for her when the moonbeams were painting her in silvered shadows. He should have written her a poem to get the true depth of his feelings across.

“I… just wanted you to know that,” he finished awkwardly. “Even if you don’t feel the same way, none of that will change. But…” He peered cautiously up at her, hoping she wouldn’t think he was being audacious. “I think you might?”

Liaoxi had stopped hiding her face, and affected her vaguely amused expression again. But her cheeks still looked duskier than the rest of her face.

“I thought that was clear,” she said, and even though her voice sounded steady, he noticed she forgot to finish her ‘too honest’ couplet. “Didn’t your hand I hold all the way here?”

“I…” He was still strangling his hat as he admitted, “Didn’t know if that was just you being friendly. I didn’t want to assume anything.”

The other province sounded distinctly teasing now as she said, “Do women usually hold hands with men just seeking to be friends?” making his face burn more.

He knew they usually didn't, but he had more experience holding a woman’s hand platonically than not- when his female cousins or sister dragged him somewhere, when he joined hands in prayer at church, or when offering comfort to soldiers and those hit by the bombs, giving them something to hold to as they passed.

“I’m sorry, I won’t tease anymore,” Liaoxi giggled as he hid his face the way she had. “Tell me again, and I’ll react how I should for sure.”

It had taken most of his courage the first time. And even though

she had just implied she shared the same feelings, it was even harder to get the words out again.

"I like you."

Liaoxi's face remained steady as she smiled, reaching out to hold his hands. "I like you, too."

North Pyongan's heart swelled like the Amnok in flood season as she finished his rhyme this time, and he squeezed her hands as joyful waters spread through him. Liaoxi squeezed back, teeth breaking through her smile for a pulse-skipping second.

They held hands around his hat as the waters of the river flowed by, almost masking the sound of bombs falling in the background.

When North Pyongan managed to gather his words past the lump in his throat, he asked, "What does this mean?"

"It means I'd like to be with you," Liaoxi said, her composure fully regained, though she still couldn't hide that blush. "And I assume for you, the same rings true."

It did. But still North Pyongan hesitated. "Tae-min and Han-jin were teasing me about you. Tae-min said since I'm Korean and you're Chinese, we would be doomed."

And he didn't even know Liaoxi was a Chinese province.

Liaoxi looked into his eyes for a long moment, her smile a ghost of what it was. Then her fingers wound around his more tightly.

"And he thinks he knows doomed, I assume. But we never know how something ends until it does. And isn't 'never' worse than 'was?'"

North Pyongan considered that. He knew his sister would disagree. But did he?

He knew his heart. Losing Liaoxi as a friend these past two months had hurt. Losing her as more than that would hurt even more.

But they didn't know how something would end until it did. They didn't know it would end at all. This war would tie a thread between their countries forever, no matter what else got in the way. And their Countryhumans were even comrades now. More than that, he could say, if he didn't think Korea would hit him for it.

They didn't have to be doomed.

"I would like to be with you," he finally replied, and her smile returned like the sun rising early. "But I have to ask Korea. And if he says no…"

Liaoxi raised a brow. "No sneaking around behind his back?"

North Pyongan shook his head. "I couldn't betray his trust like that. I'm sorry."

He had just repaired his relationship with Korea. Whether he denied his feelings for Liaoxi for a reasonable reason or an unreasonable one, North Pyongan would respect his decision.

"I can understand that without feeling blue," she said, running her thumb over the back of his hand in a way that suddenly made him incredibly conscious of every inch of them she was touching. "That's one of the things I admire about you. But I would hope if your request he does decline, you would still remain a friend of mine."

"Of course," North Pyongan assured firmly, touched to know she shared his feelings on that, too.

"Then whether or not he grants your request to thee, I think you can call me just 'Liaoxi.'"

North Pyongan couldn't have hid his smile if he tried. "Then you can call me North Pyongan, if we're being so free."

Liaoxi smiled up at him, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight like the dust that shed from a butterfly's wings.

"That works for me."

Before asking Korea for permission, there was someone else North Pyongan had to ask. So when he got back from his province a few days later, after their meager dinner of rations, he waited until everyone else had gone inside, then spoke.

"Sister," he started, looking from the corner of his eye, his hands preoccupied with cleaning their dishes for the night.

"Mmmm?" she- who was supposed to be the one doing them- hummed from where she was doing pull-ups on a sturdy tree branch.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You know I-" She made a grunt of exertion as she pulled herself over the branch. *"Hate* that question. Just ask."

He looked down at the hot water, watching it swirl as he spun the rag through it. "If I had… romantic feelings for someone, would you approve of me being with them?"

There was a crashing sound and a yelp, and he spun around to see her on the ground.

"Are you alright?"

She quickly sprung up, hurriedly dusting off her tunic and crossing her arms, pretending she hadn't just fallen.

"You have romantic feelings- Okay, first of all, why'd you say it like you're Hwang? And second of all, *you* like someone?" It sounded like she was trying to sound laidback, but her incredulity bled through. "Wait, it's not like, the Virgin Mary or some weird Christian thing, is it?"

"No," North Pyongan said, turning back to the dishes, needing to finish them before the water grew cold.

"Then who is it?" his sister demanded, marching over, leaning down to jab his shoulder. "That one chick in Sinuiju? I've got to

warn you, I think if you want permission to date one of our women, you'll probably want to ask SH. Just so you have the advantage when you've got to defend yourself."

"It's… not one of our people," he admitted sheepishly.

The cold air grew a little more frigid.

His sister's voice was dangerous as she said, "You had better not be about to tell me you're having some kind of forbidden romance with some Yankee nurse."

"No," he quickly assured her. "Never."

He could hear the cogs in his sister's head turning as she tried to figure out what options were left.

"Chinese?" she guessed, less venomously than before.

"Sort of. Yes." He set aside another dish, not looking at her.

"Damn it, stop making me guess." She prodded him again. "Just tell me who it is!"

"Liaoxi," he muttered, cheeks hot.

"Hah? Don't mumble."

"Comrade Liaoxi," he said louder, and his sister's eyes widened.

She stared at him. He stared back, eyes just as wide, hands still slowly cleaning a bowl without looking.

"The Chinese province," she said eventually.

"Yes."

"The foreign province that's living with us."

"Yes."

She blinked rapidly. "You realize Korea's going to garrote you, right? Like if you told him that right now, he'd probably

waterboard you in that basin."

"I know," North Pyongan sighed. "But I'm going to ask him for permission anyway. If you say yes."

"Why do *I* have to say yes?" South Pyongan crossed her arms, still looking unnerved. "Why are you asking me for permission like I'm the man of the house? Why are you asking permission at all? Did you knock her up so now you're trying to take responsibility?"

"Please don't talk about her that way," North Pyongan scolded, stopping his hand from reflexively crossing himself. "And we haven't done anything together."

His common sense also told him that was impossible. But even if it wasn't, he believed intimacy should be saved for marriage.

"Sorry," South Pyongan said, starting to pace in tight circles. "It's just- Liaoxi? A Chinese chick, province, whatever. Really?"

"Yes." North Pyongan finished the last dish and stood, drying his hands on a dry cloth. "And I am asking you for permission because you're my sister, and your opinion is important to me."

"Okay, well, my opinion is Korea is going to beat your ass even bluer."

"Please stop pacing."

He reached out and took her shoulders, forcing her to stand still and look him in the eye. Hers skittered away.

"I really like Liaoxi," he said sincerely, and he did feel slightly like a maiden begging her father for permission to marry the man she wanted. "But you are my sister. I'm not asking whether or not I should ask Korea, or for political considerations. I'm asking you if you would personally be comfortable with me courting her."

He could tell she wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea by the way her arms crossed over her chest like a shield, still refusing to look at him.

“Exactly,” she insisted. “I’m your sister, not your dad. My opinion shouldn’t matter. Korea’s probably shouldn’t, either. It’s *your* love life.”

“We both know Korea’s opinion does matter.”

Maybe not if they were humans. But they were provinces, and so was Liaoxi. It mattered.

“And your opinion matters to me.”

His sister heaved a sigh. “Fine.” Her boot tapped on the ground in an erratic staccato before she suddenly demanded, “She’s not seducing you, is she?”

North Pyongan blinked, letting go of her shoulders. “No.”

“You’re sure?” She squinted at him suspiciously. “I think you’d probably be pretty seduceable.”

“I wouldn’t be,” he replied, indignant.

“Please,” she snorted. “You always think chicks that are flirting with you are just being nice. So if you actually think she’s flirting with you or has feelings or something, it’s probably because she’s laying it on thick.”

‘Clearly not thick enough.’ Thinking of a few nights ago, he couldn’t exactly fight the first part of her accusation.

“I know she has feelings for me because she told me,” he corrected, and she nodded victoriously.

“See? Seduction.”

“She isn’t like that.”

If she was trying to seduce him, she would have done a poor job by freezing him out for the couple months

“I bet she is. Like country like province. China’s a seducer. I can tell.” South Pyongan narrowed her eyes at nothing. “Pretty boys

always are.”

“Let’s stay on topic,” he said, guiding her away from a China rant. “Liaoxi isn’t a seductress. I know her feelings are genuine. And so are mine.”

“I just don’t want you-“

His sister cut herself off, finally looking him in the eyes. Hers flicked over him, from top to bottom, then away.

“Whatever,” she said quietly. “You can take care of yourself.”

“Sister-“

She sighed. “If you really don’t think she’s seducing you, I trust you. And if you really like her, I think you should be with her. Or whatever.”

A weight was lifted from North Pyongan’s heart as he lay a hand over it.

“Thank you.”

“Bleh.”

She tried to turn away, but he pulled her back. It needed to be said, even if it made her squirm. He knew because he would need to hear it, too.

“I know you said no more gross talks-“

“So you’re shutting up?”

“-but I want to tell you something.” He squeezed her wrist. “We aren’t normal people. Even if by some miracle Korea gives me his approval, I won’t be leaving the household to start my own. I’m staying in yours.”

“Trust me, you can leave anytime,” she muttered, half-heartedly trying to free her wrist. "More kimchi for me."

He took the hand attempting the liberation, so he was holding both. “Family will always come first. You will always be the most important woman in my life- you’re my sister.”

South Pyongan tilted her chin up and away, trying to hide her face. “Yeah, maybe don’t tell her that.”

She still sounded casual. But the line of her shoulders had relaxed.

North Pyongan let her go. “Liaoxi would understand. She has her own family.”

She loved Liaotung, even if their relationship was different than he and his sister’s. And China may not be her real brother, but he knew he came first to her, too.

“Their family is different than ours,” his sister said quietly, then shook her head, saying in her normal volume, “If you’re done grossing me out, go hang out with your woman.”

He flushed. "We aren't together yet.”

South Pyongan smirked. “You made the mistake of telling me you liked her. I’m gonna tease you for it.”

He wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Just please don’t do it in front of Korea,” he implored. “At least not until I ask him.”

“Want me to ask for you?” She cracked her knuckles.

“I think I can manage,” he said, smiling. Then he bit his lip. “And if he doesn’t give me permission, please don’t pester him.”

“I won’t,” she assured, surprisingly easily.

Before he could leave, North Pyongan’s eyes strayed to her collar, brow furrowing. “The burn on your neck is bleeding through.”

She glanced down, even though she couldn’t see the bandage on the side of her throat.

Clicking her tongue, she said, “Yeah. I think I worked it too much when me and Korea took out those traitors. It hasn’t been scabbing right since then.”

North Pyongan went to tell her it was probably because she insisted on doing pull-ups when she was on watch, then paused.

“At dinner you said you were with a squad.”

His sister pursed her lips, immediately looking suspect. “Yeah. I was. Me and Korea and an assorted group of guys. All together. Hunting reactionaries.”

He raised an eyebrow. She made a rude gesture at him.

North Pyongan shook his head, smiling as he went to go inside.

“Hey, wait.”

He looked back over at his sister. She was facing the trees, her arms crossed and her back to him.

“About that whole talk we had before, about… getting stuck with the enemy.”

His eyes dipped. “Yes?”

“Don’t worry about it,” his sister said unexpectedly. “You were right. Even if we couldn’t risk restarting the war, Korea would. He’d go get you. Or me.”

“I’m not sure he could afford to restart the war just for us,” North Pyongan gently spoke the thoughts he had before out loud.

“No. But I think he would."

The words made him blink in surprise.

South Pyongan shook her head like she was shedding water. "And even if he wouldn't, it's like what you said- he could for South.”

As much as she hated Korea’s brother, there wasn’t a drop of

bitterness in her voice, for the same reason she had abstained from the vote on whether or not to kill him if they had to. Some of their cousins might feel scorned by not knowing if, even after all their years of loyalty, they came before South. But how could either of the Pyongans feel that way when they understood?

To North Pyongan, Korea was the only individual person that came before his sister. And as much as he loved him, that was because he was *Korea.* Their country and all their people depended on him. And they had to be more important than anything. If it weren't for that…

"Korea couldn't leave us Divided," South Pyongan said, tipping her face back to look up at the starry sky. "He'd come for you. And…"

Her head bowed. "I know you could handle yourself until he did."

Pride and deep affection welled in North Pyongan's chest at her recognition.

"I know that you could, too."

It hadn't been about whether or not Korea could come for them before, and it wasn't now. It had been what they were admitting. That hadn't changed. It still ached.

But it hurt a little less.

The Northern Pyongan smiled at his sister. "I love you, eonni."

Not turning to him, she clutched at her head in anguish. "Go inside before I end you."

North Pyongan chuckled.

As he swung closed the heavy steel door, he took one last peek at the waxing moon hanging heavy in the sky, a silvery petal suspended in ink.

If one of them was captured, Korea would come for them. That went for any of the provinces. Even if it was only because he couldn't abandon his brother, whether for their country's sake or

his own. If a ceasefire couldn't be forced, Korea would get South and all his provinces back, no matter what he had to do.

Until then, because there was nothing else he could do for them, North Pyongan sent a prayer up to the heavens for their captured cousins.

North Pyongan thinking of ways to compliment a woman, with the main woman in his life being his sister: 'I admire the way you can put a bullet in a man's head from a thousand metres away. Also you remind me of a fish.'

Yeah sure whatever. Let's do an armed 'intervention' in the Taiwan strait and show no lessons will be learned ever. It's not like since we don't have full control over our own military, the US will have to get involved, plunging us into World War III or anything (but they know this, it's the goal for some, while others are betting that China will show reserve since China *doesn't* want war, and are just trying to provoke a reaction, allowing them to make a better case for remilitarizing. It's like pointing a gun at your neighbour every day and threatening to shoot him, until he tells you if you don't stop, he's going to defend himself. Then you use that as an excuse for why you're waving around a gun, or to shoot him first. It's exactly what the US does to the DPRK. The Japanese government learned it from the best). If China launched missiles at us tomorrow, most people wouldn't deserve it but everyone in power *definitely* would. At least I get to die smiling knowing they would, too, I guess.'

The term waterboard didn't exist until years after this, but the practice existed. In English I could be calling it 'water cure,' but I'm using waterboard for clarity. Also fun fact, during the Filipino-American war, an American officer waterboarded a Filipino prisoner and only received a fifty USD fine and a month-long suspension. The tortured man had to do ten years of hard labour. This was not the worst thing they did. A man was acquitted for ordering the killing of ten-year old boys because he had orders to 'kill anyone capable of beating arms.' And he decided they were. And since he was 'just following orders,' it wasn't his fault. Investigations on the US Army's

actions ended when they conquered the Philippines.

Betray Me Like A Man

South Chungcheong bolted up as the front door slammed open and heavy boots pounded through the manor.

She had never had the luxury of sleeping lightly, so her mind was already clear as she lurched out of her bed, heart pounding. No knives or weapons for her, but for the needle clutched tight in her hand as the other smoothed her skirts, the fabric tremoring under her touch.

Surely America would not charge in so boldly, surely she was not going to finally lose, surely-

She would not go down without a fight. And when she did, ‘twould be at her own hand. Let him have his fun with a corpse. The bastard would get no satisfaction from her.

The boots didn’t stop outside her door, even at the alarmed voice that bade them. They reached it and it burst open just as aggressively as the other, the blinding beam of a flashlight pinning South Chungcheong to the far wall.

“Rise and shine, babe!” America called, his obnoxious voice filling her room with noise and her chest with tension. “See?" he tossed over his shoulder. "She’s already up and decent, Southie. Nothing to worry about.”

From behind him, South peered through the fingers he had clapped over his eyes, seeming relieved to see her standing fully clad in the white and black choson-ot she used for sleep.

He was a weak man. If he was here, violation was not to be her fate tonight.

But South Chungcheong’s body only tightened, her fist around the needle and her chest around her lungs.

She had been found out then. What else could it be?

"Good thing you're already dressed," America said, flashing her a grin. "Why don't you put down that little needle and follow us? We've got something to talk about."

South Chungcheong found her voice. "I demand to know the meaning of this."

"I don't care," the foreigner said, so chipper she could have driven the needle so hard into his eye that it burst. "Get those gams moving, dame."

"I will not be going anywhere until you tell me what is transpiring."

She glared at the Southern one, the weak link, and he flinched under it. Dark shadows painted his under eyes, and sleep dust lined the corners. His black suit lacked a tie, and was buttoned unevenly. It looked as if he, too, had been pulled from slumber.

He opened his maw, but America spoke first.

"We've gotta get this show on the road, Southie," he told him. "Get her to drop the pricker and come along."

The puppet looked at her with a plea in his eyes, willing her to obey without the Commands so that he could feel better about himself.

South Chungcheong did, carefully placing her needle on the nightstand and smoothing her skirts once more before marching past them to the door, her head held high. Not because she wanted to fulfill his desires, but because if those slithering appendages of Command were to be forced into her mind so soon after waking, she would not be able to maintain her composure.

She would not bow. No matter what her punishment was to be, she would not give them the satisfaction of breaking her.

"There's a good girl."

America's words made South Chungcheong's teeth creak as he shoved past her in the narrow hall, leading her to the open front door, where a strong wind had blown snowflakes across the entry room, invading the heated manor with its grasping fingers.

Beyond the portal, the blizzard waged war on Busan, obscuring the midnight sky with swirling gusts of snow. The beam of America's flashlight turned it into a confounding kaleidoscope of white, grey, and black as he stepped out into it, shielded by his heavy military coat.

South Chungcheong's winter clothes had been confiscated last year to discourage her from even trying to leave. As she stepped out into the storm, the wind sliced through her choson-ot like the knives that could soon slice through her flesh.

She did not know what would be done to her. She knew she would be left in America's hands. That was enough.

"Do you w-want my coat?" South asked from behind her.

"I would sooner let acid touch my skin than your American hides," South Chungcheong replied, as cold as the blizzard, words tight in throat as she fought her chattering teeth.

There was no running. Even as they passed beyond the front gate, her feet would not obey her. The Commands still gripped her tight.

She could defend herself. But there would be no point to it once she was in whatever torture room America was taking her to.

Though the flurrying snow, she spotted a dark shape looming. A truck, engine running, but headlights dark.

"Need a boost up, dame?" America shouted over the howling wind, and did not wait for a response before his hands clamped around her waist, lifting her into the truck bed.

South Chungcheong's skin crawled all the way down into the bone, but she did not give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

"Behave yourselves back there," the wretched man called, before

disappearing around the side of the vehicle. A second later, the truck started to move.

Two armed men- the puppet's handlers- had taken his place, hanging off the back. Their cold eyes pierced into South Chungcheong as she slid back from the entrance, realizing she was not alone.

Several of the other provinces were there. North Gyeongsang, bereft of his bulky glasses, South Gyeongsang, and the quivering waif, Jeju. They huddled together in the corner for warmth, just as underdressed as she, doubtless startled from sleep the same way.

"S-South Chungcheong," South Gyeongsang said, beckoning her over. "Get in here before you freeze."

"Do you know why these miserable little men are doing this to us?" she inquired, eyeing the Yankee guards distastefully.

"N-N-No."

"Then I have no use for you." South Chungcheong pointedly turned her back, looking out at the snow swirling in their wake.

They made several more stops, picking up the rest of the peons. The Jeollas, who melded into each other like the single-minded organism they were as soon as they were together, Gyeonggi, his eyes pathetically wide, tears rimming them as the cold seared the burns on his cheeks, and her brother, ignorant as ever.

"Get the fuck off of me!" he snarled as he was shoved into the truck bed, jostling South Chungcheong.

The green-eyed Yankee gave him a smack across the chest with his rifle for his trouble.

South Chungcheong leaned away from him, brushing at where he had touched in disdain. "You think you would have learned by now that reckless defiance only ends in disgrace."

North Chungcheong angular eyes flashed as he curled his lip at her. "And you think *you* would've learned that keeping your head

down like a good little slave still ends with you in the back of the truck with us. This feel nostalgic to you, *sis?"*

He could not possibly know how much.

South Chungcheong scoffed, but did not flay him with her tongue. The cold was gripping her too tightly.

The ride was not long, but felt as an eternity. America drove torturously slow, giving the blizzard time to freeze them. As they drove into the wind, the canvas covering cut the worst of it. But seated near the opening, the currents curled their fingers in to tug at South Chungcheong's goreum, and the cold followed them, slithering across her chest.

The presence of her cousins did nothing to warm her. She would have thought America would take advantage of their isolation to do what he wished to her without the others knowing, but perhaps she was to serve as an example.

Or perhaps this was nothing, merely an exercise in terror. But South Chungcheong did not hold tightly to that hope.

When the truck finally stopped, she slid out before the Yankees could lay hands on her, near stumbling on her frozen feet. They burned inside her thin shoes, and the fingers she had kept primly clasped together refused to straighten.

The snow cut all vision, and the cold masked all scent. But in port cities, the wind blew in off the sea more oft than not. As they had been driving towards it, she deduced that the large rectangular building they were being shepherded towards was a docks warehouse.

"I thought we'd be going to the police station, or your headquarters!" she could hear the Southern one shouting.

"More room here, kid!" America shouted back.

That did not bode well. The station or foreign headquarters would have provided some semblance of professionalism, others that could bear witness, even if they were just as bloodthirsty as their Yankee

master. More chances of leaks, and as such, less of a chance for brutality. But this dark warehouse, isolated on the edge of Busan, and the truck headlights that had never once turned on, bore very, *very* poorly.

As they entered the warehouse, and the overhead lights turned on, washing the piles of crates and boxes stacked almost wall to wall in filthy yellow light, the last bit of warmth in South Chungcheong's marrow froze.

There was a man curled up on the ground.

His head was shaved, bloody scabs curving across his scalp where the razor had cut too close. He was dressed in filthy peasant's clothing, a loose shirt and pants that had once been white, and were now grey with filth and embroidered with patches of rust red. His knees and chin were curled into his chest for warmth, his hands unable to join, bound as they were behind his back with coarse hemp rope.

South Chungcheong's heart thundered in her chest, drowning out the roaring of the muted blizzard raging outside.

*Run run run '**Move** damn you-'*

Still her feet did not obey. Even if 'twere not for the chains of Command, her iced-over tendons would not have let her get far.

She had been a fool. And worse than that, she had *known* she was being a fool and she had still done it anyway. She had followed a man's whims and ended up getting burned for it, just like all the idiots she had always scorned.

Perhaps she deserved this.

"Why don't you fellas go warm yourselves up, get a cup'a joe or something?" America suggested to the waiting guards, and they saluted before marching from the room, along with South's handlers.

'Twas just the provinces, the foreigner, and the puppet now. And the man.

His eyes opened a crack at America's boisterous tone, lids peeling back, waylaid by the ice crystals frozen to his lashes. As they landed on the provinces, on her, they widened in terror.

His body twitched, trying to rise, and a tortured scream tore from his throat as his chin peeled away from the tops of his knees, leaving a layer of skin behind on the fabric. South Chungcheong suspected he had been soaked in water shortly before this.

"What are you doing to him?!" South Gyeongsang and her soft heart cried, lurching forward.

America stopped her, a wall of muscle in her path. "Ah ah ah, babe. You don't want to get to close to him. He's a dangerous prisoner."

"You're torturing him!" she cried, trying to slap at his chest.

Her hand froze in mid-air, and America took it, faux-waltzing her back towards the others as she struggled to break free.

The water was not the only damage. As the man struggled and heaved himself up onto his bloody knees, more marks of torture became clear.

He was gaunt, his bruised cheekbones near poking through his skin, and his formerly straight nose had more crooks in it than Rhee's government. From her position to the side of the door, carefully not centering herself, South Chungcheong could see that his blackened fingertips were raw, not a nail left on them. His lips were bloodied and burst, and when he spat scarlet phlegm on the dirt floor, it was clear he was missing more than one tooth.

"Look at this!" North Chuncheong cried furiously, marching towards South. "Look at *him! This* is what you're letting this bastard do to our people! You're letting foreigners match into our country and torture Koreans!! How can you think you're in the fucking right?"

South backed away from his words. "He's an enemy spy. Don't act like North doesn't torture spies, too."

"We never even tortured fucking *Japanese!"* the incensed male Chungcheong cried.

"Enough of this."

South Chungcheong sliced through the useless chatter with her tongue, tilting her chin as America's attention was drawn to her, along with everyone else's.

"The hour is late, and the night is cold," she said, fighting to keep the waver from her voice. "Inform us of why we have been dragged from our slumber so uncouthly, so that I may return to my bed."

"You seriously don't even care what they're doing to this guy?" he brother demanded, disgusted.

She ignored him, as did America.

"Well you see," the foreigner drawled, sauntering over to the prisoner. "We've got a little problem. A coupla weeks ago, one of Southie here's officers was found dead in a ditch nearby the base he was stationed at. Tragic accident, the word on the street is."

America stood next to the man, leaning his full weight on the hand he placed on his shoulder, making him bare his remaining teeth.

"But word behind the scenes is that he mighta been assassinated. Ya see, one of my guys thought he saw a labourer hanging around that shouldn'ta been."

He was speaking in some ridiculous affect, not enunciating his 'r's,' and turning his 'o' sounds to 'a's'.

"And while we ain't gawt no luck finding him, we *did* find a guy he was seen meeting with a little bit before that." America's hand squeezed the prisoner's shoulder, hard enough that he drew a tortured moan from his ruined lips.

"And after talking to him real polite-like, he told us dat's da truth." He beamed down at the man, who stared forward, focused on a patch of ground. "Ain't that right, pal?"

"Go… to… *hell,"* he forced out, words lisping and stiff.

"We also got something else interesting out of him." America's cold white grin turned on the provinces as his accent dropped, and South Chungcheong's pulse stopped.

"He said he did it on orders. And he said those orders came from a province."

There must be far more grievous wounds hidden under his clothes, or that left no marks. No hand-picked personal agent assigned to a Provincehuman would crack so easily.

The eyes of the others widened as they exchanged glances, each wondering whose handler he was. It was pitifully obvious that they *did* have handlers. Only Jeju shrunk down, desperate to avoid being accused.

South Chungcheong remained poised. "'Tis obvious the North would have had agents in place to pass instructions during the period before the war. Only an idiot would still be unaware of that fact if he were in your position. Why must I be dragged out of bed to be informed of it?"

"Because after he told my guys that, he clammed right up." America patted his back. "No matter how nice they ask, he won't give 'em a peep more. And you're right, dame- only an idiot wouldn't know. And I'm not an idiot, am I?"

He grinned at her. Her expression did not flicker, even as a stitch of relief crossed her nerves.

A chance.

"We're fully aware some of you folks were having a little more contact with the North than ya should have been. I mean, hell- some of youse were even taking to the hills. Ain't that right, beefcake?"

"And I'd do it again!" North Chungcheong spat, like an imbecile.

"So of course I knew." America's head scanned down the line,

until his gaze landed on her again. “The problem is that is seems like this guy is *still* in contact. But he won't tell us how. I mean, none of you have been out and about for awhile, have ya?”

His bottomless aviators bore into her. South Chungcheong blinked back, unimpressed.

“So, that’s the question, isn’t it?” he drawled, his hand resting on his hip, and the pistol at it. “How’d he get in contact? And *which* province is he working for?”

He strafed the others again, cold and predatory. “Any ideas?”

None of them said anything. Except for that imbecile, of course.

“If you want to know so bad, why don’t you just have *him* Command it out of us?”

South winced as North Chungcheong flung a hand at him.

‘Idiot.’

“We could,” America acknowledged. “That’s definitely Plan B. But South here wanted to give you the chance to come clean and tell us all your wicked deeds are in the past. ‘Cuz I mean, if they aren’t, and it has to be *forced* out of ya, well…” He shrugged. “That’d make you a traitor. Just like this flip.”

The man stared at the floor, his crooked jaw tight with the same guilt in his swollen, bloodshot eyes, blood dribbling from his mouth as he shook and trembled uncontrollably, his clothes frozen to his body.

Even North Chungcheong went quiet.

“You were brainwashed before,” America said jovially, voice echoing around the cavernous room. “You’d eaten up years of North Korea’s lies, and didn't have time to unlearn 'em. And he Commanded you to fight, didn’t he?”

The other provinces' faces were stony. South Chungcheong’s was bored.

“But now, you’ve seen just what he’s capable of.” America let go of the man, swaggering towards them. “You’ve *seen* him and his boys cut down peasants and massacre poor innocent folks.”

“That never happened!” Gyeonggi burst out, then hid behind South Gyeongsang’s frame.

“You’ve seen how vicious and savage him and the Northerners are,” America continued, unabated as he strolled right up to them. “And you’ve seen how good me and Southie have been treating you. So if you’re still spewing his propaganda, and working with his agents…”

He leaned around South Gyeongsang to peer at Gyeonggi.

“That would make you a real, bonafide Communist, wouldn’t it? And you *know* what happens to Communists.”

South Gyeongsang put herself between them. “Leave him alone.”

America’s lips curled as he lowered his face towards hers. “Or what?”

The woman trembled, clearly trying to strike him once more, but unable to. Completely helpless.

There was no ‘or what.’ She could do nothing to America, and he could do anything he wished to her. Unlike South Chungcheong, she had not even a saving grace.

“Enough with your games.” South Chungcheong felt his gaze fly to her like an arrow. “Tell us what you desire so I may leave.”

“I ‘desire’ whoever owns this guy to come forward,” America said, taking a step back from South Gyeongsang. “I want you to tell South you’re *reeeeeally* sorry for hurting his feelings, then tell *me* how you got in contact with ole Northie. That’s all. Quick and easy.”

‘Twould not be so simple. South Chungcheong could tell that even her cousins kenned it.

America had been tricked. Somehow, with all his precautions and guards, one of them had still had enough spirit and wit to make contact with an enemy agent. They had done it right under his hideous foreign glasses. He had been slighted. And men did not take being slighted well.

There were ways to punish that left no mark. And South had not believed her before. He would not believe any of them now. He would not wish to.

The Southern Korea may be deluding himself into thinking that if the traitor came forward, they would be spared. But he was the only one in the room that was.

"And if no one comes forward, then South uses the good ole Commands, and whoever fesses up is going to be staying in some less comfy accommodations than they are now," America continued casually. "Just for caution's sake. Clearly we can't have a traitor just hanging around, having our guys assassinated. And on the off chance you all manage to bite your tongues off before you can tell us, I'm sure this gentleman here will tell us real soon. His winter's about to get a lot colder otherwise."

The prisoner was weak. His tremors were draining the last bits of energy in his body, and South Chungcheong could tell by the look in his eyes that his mind was on the verge of breaking. She had no doubt that 'twould not take much more to make him spill his innards.

South looked uncomfortable at the overt mention of torture. He was not so stupid as to believe it wasn't being carried out on the man.

But he protested not.

It seemed America no longer had an inclination to hide matters like this from him. The Korean had moved on from denial to justification, as he had done earlier.

If she were to be tortured, strung up and violated, *would* South be told? Would he justify it, just as he justified the rape of their

women and the brutalizing of this man?

No one was speaking. No one would come forward, not even to say the man had not belonged to them. They were too stubborn.

South Chungcheong loathed drawing attention back to herself, but she did it anyway.

“You are admitting you tortured this traitor,” she stated. “As such are we to believe his confession was gained under duress?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘torture,’ per say,” America said, spinning his pistol around his finger. "Just fed him his buckwheats."

“So that is a yes.” South Chungcheong arched a brow. “And how, pray tell, do you know he spoke the truth? Men being tortured will say anything to put an end to it.”

‘Twas why the Northern one had never utilized it, even when she could tell he would like nothing more than to make one of their Japanese captives scream.

“She’s right.” A rare admission from the Northern Jeolla. “You don’ even know-“

“-if he was tellin’ the truth,” her sister finished.

South Chungcheong allowed her voice to grow slightly more heated as she stalked across the floor towards America. “You have dragged us all out of bed at this unwarranted hour without coats or boots to interrogate us solely on information gleaned from a tortured prisoner. Have you no respect?”

“You’re really letting him treat us this way?” South Gyeongsang asked South, more disappointed than furious. She had always been more of a lady than their more uncouth cousins.

South shrank back. “I-“

“Forget us!” North Chungcheong cried, storming at him. “You’d let him treat one of our *people* that way?! If that man really is a spy, it’s because he’s a damn *patriot.* Because he can’t stand having Rhee

and this bastard rule over us! Because he wants our country to be *free.”*

South Chungcheong’s brother may be an imbecile, but he was a reliable imbecile. His fervor was working up the others.

“Even if Korea’s army tortured one'a Rhee’s agents-“ South Jeolla began.

“It’s differen' than torturin’ one'a his,” North Jeolla finished.

“Them and their masters cut down my workers for strikin', they massacred my peasants on Haui Island for not wantin' to hand over grain they couldn' afford to give, they murdered my coal miners just for celebratin' Liberation Day!" The Southern Jeolla not only shockingly finished her own sentence, but followed it with another. "I ain’t never seen one'a the KPA gun down a civilian on our way to the Raktong, but I *did* see Rhee’s butchers massacre my people.”

“The Communists started it!” South protested.

“Rhee started it by oppressin’ us!” South Jeolla cried, her pale skin red around her blue flower. “He started it by refusin’ to give us our land and killin’ our comrades! America started it by Dividin’ us and *you* started it by lettin’ him march his soldiers in and occupy us again!”

“Look at Jeju.” South Gyeongsang gestured to her, and the waif curled in on herself like it was the last thing she wanted. “Do you think it’s normal that she’s like this? Do you think it’s normal that she’s afraid of her own shadow and can’t even talk? What do you think *he-“* She glared at America. “-and Rhee’s criminals did to her?”

South flinched back as if she had hit him, his arms wrapping around himself. “They didn’t do anything to her.”

Jeju’s thin shoulders hunched around her ear slits.

“You Commanded us so we wouldn’t be able to spread ‘Communist propaganda,’” North Chungcheong cut in. “Why do you think the Commands aren’t stopping SJ from telling you about what

happened in her province? Why do you think I can say this man is a fucking patriot? Answer me, *S-S-S-"*

Finally with a bit of a man's fire, South's eyes flashed as he shouted, "Don't *call* me that! I am *Korea."*

America was watching the proceedings with amusement, pistol dangling from his finger. The Commands would still be an issue, but one problem at a time.

'Now.'

"You're not-!"

"I am sick and tired of this!" South Chungcheong exclaimed, and before anyone could react, she lunged forward and tore America's firearm from his grasp.

He snatched at her, but she darted back, pulse running wild in her veins as she fought pleaded *begged* for her arm to point the gun where it should be pointed. She would not bow, but she would get on her knees if her body would just let her-

It did not. The urge was too strong.

So instead she spun before America could grab her, pointing the pistol at the prisoner. Her finger quivered on the trigger, but would not apply that final ounce of pressure. The Commands would not let her harm anyone.

In that split second before she could be stopped, she looked down at the man, demanding that he understand.

And the man on the floor looked up at her, his vision clearing, resolve hardening it.

"Long live Korea," he said, then lunged at her with the last bit of strength in his body.

South Chungcheong pulled the trigger, and Pak Seo-nam slumped to the floor, dead.

The stunned silence seemed to fill the warehouse, eclipsing the sound of the storm outside. The clatter of the gun as South Chungcheong dropped it on the floor broke it.

North Chungcheong's muscles twitched as he tried to go for it, but his body would not obey. America lunged for the firearm, getting it safely back in his grasp.

"Are we done?" South Chungcheong asked coldly, blood creeping across the floor to caress her shoe.

"What the fuck did you *do?"* North Chungcheong demanded.

South Gyeongsang's hands had flown over her mouth in horror, and the others were in much the same state. Jeju was staring at the dead man, eyes wide and vacant.

"What *did* you do, dame?" America's echoed. "Or rather 'why?'"

She could not see his eyes, but the real question was clear in the way he tilted his head at her.

'How?'

She answered him, not the Northern Chungcheong. "I eliminated your pawn before you used it as an excuse to humiliate us more."

She spun to South. "I will not deny that some among us were imbecilic enough to work with the North before the war. But do you truly believe that somehow one of them made contact with an agent when we have not even seen the sky in months? We are not allowed to set foot in our *yards,* let alone in a spot that could serve as a meeting place. The entire street is monitored- no one sets foot on it without Rhee, someone in his cabinet, or America knowing. That man-"

She gestured carelessly at the corpse. "Was a *traitor*. I would not be surprised to find that the North sent him here to be caught, and to try and sow dissent amongst us. What value did this assassinated officer have?"

"I- I don't really know," South stuttered. "He wasn't even a

general, I don't think."

South Chungcheong nodded decisively. "You forget that I know exactly how the North works. He sent this man to set up an assassination of an unimportant target so that he would be taken into custody and spill his 'secrets.'"

'Twas dangerous, but she knew the Yankee must already be thinking it. The Southern one had to as well.

"In fact, as the only person here who did not join his little crusade last year, aside from the useless waif, I would bet that he desired for you to suspect *me."*

South looked at her as she looked at him the same way she had the prisoner, and his brows furrowed in.

"If he did truly work for a province," South Chungcheong continued. "What is more likely? That it is one of us heavily-surveilled prisoners? Or Gangwon?"

"Hey! Leave Gang out of this!" Gyeonggi cried.

"You'd seriously throw him under the trolley?" North Chungcheong demanded incredulously.

South Chungcheong grit her teeth. *'Morons.'*

Was Gangwon not the sole southern province out of America's grasp?

"You seem awful eager to blame someone else, dame," America said, and her muscles wound tight. "I wonder why that is?"

South Chungcheong rounded on him, lips thin, irritated without being incensed. "I am *eager* to put an end to this and leave this filthy, freezing warehouse, and I am *eager* to stop being summoned in the middle of the night for matters that bear no import to me. I do not care who amongst us is a traitor- I am already aware of where these fools' loyalties lie, as are you. I *want* this war to be over so that I may go back to being comfortable and not have to put up with nuisances like *this."*

She glared up at him, in aggravation, not defiance, her hands at her side, not clenched or shaking.

America stared back, dark and empty.

Then he swung his head to South. “Command her.”

South Chungcheong followed his gaze, looking the Countryhuman in the eye. He met them, searching.

Her heart pounded, her breaths shallow, though she refused to let them cloud the air.

There was no way to fight the Commands, whether it was just her or all of them. The only thing she could do was what she hated most- depend on someone, and hope South was not as stupid as his actions. Or as cruel.

South stared at her as she reached out for solidarity she could not hope to receive.

Then he broke her gaze, looking at the others, then back to America.

“I don’t think I need to.”

The temperature in the warehouse lowered.

“What was that, kid?”

South put his hands in his pockets, shrugging. “She’s right. If he was working for someone, it was probably Gangwon. There’s no way he isn’t with North. He would've heard me on the radio by now if he wasn't.”

“Sure,” America said patiently, leaving South Chungcheong to close on him. “But we could know for sure with one little question. ‘All provinces, was this guy your handler?'"

“North *wants* me to suspect the provinces,” South said, and though he sounded casual, he could not hide the way he shrank back from the larger man. “If I Command South Chungcheong, or any of them,

it'll just make them want to listen to me less."

America's hand closed on his shoulder. "There is a spy in our midst, South. A spy that ended up getting one of *your* boys *killed."*

"And now he's dead, too," the Korean replied. "And it's not like whichever province it was would know who the actual assassin was." The man's swelling in his throat bobbed. "It's over. If it *was* one of these guys, then let's just lock them up tighter so nothing like it can happen again."

His arms crossed over his chest as his lips thinned, his voice darkening with sincerity.

"I don't want to let North win."

America stared down at him. South Chungcheong mentally willed her moronic relatives to keep their mouths shut, and they did.

The Yankee looked back at her, his black gaze piercing into her flesh. Not a muscle on South Chungcheong's face twitched. Men were like hounds. One could not provoke them.

"Alright, Southie," America eventually said. "Have it your way. You're in charge, after all."

His heavy hand slammed down onto his shoulder as the judgement was rendered.

South Chungcheong's legs went weak, and her insides watery. But she knew 'twas not over. Not until she was inside her prison manor. And perhaps not even then.

No. She *knew* t'would not be over then. Not so long as the war waged.

"Thanks," South said, and the relief in his smile was palpable. "Can we go back now? I'm freezing."

The cold may have saved her tonight. Not even America wanted to go stand in it for privacy. And men in charge did not like witnesses seeing their subordinates have to be convinced, only submit.

“Sure thing, kid.”

America gave South Chungcheong one last, long look, then went for the door. South and the province followed, the latter with her chin up. She could feel the eyes of her cousins on her, accusing her with their weight.

‘Traitor.’

She left no crimson footprints. The dead man's blood had already frozen over.

—

An hour later, South slid into South Chungcheong’s house, knocking on the door to her room.

“It’s me.”

She was still awake. “Come in, if you must.”

He opened the door. She was standing against the far wall, like when they’d came for her earlier, only a darker shadow in the dark room.

They stared at each other in silence, as they had in the warehouse. As he had read the look in her eyes, a plea and a confession all at once.

“America asked me how you managed to shoot that guy,” he said eventually.

“And what did you tell him?”

“The truth. You’re so mouthy that I was worried about your guards roughing you up, and Commanded you not to hurt anyone unless it was in self-defense.”

He’d been worried he’d made a mistake doing it all those months ago. And maybe he had.

But he was glad for it tonight.

“And *is* that the truth?” she asked. “’Twas my guards you were worried about?”

“Yes.”

She scoffed softly. “Will you repeal it now then?”

“No.” He bit down on the urge to justify himself and defend his friend. “Don’t tell America.”

“Do you hear yourself?” she demanded. “You beg me not to tell a foreign country about your decisions involving one of *your* provinces like a child pleading with his mother not to tell father he was in the pantry. Is that how Korea should act?”

South was silent. Then, “I can’t help you next time, South Chungcheong.”

“Cannot? Or will not?”

“Both.”

Another long silence.

“I would not expect you to,” she said eventually, and the ondol floor did nothing to warm the words.

He wanted her to ask why he had tonight. Even now knowing what he knew, some part of him wanted her to reach out again, to connect, to feel like he had in the warehouse as she met his eyes and he defended her. He’d felt betrayed, but he also felt…

But she didn’t.

So South backed away, closing her door. The blizzard that lashed at his skin felt warm compared to what was inside his heart.

He had thought South Chungcheong was different. He had thought she was the one province his brother hadn’t brainwashed, the *one* province he hadn’t won over. The one South might, maybe, someday get to come around, to like him more, to see *him* as Korea. But he had been wrong.

She was just like all the rest.

In the howling storm, he felt very small. And very alone.

I've wanted to write this chapter foreverrrrrr. South Chungcheong's seed of lawyerdom showing. I want to get to her backstory chapter so much. Also when America slips into a accent, he's doing New York Italian mob boss. He's the only one that gets the joke, but his target audience is himself anyway.

'They're letting a terrorist in the White House!' I regret to inform you, but there's always been a terrorist in the White House. It's called the President of the United States. There's *another* terrorist in the White House.

Empty Stomachs, Full Hearts

"-gang? Chagang?"

Chagang blinked blearily as he heard his name called. He looked up to see North Pyongan standing over him.

"The food is ready."

Chagang could barely smell the pots that steamed on the stove. His nasal passages were choked with the sharp scent of iron.

A wisp of concern coiled around his cousin. But the azure joy shining around him was much brighter. It pierced into Chagang's skull like a stun grenade. It took a moment to clear the haze of North Pyongan's emotions away so he could respond.

"Thank you."

He stood, the last to fill his bowls, ladling small portions of rice and soup into them. He took kimchi from the crock Comrade Kim Song-ae had specially made for them for winter, careful not to take too much. With their numbers, it was quickly running out.

"I feel like your headaches are getting worse," SH fretted from her seat.

All the provinces were back from their lands tonight. Their colours were loud, refreshed with worry, fear, grief, and everything else trying to get as many people as they could through winter brought.

It made Chagang's head feel muddled. Lately even good emotions did.

The red and gold that sometimes flickered around North Pyongan when he looked at Liaoxi had grown brighter recently. As he sat next to the female province, it flared, wreathing his head like a fiery halo. It flickered from her, too, breaking cracks in the usually colourless air around her.

As beautiful as it was, Chagang had to fight to push it away. The night seemed dull in comparison.

"Chagang?" SH sounded concerned.

"You're starting to space out again, Big Guy," South Pyongan teased. "Careful, Hae might steal your food if you do."

"Ah'd never steal anyone's food," Hae said indignantly, her eyes fixed on his rice. "'Specially not Cha's. Korea's got him workin' real hard."

Not as hard as when the war was in its active phase. Instead of coordinating full-scale actions, Chagang had to travel around the provinces assessing the condition of the rear units, making sure the aircraft-hunting teams were prepared to counter aerial landings, and visiting ammunition and weapons factories. The difficult part was the travel.

And the colours that came off the workers. Bright bursts of tawny, cream, and blue as they succeeded at over filling quotas or overcame a problem on the production line, and cloying ash, ink, and sick yellow as they tried to work through mourning those they had lost, and fearing for those they hadn't. Interspersed with stabs of dark red as they thought of the ones that had caused this. The enclosed underground rooms only served to choke Chagang even more.

"Do you need to see Kangwon?" SH asked, anxious olive threading through the anger that was always with her now.

"I'm fine," Chagang said, making himself lift his spoon to his mouth.

The soup was thinner than usual. After returning from their lands, his cousins had set aside even more of their rations, and were working to stretch out what they kept even more. He had memories of North Pyongan working in the KPRA to powder venison and vegetables to make them last longer. This tasted like the potato powder he had helped make a few weeks ago.

"Here."

He looked up to see Liaotung holding something out. Taking it revealed one of the hard ginger candies that China sometimes pulled from his sleeves.

"And don't complain," she said before he could speak. "China gave it to me to give to you."

Chagang accepted it, sliding it into his pocket for after dinner. He still wasn't sure if it accomplished the same thing that fresh ginger did, but having something in his mouth made it easier to concentrate enough to push the colours back.

"Thank you."

"Anytime. I'll try and convince him to send home for more." The teal-skinned woman returned to her sister's side, huddling against her on the log.

Her emotions were better contained than her sister's, but not as well as China's. He could see discomfort shivering off of her in the cold.

Liaoxi's was even stronger. But where her side brushed against North Pyongan's, the red and gold warmed it. This pleased Chagang.

What didn't please him was the fog he could see coming from his cousins again as he eased his guard. The yellowish-grey was thick and pungent. It didn't come from the cold, but from hunger.

The Chinese provinces were hungry, too. But their provinces weren't in as dire straits. Between the Koreans' people starving and their efforts to abate that even a little, Chagang hadn't gone a day without being drowned in that yellow-grey sea since fall began.

The colour of hunger was the same as discomfort, but the texture was different. It was denser, more muddled. Something felt by the body and mind both. The empathetic hunger was thinner, but more long-staying.

Before the war, he had never experienced that secondary hunger, or even his own. He had been formed in 1949. The food issue had been solved by then. Even if his people weren't feasting, they hadn't

been starving. Any hunger of his cousins' was temporary, not strong enough to be seen. As was his.

He had North Pyongan's experiences of it. He couldn't know exactly how it felt, but he knew of it.

The reality was much worse. It clutched at his insides like claws, leaving him hollow, except for an occasional sharp pain that stabbed through his guts like the one in his temples. His head felt stuffed, and his stomach felt empty. And someplace deeper than that, that he knew no amount of rice or soup would fill. It wasn't his, after all.

"If your headache isn't going away, maybe you should start eating more," SH suggested.

"You should *all* be fucking eating more," North Hamgyong grunted from where he was standing by the mountainside. "You're being idiots."

"Mm, yes," Hwang said, hunched over by the firelight to read *'Military Knowledge.'* "Those of us limiting our caloric intake *are* idiots, aren't we?"

"Shut up," North Hamgyong growled. Irritation prickled from his shoulders. And orange-tinged yellow. Chagang had suspicions, but they were not his to share.

"Or maybe *you're* just a selfish jerk!" SH snapped, her dark red aura flaring. The edges were tipped with oily black. It hurt to see.

South Pyongan raised her hand. "I'd like to not be caught in the crossfire here."

She sounded casual. But ochre guilt flickered around her hands as she spooned the last of her rice and soup into her mouth. Her bowl had been fuller than theirs.

"Sorry," SH apologized, her own ochre directed at her cousin. But not her brother.

North Hamgyong curled his lip. Chagang did not see his colours. He

had shut in eyes in preparation.

"I'm alright," he said to SH. "I'm eating enough."

"Okay," she said, and he knew she still had worry and maroon swirling around her. "Just don't push yourself."

Chagang had to. If he didn't visit the factories and units, then Korea would. He would never rest. In order to lift even those light tasks from him, he had to overcome the headaches. And he knew eating more wouldn't solve that.

"And why wouldn't you be eating enough, I wonder?"

They all jumped as China emerged from the woods. Except Chagang. He hadn't seen him coming. A sharp shooting pain in his temple had just momentarily paralyzed him.

North Hamgyong recovered first. "None of your business."

"I apologize for my relative, Comrade China," SH cut in. The colours around her contrasted sharply with her tone. "He's suffering immensely from the bombing of his land right now. It puts him in an unpleasant mood that *no one* enjoys."

His own deep red joined North Hamgyong's usual cloud of dark blue and heavy grey-black.

"No offense taken," China said smoothly, gliding over to where his provinces sat. "But only because you're lovely enough to make up for it."

Liaoxi sighed, and Liaotung made a sharp clicking noise with her tongue.

"Gege is allowed to have fun, Little Sisters." He folded his arms atop Liaotung's head, making her hunch. "So, why wouldn't our strong silent type be eating enough?"

He was looking at Chagang. But the province decided that wasn't enough to consider it a direct question. He took another spoonful of soup.

"None of us really are," SH said quickly. "You know what it's like being on rations."

"En," China said with a knowing smile. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. I don't like getting involved in things that don't concern me."

Liaotung made a skeptical noise, and he leaned on her head harder.

"Your Countryhuman won't be back tonight, by the way," the Chinese country added. "He took off in the Jeep for the front camp."

Spikes of alarms shot from Chagang's cousins. It should have been a relief that he wouldn't have to block out Korea's overwhelming colours. But he felt his own dread.

"Did he say what he was going to do?" Hwang asked, olive fizzling around him. He had even put down his magazine.

"I believe he was just going to speak personally to our negotiators about that little problem involving your cousin," China answered. "I would have gone with him, but he actually pushed me out of the vehicle. *My* vehicle," he added, like they had forgotten.

Chagang still saw no irritation from him. He wondered if China being willing to sleep in the same room as Korea meant he really didn't feel it. Or if Hwang's snoring had just been too much.

Thinking of what he had seen from him at the Foundation Day speech, and when he had hustled into their room that final time to snatch his radio equipment, he decided he had his answer.

"It *would* be dangerous to discuss Gangwon over telegram," the male Hwanghae pointed out. But his unease didn't vanish.

The American negotiators had started asking leading questions about the southern province. It was definitely a precursor to demanding him back. The northerners had been ordered not to tell him, or Kangwon
Which was good. Their colours were overwhelmed with stress already.

But it being logical for Korea to visit near the front didn't whisk any of their anxiety away. Even if he had went for a logical reason, they all knew his emotions could give him a new one. Chagang especially.

SH masked her colours with a smile. "I'm sure he'll be fine. I'm sorry he took your Jeep. Again." The sigh in her voice couldn't be masked. "I hope he at least didn't make you walk here from the city."

"No," China assured her. "He booted me out on the edge of these woods." He straightened, stretching luxuriously. "Come on, Little Sisters. Gege has home and army updates."

Liaotung slid from under him, but didn't succeed at making him fall. She finished the last of her food, then set her dish near the washbasin. They were on rotation, when SH didn't bully her way into doing them. Tonight was Chagang's turn.

"You, too, Xi'er." China smiled at Liaoxi. Chagang almost saw embarrassment seep out of her before it was whisked back in.

She stood. She didn't give North Pyongan more than a backwards glance. But Chagang saw her red and gold touch his hand.

China gave his cousin a knowing smile. You didn't need Chagang's ability to see his cheeks turn purple.

"Gege's going to have the room to himself tonight," China sighed as he took his provinces inside. "He's going to be so cold. And lonely."

"A tragedy," Liaotung said dryly.

"If only there were a couple dear, sweet little sisters willing to warm him up," he continued forlornly. "Or lend him their coats."

"Alas, it seems his hopes will not float," Liaoxi chimed, slamming the door.

"Fucking weirdos," North Hamgyong grunted. At least he didn't feel strongly about it.

"Weirdos who are helping us Liberate our country," Hwang reminded him, already reimmersed in his magazine.

"Some fucking help-" North Hamgyong couldn't see SH's flare of red. But he cut himself off with a *'tch'* anyway. "Whatever."

"Oh wow," South Pyongan said, tossing her dish at the basin. "He's actually learning how to shut his mouth. Didn't know he could do that."

"You want to fucking die?"

Their bickering was friendly, but the other dark emotions were still leaking from North Hamgyong and SH. Chagang went to close his eyes to escape them, but was distracted by a flicker of ochre.

He looked over to see Hae, who had been weirdly quiet. She had drank all her soup, but somehow still had most of her rice left, when usually she inhaled it. She turned away from him and the others, and he could hear her spoon scraping her bowl. When she sat up, it was empty.

She popped up, still stained with guilt, and carefully stacked her bowls with the others, picking up South Pyongan's to nestle it on top. Then she skipped back to flop back down next to Chagang. Her hand patted her pack, greyish-blue impatience joining the guilt as she looked around to make sure no one had seen her.

She caught Chagang looking and the ochre spiked.

He stared at her. After a few second-long staredown, she waved her hand in front of her face.

Chagang kept staring. Her shoulders slumped with the teal of relief.

'Hm.'

"Korea shouldn't be coming back tonight, but make sure the supplies are hidden anyway," SH was ordering.

"I will," North Pyongan assured. "I'll take first watch, too, if no one else wants it."

SH looked to his sister. "South Pyongan, do you want second watch?"

"Ugh," she moaned. "You know I hate second watch. It's like I've got just enough time to fall asleep, but I don't actually get any rest. I feel like shit when I get woken up that soon."

"That's why you need to adapt," SH said. "But fine. North Hamgyong will take it."

"And who the fuck said I'd do that?" he grunted, dark blue stabbing from him.

"Me," SH said sweetly. "The schedule maker. Unless *you* want the job."

He *'tch'*ed.

"That's what I thought. So North Pyongan, North Hamgyong, Hae, me- Hwang, do you need time to prepare your teaching materials tomorrow?"

He shook his head 'no,' and she nodded.

"Then you'll go next, and South Pyongan can do last watch so she has time to work out in the morning."

The woman raised her glass in a toast. "My favourite cousin!"

Chagang blinked. "And me?"

"You need a rest night," SH decided. "I'll do the dishes, too."

"Korea won't like that."

"I'll do the dishes, too," she repeated forcefully.

"Oh no you don't. Bad. Bad SH." Red-blue crackled from South Pyongan, though her tone was casual. "Stop stealing dish-duty. Unless it's from me," she added after a moment of consideration.

"I-"

"Opinion rejected! Tiger Fists of Fury!" South Pyongan lunged at her cousin, heaving her into the air and over her shoulder, spinning them both around in rapid circles.

"Put me down!" SH shrieked, clinging to her cousin's back as her legs whirled through the air.

"Quite a lack of 'fists' in this 'Tiger Fists of Fury,'" Hwang remarked, not looking from his pages.

A lack of fury, too. Chagang was relieved to see the colour shrink.

A guilty ochre blob crept away while no one else was looking.

"Okay, okay!" SH cried after a few more seconds of her punishment. "Chagang can do dishes! Put me down before I throw up."

"Oh, and the takedown!" South Pyongan cried, sliding her off her shoulder and slamming her onto the ground. Fairly gently. "Another victim of progress in the People's Korea!"

"You're the worst," SH moaned. Her nausea made the air around her swirl with more yellow-grey discomfort. But it swirled through sky blue.

"Actually I'm the *best.* Because I *won."* South Pyongan flexed over her supine body, then started for the bunker. "I'll go get my beauty sleep now. And Chagang I swear to the General, if you let her do dishes, you're both going to find out why it's called 'Tiger Fists of Fury' tomorrow."

The door slammed.

'Scary.'

"I doubt there is a reason," Hwang remarked. He read his magazine with one hand. North Pyongan loaded small sacks of rice into the other. "I suspect she just made that up."

"I've never heard her use it before," North Hamgyong confirmed.

"Which means she'll have the freedom to *make* something up

tomorrow," North Pyongan said, finishing loading their cousin up, then lifting his own bags. "I would stay away from dishes if I were you, SH."

Their cousin grumbled. Chagang watched strands of shame rise from her.

Hwang frowned as he finally looked around. "Did Hae go inside already?"

That would have been unusual. She always bided as much time as possible before she went into the bunker. Chagang could see the uneasy dread every time she passed into the mountain, like dark grey and yellow pins stabbing into her arms.

"She went toward the latrines," he said.

Hwang still frowned, olive returning to him. It was out of character for Hae not to ask SH or South Pyongan to go with her.

"I can go check on her," SH said, staggering to her feet. She shook her head clear and brushed off her pants.

"I bet she cracked open your burns," North Hamgyong grunted. Dark blue and light olive coloured the words.

Sometimes Chagang wished his other cousins could see the colours. Looking at SH reminded him not to.

"Only on accident," she said, smiling tightly. "That's the only reason *South Pyongan* would hurt me."

Her words stabbed at North Hamgyong, drawing blood that was tan and a red darker than it should be.

He stormed inside.

"Perhaps you two should schedule a session with Kangwon," Hwang said, his olive deepening.

"Perhaps *you* should have a *lovely* night, Hwang."

"Yes, Comrade General." He scampered away from her, North Pyongan following.

SH huffed, standing up. She eyed Chagang.

"North Pyongan is coming back," he said to defend himself. "He'll tell South Pyongan if you do the dishes."

His cousin huffed. "I'll go get Hae, then. You saw her go for the latrines?"

He nodded. In the same direction, at least.

SH set off, and a minute later North Pyongan returned, taking up his guard post while Chagang set the water they had drawn earlier on the hearth to boil. Jangsan was a relatively small mountain, with no running water sources, so the river was still their closest option. Kangwon worried about intestinal parasites.

Left alone with just the cousin that was in a good mood, Chagang stopped trying to force the colours away completely. His headache eased slightly. He decided to save the ginger candy for another occasion, though his mouth watered thinking about it.

He needed to tame his hunger. They all did. Chagang never complained, but South Pyongan enjoyed it. North Hamgyong didn't, but did it anyway. And Hae would sometimes attach herself to Korea and moan that she was hungry. Her own discomfort from the hunger was almost never visible. She only did it because it was something she felt, and she wanted to comfort herself with their Countryhuman. Her colours were never accusing.

But Korea's alway reacted like they were. Ochre and chartreuse interspersed with drops of maroon like she had stabbed him.

His own hunger was never on display. Like his pain, drops of it would well out of him like he was being squeezed in a vise, before being wicked away. Chagang didn't think he or any of the provinces could manage that. But they didn't have to. Korea thankfully couldn't see the colours. They didn't have to hide it from themselves. All they had to do was hide it from him.

He would have to look for an excuse to bring it up with his cousins. In the meantime...

Chagang eyed North Pyongan over his shoulder. He was gazing intensely into the woods. But dreamy wisps of red and gold drifted around him. They made the hunger more bearable.

"Does Korea know about you and Comrade Liaoxi?"

His cousin made a strangled sound. Alarm bristled like cat hackles.

"M-Me and Liaoxi?" he stammered, then sighed in realization. "Did South Pyongan tell you?"

"No."

His cousin waited expectantly. Chagang watched the water boil.

"You're together, aren't you?" he eventually prompted.

North Pyongan nodded. The embarrassment on his face couldn't be seen through the embarrassment around him. And joy.

"We... are," he said shyly. "And Korea does know. I asked him if it was acceptable."

Chagang had assumed. His cousin wouldn't go behind Korea's back. And Korea had been aiming suspicion and unease at the Chinese woman for a week. More than even when they had first arrived. If he suspected without being told (unlikely), then he would have confronted North Pyongan.

"And he actually said yes?"

"Yes." Azure popped off of his shoulders. "Surprisingly easy."

Odd. Korea wasn't a romantic. Not in that way.

"Does he want you to use your relationship to gain more information from her?"

His cousin shook his head. "I told him I wouldn't be comfortable

trying to sneak it from her anymore, but I said I'll still pass on anything important she tells me. She's aware."

"Why did he agree?"

North Pyongan thought for a moment. "I don't know. But I promised I wouldn't let my feelings for her interfere with my duties. Our country will always come first."

Christians weren't supposed to feel pride. Chagang had yet to meet one that didn't. Violet glowed around North Pyongan.

As it should. Regardless of any other reasons Korea had permitted him to court the Chinese province, it meant he trusted the man to hold to his word. Chagang knew how good that felt.

"She likes you, too," Chagang said.

More joy tinged with surprise came from him. "You think so?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Because Liaoxi masked her emotions like China. The red-gold had to be strong for Chagang to see it.

"I do."

The water had come to a boil. He let it bubble to cleanse the bacteria.

North Pyongan was lost in a giddy cloud of emerald and azure. "I think she does, too."

More crimson and gold lit up the night like fireworks. Chagang missed fireworks. Their colours always echoed in the audience with far more beauty.

After a long moment, he asked, "How did you realize you liked her?"

His cousin raised his brows. "I feel like you're being uncharacteristically curious about this."

"Answer the question."

—

Hae crouched in the trees, watching. The creature watched back, its eyes all shiny as they reflected the moonlight making its way through the treetops. She held her breath.

Slowly, it snuck out of the dark, creeping towards her.

'Slorp slorp slorp.'

Hae wanted to clap with joy as the scrawny yellow dog started to scarf down the rice she'd saved for him, but knew from experience that she'd scare him away again. So she watched, trying not to let the happiness bubblin' under her skin make her vibrate.

Once he was done eating, it didn't matter so much if he ran off, so she chirped, "Howdy."

The dog flinched back, but didn't run away completely like he had the first few times.

"Did you like it?" Hae asked, pointing at the spot on the ground where the rice had been.

The dog snuffled around in the snow like there was more, and she felt bad for gettin' his hopes up.

"Sorry it's just rice again," she apologized. "We ain't- We haven't got meat in a li'l bit."

Korea had fed her meat a few times after she got back from the POW camp, and she'd had a bit of powdered meat soup a few times at the front, but not since then. The last time she'd even seen it had been at China's birthday party.

Hae loved meat, but she knew there were people that needed it more. It was real hard to let their animals grow big enough to make

a good meal when their pastures were gettin' bombed.

The dog looked at her, whinin'.

"Ah'm okay," she assured him. "Ah ate enough earlier."

Her stomach growled. *'Traitor.'*

"You din't hear that."

The dog whined again.

"It's okay," she chirped. "Korea's feedin' me, but you've got no one to feed *you.* So ah'll do it, even if I'm hungry."

She could suck on rocks to make herself forget about her empty belly for a li'l while, but her furry comrade didn't know how to do that. And besides, she'd never be as hungry as in the hole, so it din't really matter.

So whenever she found her mouth waterin' as she thought about pork and beef and chicken and- Um, anyhow, she'd just pop a rock in her mouth and remember that no matter how good the fake pink Yankee meat had tasted in prison, a stone tasted better now that she was free and back with Korea.

The dog flopped down in the snow. Hae felt bad. Dogs didn't know how to squat like people did, and even if they did, they didn't wear boots. His paws and belly must be cold all the time. She wondered if SH could make him little shoes out of fabric she didn't need.

"Oh, ah forgot to tell ya last time!"

Her excitement made the dog jump, and she clapped her hands over her mouth.

"Oops, sorry," she whispered, relieved when he didn't just run off. "Ah'll be quieter."

He chuffed like he was sayin', *'You better,'* before floppin' back down.

"Anyhow," she made sure to whisper. "Korea told me Rim Gun-hon got *got."*

The dog looked confused.

"You don't know him," she explained. "But he was a real bad guy that got people to hurt me, and locked me up. And ah just *know* he hurt some of my people, too."

Her gloves clenched in the snow.

"But he's gone now," she said, relieved. "Korea says our agents heard about it. He said he must'a got sick or somethin'."

Good. Hae knew that even if they couldn't have got the death penalty for him after they were Reunified, Korea would have made sure he still paid for what he did.

But *nothing* he did could pay back what he'd helped do to Sincheon. Hae preferred him bein' dead.

"Dead as a Yankee," she told the dog. "And don't feel bad. He deserved it. Oh! But we're not allowed to tell anyone else, 'cuz Korea doesn't want anyone havin' too much information, in case we get captured again."

She thought that was a li'l silly. The no-good yellow-bellied bastard had been one of the Southern One's, so wouldn't he already know he was dead? So would 'Merica, since Korea said he ran the Southern army.

But if Korea wanted her not to tell anyone, then it couldn't be silly, and so she'd keep her mouth shut.

The dog looked at her with his big brown eyes, and Hae was pretty sure his li'l eyebrows were furrowed.

"It's okay," she assured him. "Ah'm not actually goin' to get caught again. Korea wouldn't let that happen. Ah'll still be around to feed you."

The dog looked happy about that. Hae inched forward, reaching out

her hand, and-

He jumped up and back, givin' a li'l warning yip.

Hae pouted, sitting back on her haunches, foiled again. "Dang it."

"Hae."

The province jumped up guiltily, and the dog scrambled away into the woods, quick as a rabbit.

"Wait!" she called, spinnin' around. "Don't go! She's friendly!"

He was already gone.

Sighing, she turned back to SH, tryin' not to look too guilty.

"Howdy, SH."

Her cousin crossed her arms. Even though all the evidence was gone, she put it together immediately 'cuz she was real smart.

"You were feeding the rest of your dinner to that dog, weren't you?"

"No," Hae muttered, diggin' her toe in the dirt. "Ah mean yes. Aw shucks!"

SH sighed. "Hae..."

"Ah know," she said glumly. "Korea wouldn't be happy. But he din't tell me not to," she quickly added.

He knew the dog was hangin' around the mountain. He just didn't know it was because she'd been feeding him ever since she saw him that first time.

"I'm not happy," SH told her, real distressed-like. "You're already on half rations. You can't be giving half of *that* away to a stray."

The words she'd been planning on using on Korea if he caught her burst out.
"Buthe'ssocoldan'lonelyan'hungryan'he'srealskinnyan'ahdin'twanthimrootin'a

"Ppang?" SH interrupted.

"'Cuz the first thing ah fed him was a bit'a that steamed bread we had that one time," she said proudly.

SH shook her head. "It's better than 'Clucky' at least."

"She died for her country," Hae said sadly, rememberin' all her favourite moments with their chicken, like when she ate her. "And she was delicious."

SH looked happy that she'd praised her cooking. That was promisin'.

Hae rounded her eyes. "You din't actually *see* me feed him, did ya?"

SH looked like she knew where she was goin'. "No."

"So you could maybe just think ah was lyin' when ah said ah was, and not tell Korea?"

SH squinted at her. Hae slumped.

She knew even if SH had said yes, she'd feel bad about it. 'Cuz then SH was sort of lying to Korea, and she didn't want to make her do that. And it would feel like she was, too.

"If you stop feeding it, I won't tell him," SH offered hopefully.

Hae looked over at where Ppang had went, then admitted, "Ah won't stop unless Korea tells me to."

She couldn't just leave Ppang out in the cold with no food. But she knew she couldn't bring him into the shelter. Korea had always been real firm that she wasn't allowed to bring a pet home unless it was a chicken (and that was a temporary pet since the second she stopped layin' eggs, she'd end up like Clucky). So the least she could do was give the poor puppy dinner, even if it was just a li'l bit of rice.

"I'm sorry, Hae," her cousin said, all gentle-like as she put a hand on her shoulder. "If you won't stop feeding it, then the only way I won't

tell Korea is if you stop pooling half your rations with us. That way you'll still be eating... the same as everyone else."

SH couldn't say 'enough.' None of 'em were eating enough. And their people weren't either.

Hae looked down. "No. Our folks need that."

She really liked Ppang, and wanted to help him. But he was still just a dog. People came first.

"I'm sorry, Hae," SH apologized again.

"Korea's goin' to be mad." He'd probably yell at her.

But he'd be disappointed if she'd chosen Ppang over their people. And that would be worse.

"He'll be mad at *all* of us once he realizes what we're doing," her cousin sighed. "But I'll try to catch him in a good mood once he gets back. I don't want him to be mad at you, I just don't want you to starve."

She was pleadin' with her eyes for Hae to understand.

"Ah know you're just lookin' out for me," she assured her.

She knew she wasn't eating enough. The others weren't either, but she *really* wasn't. She wasn't lonely or bored, but she was *hungry hungry hungry* all the time. Not as bad as the hole, but it still felt like her insides were all hollow. Sometimes when she was suckin' on a rock, her body made her swallow it, hoping it was real food.

But it still made her sad she wasn't goin' to be able to feed Ppang anymore, especially when she'd just promised she would.

"Can ah still hang out with him, even if ah can't feed him?" she asked hopefully.

"The dog?"

"Ayuh."

She'd feel guilty not bringing him food, but at least she could give him a friend.

"I don't think Korea would make you stop." SH looked out into the woods. "Unless it has rabies, or looks sick."

Hae shook her head vigorously. "Nope! His nose an' eyes are all clear, and he doesn't snap at me or anythin'. He's just skinny, and growls a li'l when ah try to pet him."

"Maybe don't try and pet him," SH disappointedly advised. "Dogs have dirty mouths. We don't want to give Kangwon another patient."

Hae pushed out her bottom lip, eyes growing wider.

Her cousin sighed. "If he seems nice, you can try petting him again. Just be careful."

"Ura! SH!" Hae glomped to her side. "Ah'm still sad you're tellin' Korea on me, though."

She put an arm around her. "If it's any consolation, you probably would have accidentally told him soon anyway."

"Ah know," Hae sighed.

If Korea told her not to tell somethin', she was a locked box. But when it came to her own things she din't want to tell, she was as leaky as the woven sedge baskets she'd made back when they were all first learning.

She looked over her shoulder as SH took her back to the bunker, but Ppang hadn't returned.

Hae knew her cousin was just lookin' out for her, and she knew it was probably good Korea was goin' to tell her to eat more, and make sure she did. But her belly felt sick knowing she had to wait for him to yell at her.

No matter how hungry she was, she knew that would feel worse.

An important notice- I read a date in my notes wrong (never ask to see my handwriting in any language), so I took the part about voluntary repatriation out of Protectors' Onus to be used later. If you want, you can go back and read North's POV in that chapter again since it will provide a little bit of context for the next chapter. If not, you should be able to use context clues to get it. Sorry for the confusion!

China wishes that he smoked solely so someone could ask for a light, and he could lean over and use the cigarette in his mouth to sensually light the one in theirs. The reasons he doesn't are myriad- against taking anything even vaguely druglike; you can fake being a smoker for a role by spending time in a smoking parlour, but you can't fake *not* being a smoker (as someone whose parents smoke, the scent is not maskable); doesn't want yellow teeth- but this one pro comes very close to outweighing the cons.

Personality confirmed. My friend saw one of the bears a week ago and didn't tell me until today. She said she was scared I would try to hunt it. She is right.

Hunger

Another ‘Christmas’ had passed without America and MacArthur’s ‘Home By Christmas’ plan being realized. The provinces had thrown a celebration to commemorate it, and to celebrate one year since North had broken Kangwon, Hae, and South Pyongan out of the POW holding camp.

Yet North couldn’t make himself feel smug. He, his people, and the Chinese volunteers may have been able to withstand America and his puppets, and take half his stolen land back. But it was only half.

And the rest of his provinces were still prisoners of war.

He hadn’t heard anything since the news about Rim Gun-hon. The assassin had gone into deep-cover, and he had no way to get in contact with Pak Seo-nam. And he couldn’t risk contacting his agent again. All he could do was… get a ceasefire.

Another thing that had passed- the thirty-day limit to sign. The battleline hadn’t changed much, but would still need to be negotiated again. America had got his extension.

Seven days of refusing to discuss the POW issue at all, until with the deadline rapidly approaching, North and China’s negotiators had handed over their list of prisoners in hopes of forcing him to talk. Every non-Korean prisoner’s name, rank, and unit, painstakingly translated into English, and every Korean’s in their proper language.

And in exchange, they had been given a list of one hundred thirty-two thousand men and women. Just their names. In English.

It was near worthless, just like the next one the Yanks sent, only two days before the deadline. Their people’s names had been poorly transliterated into their respective languages. Korean had a limited alphabet, so English characters could carry over acceptably with a

bit of guesswork. But with how China's language worked, matching sounds wasn't enough. His characters had multiple readings, and it was clear that they hadn't been considered.

The Americans had the reactionaries, and they had China's Nationalists. There was no excuse for the botched translations.

And there had been no excuse for the lists being short forty four thousand people. Forty four *thousand* missing between the reports the Americans sent to the Red Cross, and the ones given to them. America's Libby had insisted they were civilians from the south that had been released, before changing his story a few days later, and claiming they were still waiting to be screened.

North couldn't know if the number represented those killed in the camps that the Americans wanted to hide, men taken for the reactionary guerrillas, to be snuck back into the north to commit assassinations and sabotage, as the man South Pyongan had captured had confessed to, or if they really were just awaiting screening. Whichever one it was, as they waited for a new list that Libby had spitefully said would come 'eventually,' time had ran out.

And North knew it would run out again. No matter how many deadlines were set for a ceasefire, America would meet none of them.

'Persevere.' They just had to keep persevering, to prove that Korea would not be conquered. They had to be more trouble than they were worth to America. North had to force him to give up on his country.

He had to get his brother back.

He stopped in the middle of the road out of Pyongyang, looking back. "Stop following me."

China did, tilting his masked head. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes." North hadn't. He'd only known he would be there.

The other man gave an unconvinced hum. "Where are you heading off to with that, I wonder?"

North shifted the small straw sack in his arms, attempting to hide it without putting it behind his back. “None of your business.”

China’s eyes squinched. “A tiger father really doesn't raise canine sons. Though that’s not always a good thing.”

“I’m not in the mood for this. Go away.” North turned, starting off. “I *said* go away.”

“You didn’t say it spitefully enough,” China said, still from right behind him. “So I’ll accompany you to the mountains. Unless you want to scare me off again?”

North realized where they were, but didn’t let it show. He kept walking.

“Fine. But leave once we get to the foothills.”

“As you wish, Comrade General.” China slid smoothly to his seeing side.

They walked down the road, powdery snow sloughing around North’s boots, while every one of China’s steps landed lightly, barely disturbing the terrain as he walked in the path of cart tracks.

North’s skin shivered as they passed that field. The tips of winter wheat poked out of the snow, the wind having finally freed them from the blanket that last week’s blizzard had dumped on them. The fields stretched out, pure and untouched. You would never know that the remains of over thirty people had been pulled out of a mass grave on its edge almost a year ago.

North knew. He had faces and names to match the feeling in his bones now.

How many of those forty four thousand missing names were lying in mass graves in the south? When it was finally Liberated, how many new places would send that shiver through his skin? Would he even be able to set foot on Jeju or Geoje Island without his insides being hollowed out with grief and refilled with rage?

How could South?

He didn't look toward the field, but China did, his slender eyes scanning it. North waited for him to say something about last year, but his eyes only met his for a moment, then looked away.

He wondered if China could feel that same feeling. Was the suffering of their people bound to their lands, or could they find it wherever they went? If North crossed the Amnok and retraced the trail of the Arduous March, would he feel himself walking in the footsteps of those he had lost? Would China have to feel the loss of hundreds of thousands of his people every time he crossed the Amnok and Chongchon?

Would he feel it at Chorweon?

North didn't want to know. He wanted China to say something. He wanted an excuse to get mad at him to get rid of the heavy feeling pressing down on him like snow on winter wheat, or earth over a mass grave. But no matter what he said to antagonize the other man, he just hummed, or responded like North had been genuine, denying him the satisfaction.

"Are you simple?" North eventually demanded, going for a blunt attack.

"I prefer the term 'uncomplicated.'"

"Or slow." He knew China wasn't. And he also knew he had to have a threshold for what he would take from another country.

"'Slow the river flows, swift thoughts do fly. When river rushes forth, deep reflection does die.'"

It clearly wasn't this, though.

They had fought before. If North held him down in the snow, maybe it would be humiliating enough to goad him into it again.

He wasn't heading for the Hyongjes this time. Shortly after the mass grave, North had turned down a narrower road, heading towards Mount Taesong.

"We're here," he said, stopping as they reached the foothills,

holding his straw sack tight to stop himself from doing what his body wanted. “Leave.”

“Alright,” China said, surprisingly easily. “But take this first.”

He reached into his bulky padded winter jacket, and pulled out another small sack, like the one North was holding.

The Korean stared at it.

“Take it,” the other country urged.

“I won’t take your rations.” North took an instinctive step back as he realized what China was offering. “You need them.”

The ones he had left when he went to the trial had been one thing. He’d had to be eating in his own country. But the man’s high cheekbones had started to look too sharp lately.

China raised his eyebrows wryly. “But you don’t need yours?”

“These aren’t my rations,” North denied, trying to hide them again. “It’s donated grains.”

“Mm,” China hummed skeptically. “Then that’s what these are, too. Take them. Consider it a gift for over a year of friendship.”

North’s eye flicked down.

It had been a year and almost two months since they had met on the outskirts of Kanggye. One year, two months, and thirteen days since the People’s Volunteer Army had crossed the Amnok.

A year since China had left his country for Korea.

“I’ve been waiting for you to commemorate the anniversary of the kindling of our fires of friendship,” China sighed, still holding the sack of grain out. “But I suppose you’ve forgotten.”

“We aren’t friends,” North growled, trying to inject anger into his voice. “And you should go home.”

“Is that an order?” China lilted.

North’s jaw feathered as he looked away. “You have fought for a year. Any debt you or yours owed to my people is paid.”

“You’re not the one who decides that, I’m afraid,” the other man said. “Especially when you don’t believe in the concept of debts. If I left now, mine would still feel unpaid.”

“You aren’t *doing* anything here,” North stressed. “You haven’t seen combat in months, and you can’t reveal yourself to bolster your soldiers. All you’re doing is giving America another chance to drag you into court.”

“I like to think I’m doing something *very* important here,” China said with an offense North hoped was genuine before it was clear it wasn’t. “I’m keeping you company.”

“You are the *worst* company I have ever had,” North growled, frustration twisting inside him. “Does the fact that I don’t want you around me mean *nothing* to you?”

“Very little,” China airily acknowledged. “You’ll recall me mentioning that it’s a possibly I enjoy being yelled at.”

“That’s not what I-“

North cut himself off, clenching his fists.

He knew it didn't. China had been lying when he said North had power over him, it was obvious with how he liked looking for any possible loophole in what he was told to do. There was no way he didn’t secretly enjoy laughing at him when he denied what he wanted, like right now and every time he followed him or slept in his room. Even if North never actually ordered him to leave, it was because he shouldn’t *have* to. China should just *listen.* But he didn’t because he was arrogant, aloof, and liked feeling smarter than everyone around him.

So why did he tolerate North treating him like this?

He had to want something from him. Even if that wasn’t why he

was here, even if paying he and his people's 'debt' to North's was really what had brought him to Korea, there *had* to be something else he wanted. Otherwise he would stay with his mobile Command or go fight at the front. He wouldn't still be putting up with North.

"Was that enough to make you feel better?" China asked, unfazed by the low growl rumbling in the Korean's throat. "Or do you need to yell at me properly? Because if it's the latter, I suggest we head back to the bunker. Sound carries in the foothills."

North's skin still prickled, and his insides felt uncomfortably tight. But he couldn't afford a repeat of what had happened outside Anbyon.

"Give me the grain and get out of here," he growled, snatching the sack from China.

His fingers dug into the woven straw, into the grains beneath. Rice. A full day's worth.

China smiled, wrapping the grey and white scarf more snugly around his neck.

North held the grain tightly, opened his mouth, then snapped it shut and started his hike into the mountains.

His shoulders itched, telling him to turn around and make sure China really was leaving. But he refused. He knew even if he was, the man would be looking back at him. He didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

He wouldn't return to the bunker tonight. Hae needed to be reprimanded over what SH had told him this morning, but he would do it tomorrow. Sleeping in the same room as China was out of the question. And it was New Year's Eve. His provinces would want some sort of acknowledgement. He couldn't take that right now, not when he had to make a speech tomorrow.

He had to. He couldn't let his soldiers and the rest of his people think he was blaming them for the war not being over. Not again.

As the terrain around him became more sloped, and the severed

tree trunks started to be replaced by those still standing, North's breath came in shorter, sharper bursts, and his head started to spin. The heavy pall of exhaustion that had been draped over him sank down into his bones, trying to force him to lean against a tree to catch his breath.

He grit his teeth, pushing through it, ignoring the black fuzz that obscured his view of the snowy mountain forest.

Truthfully, before his outburst he wouldn't have... entirely minded if China made the hike with him, so long as he left before North did what he had to. He was ambivalent towards the idea at least. Unlike last year, he hadn't been going to do something classified- fetching the book of names his agent had left for him. There were no American tire tracks on the road to boil his blood, and the old mass grave at the edge of the field was as disconnected from China and his soldiers as it could be. He knew by now that the other country wouldn't attempt to assassinate him, and while North was restless and churning with irritation, he hadn't been filled with that wild fury that made his chest grow tight and made him think *he* might actually hurt his comrade.

But his chest *was* tight. Each filling of his lungs took more energy than he had, but if he didn't breathe deeply enough, it felt like those dregs drained without being replenished. The exhaustion pressed harder on him, trying to drive him down into the snow.

North knew why he felt this way. But unlike the others, for him it was a purely physical problem. And he wasn't weak enough to let it conquer him. Or to let another country witness the fight.

With China gone, he was free to move the rock he had slipped into his cheek back onto his tongue, rolling it around in his mouth. He would have removed it before he reached the spot in Mount Taesong's eastern foothills, if he had known someone would be there.

North knocked on the door, not expecting anyone to answer, allowing him to hide the sack inside like he usually did.

So he tensed as someone called, "Who's there?" in a tight, nervous

tone.

He hesitated, then shook his head, slipping the rock into his cheek again. “Korea.”

“Comrade Korea.” There was a note of surprise in Oh Tae-min’s voice, but the tightness was still there, one North knew well. “Come in.”

North slipped in, pleased when shutting the door didn’t rattle the entire thin frame of the hut. South Pyongan had done most of the work, and she had done it well. He would consider her capital surveys as the final test. If she did them well, he would make sure she ended up in the Ministry of State Construction Control. The classes would just be formalities- he knew she could muster the patience and discipline now that she wanted to.

The thought of the classes he had assigned all of them before the war began made his shoulders feel heavier. But he kept them straight, focusing on the boy in front of him.

Oh Tae-min had pushed past a thin curtain that divided the house in two, and was leaning heavily on his cane. North could tell by the lines around his dark eyes and the tension in the reddened knuckles clutching at the carved magpie atop his aid that he had identified the feeling in his voice correctly.

“Sit,” he said, nodding to the roughly-carved low wood table, and Oh Tae-min gratefully lowered himself down, his lame leg trembling.

“I’m working,” he assured him, hands tight around the edge of the table. “I’m sewing jackets in o- in the bedroom. I sleep in there, and Han-jin sleeps in here.” He gestured at the small sitting room and the shelf with their sparse collection of cooking utilities with a sudden burst of frantic energy. “And I was just in there working. I just…”

His gaze lowered to the table as the energy drained, gripping it tighter. “Couldn’t make the walk down to the aid station today.”

The ache in North's hip might still have not came back, but he had lived with it for most his life. And he still had others. He knew how it could feel when winter got its jaws into your bones. And he could tell by the set of the boy's jaw and the look in his eyes that offering any empathy wouldn't be appreciated, thankfully allowing him to get straight to business.

"I brought you and Hyun Han-jin extra rations." North set the sack he had brought on the table.

China's contribution would go to another family. He might bring it to the young girl SH and Kangwon had been looking after- Yun Jin-suk- and her father. It had been a few weeks since his last delivery.

Oh Tae-min's eyes widened as he felt the straw sack, and the rice shifting inside it.

"I can't accept this," he said, looking up at North.

He wasn't the first to say it.

"It's part of a program decided on by the Food Administration Bureau," North lied by rote. "Through the creative efforts of our peasants, a few counties were able to overfill their projected harvests this year. As thanks for the State's efforts in cutting taxes and loaning out farming supplies, the patriots have kept up the tradition of donating the excess."

That part was true. But it went to their soldiers, factory workers, and storehouses, not non-productive workers that had already received their rations.

"You have been selected for this round," North told Oh Tae-min. "If you've ever came home to grain deliveries before, it was likely because of that."

"No, I know that," he said, which was strange, since North had made it up, and he hadn't been around to tell it to when he made his previous drops. "But we already received ours today."

The Countryhuman's eye narrowed. "You did."

Oh Tae-min nodded, his brows furrowing. “Comrade North Pyongan always brings it for us. He brought today’s by earlier.”

He tilted his head at the corner, and North stalked to the clay pot there, opening the lid to find a layer of rice on the bottom. More than there should be for two boys on non-productive worker's rations.

His jaw feathered.

“Comrade Korea?” Oh Tae-min prompted. “Is something wrong?”

North turned around, expression composed. “No. It seems a mistake was made at distribution. I need to ask a few questions, so that nothing like this happens again.”

Oh Tae-min seemed confused and slightly wary, but he answered his questions, winding North tighter.

When he was done, he departed and, working off a growing suspicion, visited Yun Jin-suk’s dug-out.

She was in a private session with a female tutor Hwang had helped set up, but her father graciously informed him that they had already received today’s donation, and had been periodically. North knew that he’d been receiving some because *he* had been the one making them, and had told him the reason why.

But he didn’t have the supplies to make them ‘periodically.’

North gave him China’s gift, since it was technically extra and Yun Jin-suk needed to make up for the months she had spent wasting, then set off to scour the hills, hands balled into fists.

A young single mother with a son and daughter, a worker at the Paper Mill whose grandmother had a lung infection, the umployed father of a student at Kim Il-sung University. They all had the same story- they had been receiving donations from their Provincehumans, who told them a story about how it was excess on behalf of the State, the same story *North* had been telling people. And he had no doubt that if he were to visit the refugees in his provinces, he could find some that told the same story.

Now he knew why South Hamgyong had been so worried when she told him Hae had been giving half her rations to that mutt.

At the end of the day, blood boiling, he burst into the hospital, interrupting Kangwon just as he was sliding the IV out of his heavily bruised arm, a fresh bag of blood hanging on the pole.

"Kangwon," he growled, and the man flinched back, his guilty body language already telling him everything he needed to know.

"With me. *Now.*"

—

SH squatted by the agungi, her olive gloves draped across her thigh so the fire could warm her palms directly. Hae huddled beside her, bundled up in her red scarf and long coat. The thick fabric couldn't muffle the sound of her stomach rumbling.

"Comrade Mao Zhilong," her cousin said, looking up with eyes round and white enough that it didn't matter the moon hanging above them was only a pale sickle. "Do ya have any more candy ah could have?"

Hae's endless spirals of guilt at accepting presents from him had finally been ended by Korea firmly telling her that so long as she *asked* China for something, it wasn't a bribe.

SH knew Korea didn't like having her ask the foreign country for food, which meant he must have been sick of Hae flinging herself at his feet to beg for forgiveness once a week. And it might mean he didn't expect China to actually attempt to bribe her, or at least not to get anything out of it.

'Which means he could be ***nicer*** *to him.'* And *stop stealing his darn Jeep.*

China upended his long, bell-shaped sleeve, shaking it over his gloved hand.

Nothing came out.

“Sorry, Little Tiger,” he said ruefully, tucking his hands back into his sleeves. “It’s been awhile since I received a care package. But once I do, you’ll be the first person I look for.”

Hae pouted. “Okay.” At SH’s nudge, she added, “Thank you.”

She went back to watching North Pyongan as he made more of their powdered potato soup, like a tiger watching a deer from the dappled shadows of the forest.

“Hungryyyyyy,” South Pyongan moaned, draping herself over her brother. “Hurry *upppppp.”*

“I could cook faster if you weren’t on top of me,” he politely noted, and she moaned louder.

“I could cook faster,” SH offered in vain.

North Pyongan always took his time, letting the soup simmer for almost an hour, and adding seasonings pinch by pinch. They didn’t have any that weren’t salt and gochugaru (another gift from Comrade Kim Song-ae) right now, but he was still adding them almost by the grain.

“On second thought, take as much time as you need, brother,” South Pyongan said hastily, releasing him. “Sorry, SH, but you failed to kill us that first New Year’s. You’re not getting another chance.”

SH huffed. Her soup hadn’t been *that-*

She felt the burnt bits in the thick grey sludge crunch beneath her teeth with the kind of mental clarity that should be reserved solely for things that were happening in the moment, and shuddered.

Okay, it had been that bad. But it had been her first time cooking! She’d gotten at least *slightly* better since then. Her food could be considered edible. Broadly.

‘Maybe I should be painting those memories away, too.’

“I think you’re all exaggerating,” Liaotung said from her spot next

to Liaoxi. “Comrade SH can’t be that bad at cooking.”

They had a full seating set-up now, with fallen logs and rocks arranged around the cooking area. The bunker was becoming a proper base.

It made the thing behind the wall pace faster. It never rested nowadays, just stalked back and forth from the moment she woke to the moment her head hit the pillow, turning to howling and clawing at the wall whenever she thought about the ships lined up off her coast, or the ruins that covered her lands where Hungnam had once stood, or the hollow-cheeked, empty-eyed people lined up for ration distribution, or that this was still wasn’t over and Yankees were still drawing breath in their country.

Or her brother.

“You’d be wrong,” he grunted to Liaotung. “She’s shit.”

“At least *I* help out,” SH said tightly, nails curled into her palm. “You could try cooking, you know.”

North Hamgyong snorted. “Why would I? *I* know I’m not any damn good at it.”

The dark thing snarled, but before SH could bite back, Chagang suddenly let out a strangled sound.

They all looked at him in alarm as he clutched his head.

SH’s brows drew in. “Cha-“

“Korea’s coming,” he gasped out, and a moment later they heard the crunching of snow as Korea stormed towards the clearing.

All the Korean provinces jumped to their feet, immediately sensing the darkness he brought with him as he halted amongst them, his eye shooting straight to Hae.

SH’s chest tightened at the fury she saw in it, and she stepped slightly in front of her cousin. He hadn’t seemed this angry when she’d talked to him earlier.

But his glare didn't stop on her. It moved to SH, burning into her skin before moving to each of her cousins, one by one, the firelight painting his face in red light and deep shadows.

The Chinese provinces shifted nervously in their seats, understanding that something was wrong.

China seemed unbothered. "I didn't expect you to be back-"

"Leave," Korea interrupted, not tearing his eye from the Korean provinces. "Take your provinces with you, and don't come back tonight."

Liaoxi and Liaotung looked to China, their expressions tableaus of unease.

He rose. "Come on, Little Sisters. Comrade Korea is in charge, so let's be obedient."

They climbed into the Jeep, and drove away, Liaoxi looking back at North Pyongan. He remained straight-faced, like SH and the others.

As they waited for China to leave, more snow crunched, and Kangwon jogged up, chest rising and falling deliberately slow as he tried to catch his breathing.

"Korea-" he tried, clearly not for the first time.

"Shut. *Up,"* Korea growled.

Kangwon winced, and SH caught his eye. She crinkled her brows, and he darted a look at the pot on the stove, then flattened his lips.

'Oh no.' They had known this was coming. But that didn't stop the dread from coiling in SH's stomach.

Korea stood amongst them, his muscles visibly wound tight with rage.

"Korea?" SH prompted, keeping her voice neutral. "What's wrong?"

North Pyongan went to take the pot off the stove, and Korea snapped at him, “Keep it on!”

The male province did, keeping his gaze down as he kept stirring.

Korea crossed his arms, still glowering at them all. “Carry on.”

Hwang’s notes had been set down long ago. “If you could just tell us-“

“Carry. On.”

Hwang shrank down, and so did Hae, cringing into SH’s side.

“Korea,” she ventured, her voice small. “Ah’m real sorry for feedin’ Pp- the dog.”

He gave her a scathing look that could have obliterated someone else, let alone Hae. She hung her head, wilting like a dead flower.

Korea had told them to carry on, but none of them could with him standing there, radiating a tangible aura of fury. SH could feel it inside her, crushing her heart in its grasp and making her organs feel watery. The dark thing had finally gone quiet, slinking back from a force greater than it.

The provinces all remained standing, stiffly avoiding Korea’s eye as North Pyongan kept cooking in silence. The tension in the air could have been cut with a knife.

North Hamgyong tore through it. “This is bullshit. We know why you’re so fucking pissed. Just get it over with.”

Korea looked at him from under lowered brows. “I would *advise* you to stay quiet.”

And because SH’s brother wasn’t a complete idiot, he did.

North Pyongan stood back from the soup, hesitating as he peeked at Korea from the corner of his eye.

“Go on,” their Countryhuman said coldly. “Get your rations.”

North Pyongan did, tentatively taking the cooked rice from their clay pot to add to the soup.

"No," Korea said sharply. "Separate."

"I was going to make juk," the province said quietly.

"And now you are not."

North Pyongan started to plate their rice, adding some to each bowl, and probably regretting not letting SH cook after all.

SH cursed their bad timing. Most days they at least would've had the rest of the grains set aside, but since tonight was New Year's Eve, they had wanted to make sure some of their people could have a good meal. The deliveries had been done early.

With the rice and soup in their tin bowls, Korea turned to look coldly at the others.

"Come get your dinner."

SH was standing closest, so she grabbed hers first, passing Hae's over to her. At Korea's direction, they went over to their seats, perching on the fallen log. SH cupped her frozen hands around the hot soup, watching it steam in the frigid air. Her stomach growled loud enough to hear, but she didn't dare touch her spoon.

When everyone was seated parallel along two of the fallen logs, Korea stood before them, backlit by the flickering fire. No one met his eye.

When he finally spoke, his voice was as icy as the frozen spears hanging from the tree boughs above. "Does that look like enough food to you?"

SH looked down at her brimming bowl of potato water, and her quarter-full bowl of rice.

No one answered.

"I said, *'Does that look like enough food to you?'"*

Sitting closest to him, SH took the fall, making sure her voice was clear and concise as she said, “No, Korea.”

“No.” He curled his lip at her. “And I know for a fact that the rations for an office worker are enough to live off of. So *where are the rest of yours?”*

South Pyongan hand went up. “Hey, before this goes any farther, I’d like to request leaving me out of it. Look. Full bowl.” She tilted it at him. “And it’s not just ‘cuz North Pyongan’s playing favourites. It’s because I’m being responsible and eating my portion.”

“But your brother *hasn’t.”* Korea shot a glare at the man next to her that made him flinch. “He has been giving half his rations to Hyun Han-jin and Oh Tae-min for the past five months.”

That was longer than they’d had the pact for, like with SH and Jin-suk.

“And *who* fed them when he was deployed on his mission?” Korea switched his glare back to South Pyongan, who winced.

“I haven’t done it recently?” she tried weakly, then hastily caved. “Okay yeah, no recess for me. Got it.”

North Pyongan tried to defend himself. “Korea, they couldn’t receive rations when they were first discharged from the hospital. I had to-“

“They are now!” Korea snapped. “Most of the people you idiots are giving your food away to are on rations!”

“Korea,” Hae piped up in a tiny voice, fidgeting with her mittens. “Ya shouldn’t yell at Hambu at least. He ain’t got nothin’ to do with this.”

Hwang didn’t correct her for once, following Korea’s gaze at it swept across the clearing to land on North Hamgyong, hunched over next to Chagang.

SH’s brother met his eyes defiantly, crossing his arms.

“Kim Mae-jon.” Korea said the name as an accusation, and North Hamgyong *‘tch’*ed. “She also receives rations.”

“It’s not enough,” he growled. “She’s got two growing kids, and they don’t understand why they can’t eat as much as they used to.”

SH blinked in shock at the realization that her brother had been giving away his rations with them.

But now that she thought about it, she realized that with how he always ate standing off to the side, she’d never seen his bowl. And she usually tried not to look at him in order to keep the angry thing quiet.

Now peering across the few feet between them, she could see the rice bowl at his feet was just as empty as hers.

“I could have arranged something!” Korea snapped.

North Hamgyong snorted. “Like what? We know damn well the State is wearing itself out as it is.”

“I would have worked something out,” Korea insisted.

The others stayed quiet. They knew what Korea’s ‘something’ would have been. He had promised the same thing to North Pyongan for the two young men, and to SH for Jin-suk. It was why they had days when they could give their rations to someone else in need. It was where they had gotten their ‘donated excess’ story from.

North Hamgyong didn’t have the same tact.

“You don’t get enough rations to feed everyone,” he said. “And you don’t have any right to get pissy with us when *you’re doing the exact same damn thing.”*

“You need your rations!” Korea snarled, advancing on him, making the Pyongans lean away and Chagang curl in on himself. “How do you expect to function when you’re eating next to nothing?!”

Before any of them could protest his hypocrisy, he whirled on Hae,

eye flashing.

"And *you."*

Hae shrank as he stormed towards them, looming over her.

"Put your bowls down," he ordered, and she meekly obeyed, setting them on the ground.

Immediately, Korea grabbed Hae's collar, hauling her up with a squeak.

It was rare for him to get handsy with the small woman, and it made SH reached for him in alarm. "Korea-"

He smacked her hand away, not even looking at her.

"You haven't even been giving your rations to our people," he snarled in her face. "You've been giving half to a fucking *dog.* Every single damn time you've complained about being hungry while your dinner is sitting in some useless mutt's stomach! How many fucking meals have you missed?"

"Ah've been-"

"How many?"

Hae's gaze dropped, her voice choked past the collar Korea was twisting against her neck. "A lot."

Her honesty was clear in how easily Korea had lifted her off her feet with a single hand.

"Are you stupid?" he demanded, and Hae's eyes widened in hurt.

"Ah'm not! Ya know ah'm not!"

"You are." He dropped her aggressively enough that SH had to stop her from falling over backwards before rounding on the rest of them.

"You're *all* fucking *idiots!"* he snarled, eye blazing. "You are given

exactly enough to keep you healthy. What do you think happens when you don't eat it? You can't supplement rice with fucking flavoured water!"

"And you aren't even eating that," Kangwon pointed out.

"This is not about me!" Korea shouted, and the province's shoulders hunched. "I need you all fully functioning. If you're passing out and making wrong decisions because you're too stupid to eat what you're given, then you are *useless* to me and there's no point in risking keeping you active. If you want to eat less calories, then why don't I lock you up so you don't need as many. Is that what you want?"

"No, Korea," SH answered for them, staying seated so he wouldn't feel threatened. "But you can't go off on us like this when you're doing the exact same thing but worse. You're eating even less than us-"

"Because I can take it!" Korea burst out, rounding on her. *"I* am strong enough to get by without eating. *You* aren't."

South Pyongan pursed her lips at that, and he whirled to her like he'd sensed it. "What do you think people will think if their provinces are walking around as skin and bones on the edge of passing out? How does that reflect on our country? What does that say about the war effort?"

"What does it say if our *Countryhuman* is walking around as skin and bones?" SH demanded, rescuing South Pyongan from his attention.

"I always look like this!" Korea snapped, sunken eye blown wide above his hollow cheekbones. *"You* don't. People can tell, they're talking. And hunger doesn't affect me- it *does* affect you. I've noticed that you're all exhausted, I have *noticed* when your minds wander because you can't think about anything other than food. I thought it was because of the empathetic hunger, but clearly I was fucking wrong."

SH knew he was right. Despite her best efforts, she would

sometimes catch herself focusing more on her stomach than words being said to her. But she also knew he was wrong about himself.

"We're used to going without food, too, Korea," she reminded him. "We ate just as little as you during the war against Japan."

"It's different!" he snarled, even though it shouldn't have been. "We have food now, we have fields and a Food Administration Bureau, and rations. *You shouldn't have to go hungry!"*

His words echoed up the mountain as his chest heaved up and down, his breath clouding the air in erratic bursts of icy mist.

SH paused, her eyes flicking to Kangwon. He was watching Korea's back sadly, realizing what she and likely their other cousins had.

The Southern Hamgyong lowered her eyes. "We just wanted to help, Korea."

"I know," he said, quieter, though no less furious. "And if you had excess food to give, I would be praising you. But *you do not.* And I will not have my provinces starving themselves."

"But it's okay when you do it?" North Hamgyong challenged.

"I am not starving myself," Korea lied to their faces. "I know my limits."

North Hamgyong curled his lip, echoing SH's own disbelief.

Korea drew himself up, glaring again as he addressed all of them.

"No more. You are going to eat everything you are given, and if you give away or waste a single grain of rice then I am going to have you locked up until the war is over."

"Korea-"

He ignored SH again, glaring at Hae.

"And if I hear you gave *any* more of your rations to that mutt, I am

going to skin it and make you wear the fur as a coat."

Hae's gold flower paled at the very real threat, likely remembering the animal furs Korea had brought them to keep warm during Paektusan winters.

"But he's hungry," she protested, bottom lip trembling.

"And so are you," Korea growled. "And *you* are the one I give a damn about."

He levelled his glower at all of them. "I am *not* letting any of you starve."

"But what about the people we've been supplying?" North Pyongan fretted. "Tae-min and Han-jin can get by on rations and what the women at the aid station bring them, but some of the others can't."

"Yes," Hwang piped up. "I've been cautious when supplying anything to our lumpenproletariat, but Mr. Sin Hi-sam is only unemployed because a mental ailment makes it difficult for him to work anywhere with loud noises. The air raid he was caught in left an indelible impact on him."

"Jin-suk needs more than what she gets as a student, too," SH spoke up. "They're not war dependents, and her father only makes money collecting firewood."

She still didn't like the man, but she didn't want the girl to lose the last family she had left. Her brother was still missing in action, and without the proper list of POWs from the Americans, they couldn't know if he was in a camp down south or dead.

Kangwon nodded. "I haven't been giving away as much as everyone else, but I help with them sometimes. It's my opinion as a doctor that they both need to eat more."

"And what the fuck am I supposed to tell Kim and her brats?" North Hamgyong demanded. "'Sorry, you're on your own now?'"

Hae's lip was still quivering, but she overcame it to say,

“KoreaComradeAe-
janeedsjuktogetbetteran’ahjus’metsomeorphansoutsideHaejuan’they’rereact

Chagang had been giving away his rations just like them, but he didn’t add to their words. SH noted with concern that his chin was pressed to his chest, his eyes squeezed shut.

Korea was backing away from their protests, his shoulders climbing up around his ear slits as the look in his eye started to grow wilder.

Trying to make him feel less cornered, SH softened her voice and spoke over the others. “Korea, even if it was the wrong decision, everyone we’ve been looking after is used to relying on us. It feels wrong to just cut them off now.”

“Which is why you shouldn’t have been giving away something you couldn’t afford to in the first place!” Korea snapped.

North Hamgyong scoffed. “Because we’re the only ones that start shit we can’t follow through on.”

The look Korea turned on him was a truly dangerous one. Unable to think of anything quick enough, SH brushed a smear of blood and ink over the weak point in the wall just as the dark thing lunged at it.

“Korea, ignore him,” she said quickly. “He’s an idiot, you know that.”

“Fuck you,” her brother spat.

North Hamgyong had already stood, so she did, too, blocking Korea’s line of sight to him. As much as she’d like to see her country put him in his place, she needed to de-escalate the situation.

“You’re right,” she soothed. “We were stupid to start doing it. But you can’t blame us when we’re just following your lead.”

“Yes I can,” Korea growled, taking his ire off her brother.

“Not without being a hypocrite.” Knowing she wasn’t going to get

anywhere with that, she said, “We were stupid to start, but we did. We can’t just cut them loose now. They’re our people.”

“I’ll take care of them,” he said, and she shook her head.

“You only have so many rations. You get just enough to keep one person healthy, too. We’re taking care of a dozen, on and off.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll think of something.”

“Why don’t we take a vote?” SH suggested.

“I’m not letting you *vote* on starving yourselves!” Korea snapped, fists flexing.

“Then let’s just vote on whether we would be willing to keep feeding people, even if it meant we went hungry.” SH turned her back to him, looking at her cousins. “Comrades? Who would vote for that?”

She raised her own hand high, and North Pyongan almost immediately joined her, along with Hwang. Hae took a tentative look at Korea, then raised hers. South Pyongan glanced at her brother and shrugged, voting. North Hamgyong glowered like he didn’t want to vote the same as SH, but grudgingly raised his own hand. He nudged Chagang, who raised his with a great effort, eyes still closed tight.

Kangwon leaned back on his palms. “Abstaining due to conflict between what I’d decide and my opinion as a doctor.”

SH nodded decisively, pleased. “No need to ask for opposition then.”

She turned back to Korea, whose eye followed her hand down to her side. She realized he was locked on to her exposed bandages, and curled her fingers over her burnt palms.

“We’re all willing to make sure at least some of our people get enough to eat, Korea,” she told him. “Even if it means we go without.”

Korea's gaze moved to her face, and he shifted back, the line of his shoulders tense as his eye darted between all of them. A log in the fire burst with a crack behind him, and for a moment she thought he was going to throw himself at the agungi.

Then his shoulders slumped, and he looked back at her, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Fine," he said quietly. "One day a week you will be allowed to give out half of your rations."

"Two days," SH countered. "Hae and… North Hamgyong feed children. Extra food on weekends will be good for them."

Korea's jaw feathered. After a long moment, he assented. "Two days. Half of your rations. Nothing more."

It didn't feel like enough. But SH knew they wouldn't get any more concessions from him.

"Thank you," she said, smiling nonthreateningly at him.

The cords in his neck spasmed. "And I'll work something out for the other days."

"Korea," SH tried gently. "Maybe you could join us with the two-day rule?"

"I'll work something out," he repeated stonily. "And I meant what I said. If I find out any of you are giving away even a *single* grain more, you aren't going to see sunlight until the war is over and we're Reunified."

North Hamgyong made a noise. SH's fists clenched, painting full bowls of blood and rice and dead white limbs over the wall as she silently threatened him to keep his mouth shut.

He must not have heard her, because he did.

"Kangwon, you may be needed in the hospital and with the Mobile Medical Corps, but don't think I won't find another way to punish you," Korea threatened.

“Yes, Korea.”

“And South Hwanghae?”

“Ah’ll stop feedin’ Ppang,” Hae muttered into her chest. “Ah promise.”

“Stop naming wild animals, too.” Korea’s gaze roved over all of them again, and SH watched his throat flex. “I’ll make sure your charges are taken care of. I will. I won’t let *anyone* starve.”

Before anyone could get another word out, he vanished into the forest.

SH’s knees unlocked, and she slumped back onto the log, heart beating light and quick as bird wings.

As hot as Korea’s anger could flare, it never frightened her. She understood now it was because it reminded her of hers.

It left her feeling shaky and ill for a different reason, the same reason Kangwon was sinking down into the log, and Hae wasn’t falling on her supper even now that she could.

They were all quiet, listening to the pockets of air in the wood on the fire pop and crackle like distant rifles, or bombs. SH watched a snowflake spiral down to land in her soup, not melting as it floated on the surface. She inhaled, calming her heartbeat.

“I think we shouldn’t complain about being hungry to Korea anymore.”

“No fucking shit,” North Hamgyong grunted, sitting back down heavily, starting in on his cold meal. “He’ll just say it’s our own damn fault.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” SH said distractedly. “But I’m not joking. I know we used to, but I don’t think we should anymore. It feels… different.”

When they had been fighting against Japan, she’d never complained about hunger. She would rather go hungry for the rest

of her life than be well-fed and caged again. But she would tell Korea when she was hungry, or when one of the others was, so he would know they needed to get supplies or go hunting. She'd been keeping up the habit, only mentioning it so he knew she was going to the market to use her stipend to buy flour or potatoes for powder.

She had thought she was sensing something weird from him when she did, but she assumed it was because he didn't really like her 'taking food' from their people, even when they were choosing to sell it.

But now…

Chagang raised his navy head. "He takes it personally."

His usually smooth voice was raspy, and Kangwon said with concern, "Your nostrils are bleeding."

Chagang touched a mitten to his smooth face, where scarlet blood was trickling from a source that couldn't be seen.

"Cold," he said, wiping the blood on the log.

SH nodded at his earlier words. "He takes it personally now. That's a good way to say it."

Their hunger had used to come from the Japanese, from them buying up their produce and draining the peasants dry, shipping all their harvests across the East Sea. SH had used to crouch amongst crates on the docks and watch hauls of fish and crates of vegetables and dried fruits be loaded onto ships, and wait for her chance to snatch one back. They and their people had been starving because the puppet government cared more about money than national pride or their people, and because they were part of a guerrilla resistance movement. They had no supply lines or trading partners or state stores of grain. All they had was whatever they managed to catch, forage, or purchase from empathetic peasants or merchants.

But now they had fields, they had supply houses, foreign trade, patriots who donated what they could afford to, and the ability to

loan out seeds and produce farm equipment and fertilizer. SH had been able to personally make sure the peasants in her province had the tools they needed to get the harvest in on time. Their workers owned the factories, their peasants owned the fields, and the State operated ration distribution and held the power to mass mobilize their people to sow seeds and harvest the fruits of their labour. They had a government that *cared,* and Korea was in control now.

And they were still hungry.

SH knew it wasn't their fault, and she knew it wasn't his. It was *America's.* It was him and all his savages and puppets that had murdered their peasants in their fields, razed storehouses and seed stocks to the ground when they couldn't take them as they fled, and were lounging around in their fertile lands to the south, squatting on the Honam Plain like gluttonous neoguri, tearing their crops away from their peasants with their blood-greased hands and shipping them back to their dens in Japan, Taiwan, and America, growing fat while the Koreans that grew them starved, just like how it had always been and how it always *would* be if they didn't win.

SH knew their hunger wasn't Korea's fault. And she knew why he would think it was.

'You shouldn't have to go hungry.'

"That was a big reaction," SH told her cousins. "Even for him. It's obvious us being hungry upsets him, so let's not mention it to him anymore."

"He just reamed us out, and you're worried about how *he* feels?" North Hamgyong demanded.

"He was right," SH pointed out. "We knew when we agreed to do it that it wasn't the best for us, and he'd be upset when he found out."

'Even if he was being a hypocrite about it.'

Hae nodded glumly. "Korea just got mad 'cuz he cares."

Her own words made her brighten a bit, enough that she finally

reached for her bowls.

SH nodded, then narrowed her eyes at North Hamgyong. “And *you* don’t have a right to complain when you’ve been saying the exact same things he was for months."

“Yeah, seriously,” South Pyongan said, lowering her voice to a gravelly imitation of his. “’You’re all idiots, you should be eating more, I’m a bastard with a dog’s face.’ And the whole time you’re giving away your food, too. Which makes *me* the only non-idiot, if anyone’s keeping track. And Kangwon.”

“I wasn't lying about giving some of my portions to Yun Jin-suk,” he admitted.

“Just me then. South Pyongan number one, baby!”

“Exactly,” North Hamgyong growled. “I was saying the exact same-“

He severed his words with a *‘tch.’* “Never-fucking-mind.”

SH couldn’t understand why her brother hadn’t told them he was using his rations for mutual aid, too. His grouchy forest green face gave nothing away that wasn’t unpleasant.

She sighed, then straightened again.

“From now on, no bringing up hunger around Korea. Not even jokingly or because you’re trying to get him to pet you on the head.” She looked over at South Pyongan and Hae.

“But I love complaining,” the azure woman whined.

“Ah don’t want to make Korea upset again,” Hae said quietly. “He’s tryin’ his best.”

“Let’s try not to mention it even in private,” SH continued.

“It’s not really good to bottle your emotions up,” Kangwon said, pointed enough that she glared at him.

“It’s *also* not good if Korea or one of our people overhears us,” she shot back. “And if we’re used to complaining with each other, it’ll be easier to slip up in front of someone else.”

“Private habits become public displays,” Hwang agreed.

“So no more muscular skeleton talk then,” South Pyongan said. “Got it.”

The others agreed easily. North Hamgyong glowered and showed his teeth, which meant he did, too.

SH nodded decisively. “Decision made then. Violators get fed to Hae’s dog.”

Her cousin’s face fell, and she winced.

“Sorry, Hae.” Realizing what else she needed to apologize for, she turned to her fully. “And I’m so sorry he targeted you like that. I thought I’d finally caught him in a good mood when I told him about you feeding the dog this morning.”

Well, not a *good* mood. But a low one. One she had hoped was less likely to explode on Hae.

“It’s alright,” her cousin said, rosebud lips trembling again. “Ah’m just glad Korea din’t skin him right away.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t been eating anything,” Hwang said, guilt painting his voice. “I should have noticed.”

“Ah tried to tell Korea ah’ve been eatin’ a few grains of rice, and the soup.” Hae’s boot tip nudged at the snow. “He din’t listen.”

“That isn’t enough, Hae,” Kangwon said gently. “Especially not when you’ve still been coming in to give blood. No more appointments until you’ve been eating right for a few weeks.”

“But Korea gives blood,” she protested.

“And we just had an entire conversation that makes it obvious

why his decisions shouldn't be replicated." Kangwon exhaled heavily. "I'm sleeping here tonight. I think walking here with him permanently raised my blood pressure."

"And you don't want to get attacked by spirits walking back alone," South Pyongan quipped.

"Not true."

Kangwon scrubbed at his face with a hand, and SH felt a flush of shame. They'd been making his job harder lately, even if it was just by filling his heart with worry over them.

But it was hard to be healthy when they had Korea's example to follow. Even if SH knew it was wrong when he did it, their people appreciated it. They *needed* it. And when Korea was doing more than he should, it felt like the provinces weren't doing enough.

SH would rather he starved himself than feasted while others didn't. And she had realized she felt the same way about herself.

The anger flickered inside her, electrocuting the dark thing into resuming its pacing, talons clicking on whatever was behind the concrete wall.

They shouldn't *have* to starve, *none* of them. They should *all* be able to feast. Instead they were sitting here in the freezing cold eating thin soup and rice, and Korea was marching back into the night with nothing, all because of *America,* while the foreign man was probably still eating leftovers from Christmas, turkey and real potatoes and pie, tossing sticky, too-sweet scraps of chocolate to their people like he was their saviour instead of the country starving them.

'I'll make sure your charges are taken care of. I will.'

The desperation in Korea's voice only fed her fury. He *shouldn't* be blaming himself, he shouldn't be taking their hunger personally. Just because he was finally able to govern properly as their Countryhuman didn't make it his fault. He couldn't control the weather or the bombs or the shattered supply lines or make sure

every single peasant and every single worker did every single thing they could to produce as much as they could and get it to their people.

But he did take it personally. And SH knew when all those circumstances out of his control conspired to steal more lives and hollow out the provinces even more, he would blame himself for that, too.

North is the epitome of when your parent is in a bad mood and you can feel it as soon as they enter the house. I like to think that modern day when he enters the high-rise after a bad day, South Pyongan feels her muscles tighten up on the fifth floor.

While looking at Chinese poems, I found one that makes me think of future North and China:

We bid each other farewell beside the hill,
As day meets dusk, I close the wooden gate.
Next year, in spring, there will be green grass again,
But will my honoured friend return?

It's also coincidentally by a man named Wang Wei.

Bloody Muzzle

1952

Hae slowly reached out her hand. The dog stared at her, eyes gleaming warily in the light of the flashlight she'd stuck upright in the snow. She reached out a little more, and its lip started to curl. She drew back. The dog's lip fell. Then she quickly reached out again, and it jumped back, growling.

The woman made a miserable little noise, hanging her head.

"It's going to bite you one of these times," North Hamgyong grunted, and she looked over her shoulder with wide eyes, finally noticing he was watching.

"Ahwasn'tfeedin'himahswearahwasjus'tryin'-"

"I don't fucking care," he interrupted. "If you want to be an idiot and give it all your food, I'm not going to be the one to tell Korea."

"Ah'm not," Hae stubbornly repeated. "And he isn't goin' to bite me. We're friends."

"It's a *dog,"* North Hamgyong said. "It doesn't know you're just an idiot that wants to pet it. It'll bite if it's scared. Do you know how dirty dogs' mouths are?"

Hae puffed out her cheeks. "That's what SH said."

And she didn't know the fucking half if it.

"But ah know he won't bite me," Hae confidently declared. "He just gets a li'l growly. Like Korea."

Who'd probably get *more* than a little growly if he heard her say that.

North Hamgyong picked at the scar on his forearm, watching as

she tried to pet the dog again, and it growled at her, inching back.

He heaved a sigh. "You're doing it wrong."

His cousin was shit with animals. Somehow. Despite the fact she worked on farms most of the damn time. She was fine with oxen and plough horses, but it was like the moment they got off work, her brain fell out of her ear slits around them. He'd watched her go from quietly coaxing a horse out of its harness to squealing like a moron as she tried to shove grain in its face. Not to mention all the times she'd terrorized their chickens or chased stray dogs and cats on the street.

Hae looked back at him. "What do ya mean ah'm doin' it wrong?"

"You're coming at it from above," he said. "Animals hate that. How would you like it if a giant hand was coming at your face?"

"Ah'm pretty short," Hae informed him. "That's usually just how it is. It doesn't scare me."

"*You* have marginally more brains than a dog." North Hamgyong squatted, taking off his glove, and holding out his hand.

The rangy yellow dog squinted at it, then its ears swivelled, and it looked off into the trees, hearing some night animal they couldn't.

"He's not movin'," Hae whispered. "Go for it, Hambu!"

He kept his hand extended as the dog looked back at him. "You have to let it come to you. And don't call me that."

He sat still, his thighs straining. Ssi-bal, the stupid ration-cutting had been fucking with his muscles. He'd have to make sure South Pyongan kept her hands off him or he'd never hear the end of it.

Hae watched raptly. North Hamgyong thought she was managing to sit still for once in her damn life before realizing she was vibrating so fast it was barely visible.

Whatever. She wasn't scaring the mutt.

After a minute, it crept forward, sniffing cautiously at his outstretched fingers, looking for crap to eat. Its tongue lapped tentatively at his palm.

"He's touchin' you!" Hae whispered in excitement.

North Hamgyong lowered his hand slightly, scratching the dog's chin. He made a contented snuffling noise.

"Ah want to do it." He could hear the noisiness trying to burst out from under her whisper. "HambuHambupleaseletmetry."

North Hamgyong pulled his hand back, wiping dog slobber on his pants. "Just hold out your hand. Slowly," he said before she could thrust it out like a spear.

Hae stretched her hand out with exaggerated slowness. The dog considered it. The woman's fingers trembled.

"Hambu, ah can't keep still," she whispered urgently.

"Then you don't get to pet it," he said mercilessly. "And don't *call* me that."

A second passed, then the dog stretched his nose out again, sniffling at Hae's limb.

"He's touchin' me," she said, ecstatic. "He's actually touchin' me!"

"Now lower your hand and come at him where he can see you."

She did, dropping her hand, then reaching out to stroke the white patch of wiry fur on the dog's chest. He didn't pull away.

"Ah'm doin' it!" she said, enthusiasm making her voice rise. "Ah'm pettin' him!"

North Hamgyong gave her a moment before attempting to pet the dog's head. The presence of another hand seemed to make him consider his choices, but then he sat back, accepting both of them.

"It's not fucking science," he grunted, scratching the hard-to-

reach spot behind one pointed ear. “You’re just too loud and annoying.”

“Ah know,” Hae said happily. “Look, Hambu! His leg’s doin’ that funny thing that yours does!”

The dog’s leg was thumping up and down in the snow as North Hamgyong scratched his ears.

He swivelled his head to her. “What the fuck do you mean ‘that mine does?’”

“Sometimes when you’re sleepin’, you’ll scratch at your neck,” she explained, using both her hands to ruffle the dog’s chest now. “But you’re sleepin’, so it doesn’t work too well. So ah help out an’ scratch it for you! And your leg moves like that.”

“How long have you been doing that?”

“Forevah!”

“Well stop,” he ordered. “That’s fucking weird.”

“Okay!”

And damn SH had probably been letting her do it. He grimaced at the idea of her snickering as she watched his leg thump like a dog’s.

They pet the hound for a few more minutes, then North Hamgyong stood up. “Don’t pet it too much. You’ll overstimulate it. I’m not getting blamed if you get an infected bite.”

“Ah wouldn’t blame you,” Hae said cheerfully, reluctantly pulling her hand back to wrap her arms around her knees.

“Korea would.”

The dog heaved a pleased sigh, and flopped down onto the ground, resting his tapered muzzle on his paws. North Hamgyong’s fingers twitched, but he jammed them under his armpits.

“Ah’m sorry,” Hae said to the dog, her words squished by how her

chin was set on her legs. “Ah don’t have any food for you. Korea says ah’m not allowed to feed you anymore.”

“If you want to feed it, do it,” North Hamgyong said, even though he knew it was more of a lost cause than getting his sister to open her eyes and see reality the way it fucking was. “Korea might find out you’re giving shit to people, but if he’s not around, he won’t realize you’re still feeding the dog. And now that you’re not starving yourself like a fucking moron, it’d be fine.”

“Korea says ah can’t,” Hae mumbled sadly. “Ah really don’t want to upset him again.”

“He didn’t give a damn about upsetting *you.”* She’d been near tears half the time he was yelling at them.

“He wasn’t tryin’ to upset me,” Hae said stubbornly. “He was just worried about me. Korea gets angry when he’s worried, like you.”

“I don’t get ‘worried,’ I'm usually pissed that someone's doing something stupid,” North Hamgyong scorned, then redirected her. “Korea could throw you off a damn cliff and you’d come up with a way to justify it.”

“You an’ Hwang are always sayin’ stuff like that,” she huffed. “Korea wouldn’t throw me off a cliff or make me jump. And if he did, he’d have a good reason, so ah wouldn’t *have* to justify it.”

She was just like his damn sister. He couldn’t stand her.

“And ah know he’s right this time,” Hae said, looking back at the dog. “And ah don’t want him to turn Ppang into a coat.”

‘Stupid ass name.’

North Hamgyong *‘tch’*ed.

Hae looked down as something hit the ground next to her, then snatched it up, turning her wide white eyes up at him as she clutched the steamed bun to her chin.

“A guy I was working on the rail lines with gave it to me,” he

grumbled. “Said his wife made it, and wouldn’t take no for a damn answer. But it tastes like shit. I don’t want the rest.”

Unlike their siblings, neither of them had ever had the luxury of giving a damn what their food tasted like. Hae beamed up at him, knowing that. He should’ve just kept his mouth shut.

Hae’s smile fell, her small brows furrowing as she looked down at the remaining half of the bun.

“Korea said ah can’t feed him anymore.”

Knowing how her brain had to work to get around her obsessive devotion to Korea, North Hamgyong said, “He said you can’t give it your rations. You’re giving it half a stale piece of bread that I gave you.”

It was the same fucking difference, but after a moment of the tractor gears in her head grinding away, Hae brightened.

“You’re right! He din’t say ah can’t feed him *your* food.”

Happily, she held the bread out to the dog, even though Korea would definitely still beat her over the head with a sandal if he saw.

Ppang eagerly wolfed the bun down straight from her hand, not hesitating at all now, making Hae bounce up and down.

“There ya go,” she chirped. “Ah can still feed you, it just won’t be as often. Ah can’t always be takin’ Hambu’s food. He needs it so he can stay big and strong and smash bad guy’s heads together.”

“C’mon,” North Hamgyong said, ignoring the comment. “It’s fucking cold out here. Get your ass back to the bunker.”

Hae nodded, giving Ppang one last pet before jumping to her feet. The dog didn’t move, still gnawing on the chewy bread.

North Hamgyong crossed his arms. It’d been decades ago, but he could still smell the fur of the mangy street dogs he’d curled up with in Chongjin before that other mangy dog had came into his life. They’d made his sister nervous, but he'd still tossed food scraps

to the ones around the docks warehouses even once they moved to Hungnam.

Of course, after he'd gotten sick, and his sister had gotten sold, he'd kept his distance.

He realized he was picking his scar again, and pulled his hand from his sleeve, irritated.

"Thank ya, Hambu!" Hae chirped. "For lettin' me feed Ppang, and helpin' me finally pet him. You're the best!"

"Touch me and die," he said gruffly, and she aborted her hug attempt. "And for the last time, don't call me Hambu. It sounds fucking stupid."

"Ah think it sounds cute," Hae chirped. "Cute an' stupid."

He cuffed her over the head. "Like you."

Her grin stretched wide enough that the gap in her teeth was fully exposed. "You think ah'm cute? Really?"

North Hamgyong shoulder-checked her hard enough that she fell over, storming away. Like a fucking spinning top, she lurched right back up, skipping after him.

"Even Hambu thinks ah'm cute," Hae sing-songed. "So when the war's over an' everyone's got enough to eat, he's goin' to give me his braised soybeans at dinner 'cuz they're my favourite."

"Ah'm *going* to drown you in the well," he retorted. "Leave my fucking soybeans alone."

Hae giggled, starting to walk mostly normal, but still with that damn spring in her step.

As they walked under the trees, the flashlight beam casting swinging shadows that would've scared the shit out of Kangwon, Hae said, "Hambu, why din't you tell everyone you were givin' your rations out, too? You were lettin' us think you were bein' selfish. Ah knew you weren't," she added quickly. "Ah thought you were just

being pragma… pragmatic."

She looked smug before her brows crinkled again. "But the rest of the family thought you were bein' selfish."

Kangwon had known, since he took his rations back to the city for him some nights, and that damn Four-Eyes had figured it out. North Hamgyong would've rathered they didn't know shit either. Trust Korea to expose him like that in front of everyone. But if *he* did the same to *him,* he'd never hear the fucking end of it.

"You're not smart enough to get it," he muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Hae frowned at him, not hurt like he'd wanted, just reinforcing his opinion that she wasn't as air-headed as she acted.

"Ah can't get it if you don't tell me."

"If I had a real fucking reason, you'd just tell South Hamgyong," he growled.

She nodded immediately. "Ah want you two to stop fightin'. Ah don't like it."

"And I don't like *her,"* he growled, making her face droop. "And I don't have a real reason."

"Ah like her," Hae said quietly. "And ah like you. Ah like *both'a* you, so you should both like each other. You're siblin's."

"So are Korea and the Southern bastard."

"Mhm." She bobbed her head. "And Korea likes him."

"He shouldn't."

"Nope," she agreed. "The Southern One is evil and awful and mean and stupid. But Korea still loves him. And you an' SH aren't any of those things. Well," she said after thinking for a second. "You are *kind of* mean. But it's in a fun way, not a *real* mean way like the Southern One. So you an' SH should love each other, too."

North Hamgyong's teeth struck together like flint off steel, and he stretched out his legs, easily leaving her behind as he stormed back into the bunker's clearing.

She didn't know what she was talking about. It wasn't that easy. Not when his sister was always such a damn busy-body, and looked at Korea like that even when he'd just finished screaming at her for doing what he was literally doing, too, but looked at North Hamgyong like *that* when he said the *same exact thing,* not even doubting for a second that he'd keep all his rations to himself while their people were starving. And when she acted so damn *positive,* even when the truth was looking them in the fucking faces. Hae might be innocent enough to believe what Korea said, but South Hamgyong wasn't. And still she kept that *fucking* attitude, smiling as she declared they couldn't talk about being hungry without setting Korea off. And what did *that* say for the war effort?

'When the war's over,' Hae said. *'We will win,'* Korea had said in his New Year's speech. *'When we win, when we're Liberated, when we're Reunified,'* the others always repeated like a damn mantra, like saying it enough meant it had to come true.

North Hamgyong knew that wasn't how it worked. So his sister should, too.

'When we don't have to work here anymore, when we're free, when we have enough money.' But all that had been waiting for them was more suffering.

When America was done with Korea, that dog would be the only one eating well.

—

North watched from the shadows as the light of his provinces' flashlight retreated, and their voices and footsteps faded away. The dog remained under the trees, spotlit by the weak moonlight leaking through them.

He had come to make sure Hae was following his orders. She was, of course, in her loopholed way. It irritated him to compare the

two, but she was like China in that regard, though her loopholes were less malicious. He should still go reprimand her.

The dog finished the bun, snuffling around for more food. North padded out of the dark.

It raised its nose, sniffing the air, then went back to rooting through the snow, unbothered by his approach. It wasn't that animals weren't afraid of him. It seemed like they just cared about him less. It had always been useful for hunting.

North came around to the dog's front, staring down at it.

It was rangy and yellow, with thick fur and large paws. Something in the triangle-shaped ears and creamy undercoat said its ancestors had once been tiger-hunting dogs from the northern mountains.

But this dog was just a mutt, scrawny and wild, with everything distinctly Korean bred out of it.

With no more scraps to be found, it sat back on its haunches, looking up at him expectantly.

"You've been taking my province's food," North coldly accused, then felt foolish for talking to an animal.

It stared up at him with uncomprehending eyes, waiting for the next scrap.

It had warmed quickly for a stray. Maybe it had been a pet before the war, for one of the rare families that could afford it. But it wasn't now. If someone had owned it, they were long dead or gone. At the very least, they couldn't afford to feed it anymore.

"Go," North said, jerking his head at the trees. "Get out of here."

The dog cocked its head.

"Go," he ordered again, fists clenching. "There isn't any food for you here. Stop stealing from my provinces."

It still didn't move, even when he bared his teeth in a language it

could understand.

“Go!” he shouted, stomping his foot to scare it. “Get the fuck out of here! We can barely feed ourselves, let alone a useless mutt!”

The dog whined needily, and his vision went red. He drew his boot back and slammed it forward into the hound’s thin ribs as hard as he could, sending it tumbling back with a yelp of pain.

And still it didn’t run. It got down on its belly and came crawling back to him, eyes rolled back in its head as it whimpered, begging him for forgiveness, even though he had been the one to hurt it for no reason.

The anger drained from North, and he exhaled, crouching as he held out his hand. The dog’s muzzle nudged into it, and a wet, warm tongue licked his bandaged palm.

Hae had screwed up by feeding it. If you gave a wild animal food, it would come back, no matter what you did to it.

As the dog rolled over so he could pet its belly, North’s eye scanned its body in the dim light. It looked healthy. Its fur was dirty, but smooth, not tangled like it couldn’t take care of itself. Its eyes and nose were clean, and as he nudged the dog back onto its stomach to run a hand over its ears, he could see they were, too. It was lean, but not emaciated.

His teeth grit, imagining it rooting in ruined buildings and digging in fields, muzzle coming out crimson.

But it looked like it hadn’t eaten anything alive in awhile. No blood flecked its snout or stained its paws.

It was a scavenger, too useless to hunt its own food. The way it whined as he ruffled around to the back of its neck proved that. All it knew how to do was beg, even after it was wounded, hoping that by showing its belly it would be rewarded.

'Pathetic.'

North sank his fingers into the thick ruff, reaching back with his

other hand.

He probably should have made South Hwanghae or North Hamgyong do this, made it a lesson.

But he didn't want to. It would have been a lesson Japan had wanted to teach him, unlike this one that he had imparted unintentionally. North didn't want to teach his provinces anything like that.

He had learned his lesson so that they would never have to.

The dog whimpered as he sank his blade into its throat, but didn't even try to fight back. It just looked up at him with big, dumb eyes, stupidly obedient until the last. North held its gaze as firmly as he gripped its ruff, holding it still as the life shook out of it, keeping its head tilted back to avoid wasting precious blood.

Still, some of it flowed over his hands, wet and warm.

When its brown eyes had glazed over, he pulled his knife out, sliding it back into the sheath, and lifted the carcass over his shoulder, exhaling a cloud of mist as the night grew darker. He scuffed a boot through the snow, disguising the drops of blood on it, then set off through the trees, the dog cooling against his body as he went to find someplace with more light, farther from the bunker.

His provinces had learned too many lessons that he hadn't been there to shield them from. But he was here now, to keep them safe, to do what was needed, to get his hands bloody so they wouldn't have to, just like he had done for his brother.

Korea wasn't going to let any of them starve.

One must question whether the volcano is a warning. Coincidentally timed with the government trying to start a fight with China. Kami also do not want to get hit by missiles, I expect.

And just to be clear, the morally questionable thing here is not that North is killing a dog for food. It's that he's killing a dog Hae likes. Eating dog is fine, especially during war time. It's

literally just another meat. Humanely slaughtered dog is more ethical than most beef or pork that comes from slaughterhouses. I also think South Korea's insistence on banning it speaks to the level of Americanization of their society. Westerners who have the privilege of being able to eat what they want go 'oh noooooo the puppies, how uncivilized!' And we're all supposed to see it as uncivilized, too, because *they* don't do it. There's a reason why places like Taiwan and Hong Kong banned it first, and it's because they've been having Western 'morals' shoved down their throats for decades. Society is supposed to progress and cut out genuinely uncivilized things like sexism and child abuse, but there isn't anything uncivilized about eating dog. It is just meat, and in a lot of places it is a cheap, easy to raise meat that people rely on. As much as I love cats, I echo these sentiments for cat meat. When you hear about any new American attempt to ban cat and dog meat globally, just know that would probably kill some people. And when they call it 'barbarity,' just know that they don't see the mass culling of cows and pigs by underpaid, mistreated, traumatized workers the same way. They also don't see the genocide of human beings the same way.

I'm aware I'm weirdly passionate about the right to eat dogs, I promise it comes from my disdain of Westerners continuing to impress their practices and viewpoints on the entire world , and concern for the people that have dog meat as a large part of their diets, not because I just really want to eat dog.

Bleeding Hearts

Sitting on her knees, the heavy tread of approaching footsteps, the rustle of money changing hands and those little chuckles at a joke she did her best to pretend she hadn't heard because if she didn't the smile she was desperately fighting keep on her face might fall and that last little bit of self-control she had might ***snap,*** *the door sliding open-*

'BANG BANG BANG.'

SH's mind knew her clients never knocked, but her body shot up anyway, heart pounding so fast it made her feel ill, nails sunk into her bedroll.

It was only when Korea's voice called, "Get up," through the thick steel door that she relaxed, though her pulse still ran wild.

"I'm up, Korea," she made herself call back, raspy from sleep.

"Outside in five," he ordered, then his fist pounded on the men's door across the hall.

As SH rubbed the sleep from her eyes, she selected a paintbrush and colours from her palette, working to reinforce the wall with geysers of blood-streaked ocean water and singed parachute silk as blockade ships were obliterated and the infiltration teams the Yankees tried to drop over their country were shot down. Sights she would hopefully see while she was in her province for the next week.

She'd had another nightmare last night, even though she'd worked so hard yesterday, travelling across the entire Pyongyang area to make sure every refugee heard the New Year's broadcast. Korea's voice was more important than ever, and she had made sure it reached every corner she could carry it to.

Yet still her wall had been weakened, the thing taking advantage of her terrors to gouge at the concrete, not even waiting for her

eyes to open before it was already pacing again.

But it felt calming to be able to practice her mental painting routine properly. So often nowadays she was forced to just spread colours on the wall slapdash, creating a chaotic splatter that's lack of form or meaning only made the wall feel patched, not thickened. Tracing the outline of twisted Yankee limbs from a long fall and abrupt landing unwound her muscles like a spool of thread, and gradually her shaking stopped.

SH let out a slow exhale, then her eyes snapped open.

"Rise and shine, comrades!" she called, clapping her hands together as she swung off the top bunk, her missing toes barely impeding her landing. She clicked on her flashlight.

Hae was already up and buckling on her belts, likely as soon as Korea's voice had touched her 'ears,' but South Pyongan was still a lump on the top bunk. She moaned miserably, pulling her pillow over her head. SH reached up to tug it off her face, but had to settle for dragging her bedroll towards the edge.

"Time for good soldiers to get to work," she chided.

"I'd rather die." South Pyongan raised her head, squinting blearily in the light of the beam. "What time is it?"

"It cannot be very late," Liaoxi chimed from her bottom cot. "Second last watch was North Pyongan and I's, ah…"

She ducked her head, tugging one slim brown boot on, making SH smile.

It wasn't like the two had been making broadcasts about their relationship, but it was obvious to anyone with eyes, especially when Korea wouldn't let SH assign watches to the Chinese provinces, but Liaoxi joined North Pyongan on all of his anyway.

She thought it was cute, though it also made her… slightly uncomfortable to think of her cousin doing… the things that men did.

But it was fine. Liaoxi wasn't one of their people, and she doubted North Pyongan was very interested in that sort of thing anyway. And it wasn't her business if he was.

"What she means is that she took last watch with your cousin, and hasn't been asleep very long." Liaotung gracefully leapt from the upper bunk, wincing as her socked feet touched the freezing cold concrete floor.

SH liked the ice leaking through the bottom of her feet and into her bones, but she went to put on her boots anyway, the one article of clothing she didn't sleep in when she wasn't in the field.

Liaoxi cleared her throat, nodding. "Comrade Korea arrived towards the end, and told us the bunker he would defend."

SH pursed her lips. Odd for Korea to steal last watch from Hwang. Actually now that she thought about it, it was odd he'd woken them up at all. Usually when he didn't sleep at the bunker, he just met them at the rendezvous point near Pyongyang to give their orders for the day.

Korea hadn't sounded urgent, but she still hustled to get ready, tucking her black officer's pants into her calf-length boots, sliding her navy gloves (a gift from a comrade in the Democratic Women's Union that had decided her drab military-issue gloves weren't pretty enough) up to the wrist, placing her winter ushanka firmly on her head, and finally wrapping herself in the thick olive long coat that went down past her knees, making sure the wind couldn't creep in any exposed gaps. SH might like the cold, but only in short bursts. Her ice bath last night had been enough, thank you.

Though last night's nightmares had left her feeling like she needed another.

The province shook her head, urging the other women to finish dressing, then shepherding them from the room, being far more polite with the Chinese sisters. Because *she* knew how to treat guests.

North Pyongan and Chagang were already in the hall, the latter

doing brisk stretches. SH went to pound on the men's door again.

"Time to get up!" she called, her voice reverberating in the tunnel, making Chagang wince. "North Hamgyong, get your lazy rump out of bed!"

"Fuck you," came the muffled reply.

Satisfied, SH joined her cousins, Hae already pushing open the front door.

As soon as the crack of muted light spilled through, so did the smell.

SH froze as it hit her nostrils, and her mouth instantly flooded with saliva. The others stood at attention, too, Hae's eyes lighting up at something they hadn't smelled from a source that wasn't their own charred flesh in a long time.

Meat.

South Pyongan pushed past Hae into the outside, and SH followed with tentative hope.

It was still half-dark out, bright enough that she could turn her flashlight off, but early enough that the encircling forest and towering mountain were still painted in shades of grey and silver. The fire crackling through the trees was the only splash of colour, like blood on silk.

For once, SH didn't mind the oppressive pall of pre-dawn, too focused on the rich scent filling the air as she was lured towards the flames, and the sound of a ladle scraping against a pot.

It wasn't their usual one, but a much larger cast iron cauldron, too large for their stove. It sat over an open fire whose banked flames licked at the bottom. Korea stood over it, his back to them as he stirred its contents.

"Soup?" South Pyongan asked, darting to him like an arrow to peer over his shoulder. *"Meat* soup?"

“Congratulations,” Korea said dryly. “You have eyes and a nose.”

“Actually we don’t have the latter,” Hwang said as he joined them, his coat drawn tight around his thin body. “But my nares still aren’t deceiving me. You made soup with meat in it.”

“I went hunting last night,” Korea said, not looking up as he stirred. “I caught a deer.”

Hae sidled up to him with wide, hopeful eyes. “Korea, is the soup… for us?”

“Yes,” he said unexpectedly.

The woman’s face lit up, and she beamed, throwing herself at him. “Thank ya, Korea!”

SH blinked in surprise. “Are you sure?”

Deer were as scarce as the rest of their wildlife, either hunted down by refugees or driven into the depths of the mountains by the war activity of planes and vehicles. She would have thought any kill he managed to make would go to their people.

South Pyongan cut in before Korea could. “Hey, hey, cuz, don’t question our Countryhuman’s sudden generosity.”

She mouthed *‘Don’t ruin this for me,’* over her shoulder.

The mist of Korea's words twinned with the steam coming off the pot. “I’m sure."

“I assure you I'm not protesting,” Hwang said as the others gathered around, all drawn by the smell of meat. “But if you managed a successful hunt, shouldn’t we dry the venison for powder?”

Korea tapped his ladle on the side of the cauldron. “You didn’t have a New Year’s meal. Consider this it.”

SH smiled. So it was like that.

“I suppose this means I won’t get a meal for *proper* New Year’s?” China asked, breezing over to lean against the hearth, peering into the other pot bubbling away on it.

“Why would you?” Korea flatly asked. “I expect you’ll be in your country getting drunk again.”

A few of the provinces tipped their heads at that, but China just smiled.

“I expect you’re right. A pity,” he sighed. “And it’s the Year of the Dragon this year, too. It should bode well for us. Of course, that’s *if* we keep them fed.”

Korea rolled his eye. “The soup is for you, too. Consider it an early Lunar New Year’s meal.”

SH was even more shocked at that. It obviously wouldn’t have been good manners to exclude their Chinese comrades from a meal, but, well, she could definitely see Korea doing it.

China smiled. “Then I predict great fortune for the coming year.”

“Grab your utensils,” Korea ordered them. “It’s done. Boiled water is on the buttumak.”

It was a good thing he’d waited until it was almost done to wake them up. SH thought her stomach might jump out of her throat if he hadn’t. It almost did as she let her other cousins go first, struggling not to choke on her saliva.

When it was her turn, Korea swirled his ladle through the pot, coming out with cracked bones glistening with marrow, one of SH’s favourite parts.

“No eyeballs,” he informed her.

“It’s alright,” she assured him. Eyes weren’t really her favourite texture or tastewise anymore, they just…

She looked over at North Hamgyong, then went to her seat, reminding Korea to save some marrow bones for Kangwon and

Gangwon, who would eat a bowl of the jelly if you let them.

China had held his provinces off, but let them go now. SH could see Korea didn't withhold any meat from them, or from the Chinese Countryhuman as he went last.

Even if he was... warming to China, food was a different matter. So long as a foreigner wasn't actually starving, she wouldn't have said her Countryhuman would share Korean resources with them. But here he was.

"What part do you like?" he asked in another shocking display of consideration.

China eyed the pot. "I don't suppose there's any intestine?"

As Korea fished a few segments out for him, Hwang said, "I hope you cleaned the deer well."

"If I didn't, blame the Kangwons," their Countryhuman retorted. "I did it the way I learned."

SH trusted him. Next to their doctor cousin, Korea was the best butcher they had. They'd never gotten sick eating meat he prepared.

They all took their seats around the fire as Korea curbed it, holding their steaming cups of boiled water and soup. It was a rich brown, overflowing with chunks of meat and flecked with green. The pot had been burgeoning, like the entire deer had been thrown in it, nothing like their usual method of stretching a carcass out for as many meals as possible.

SH looked up to see Korea taking his place on a stump over by the agungi. His hands were empty.

"Korea," she said, her own wrapped around her tin bowl. "Aren't you going to have some?"

"It's all for you," he said, expression blank. "Eat well."

Hae and South Pyongan didn't need any more encouragement

before digging in. SH sighed, but joined the others, finally able to use her short metal chopsticks now that they had a soup that was more than thin liquid.

She almost moaned as her teeth sank into the meat, and the rich juices flooded her mouth, more fragrant than any deer meat she'd had before. Across the clearing, China *did* moan, earning a slap from Liaotung.

"This is quite tender for venison," Hwang echoed her thoughts, brow furrowed as he chewed with his hand over his mouth.

SH was too busy devouring her soup to scold him for technically talking with his mouth full. She'd been trying to suppress her hunger and keep her stomach quiet for the past few months, but now that it had been awakened, it was screaming for more.

"And it's flavourful. Is there doenjang in this?" North Pyongan asked in between spoonfuls.

"I borrowed some from Comrade Kim Song-ae," Korea said. "And dried scallions."

"It tastes excellent," China praised, closely examining a scrap of meat. "Of course, it could use some spice."

"Complain and I never cook again."

"I don't think I want you to cook again if there's no chili paste."

"You and your peppers," Liaotung muttered.

SH was pleased to see that her and her sister were eating daintily, but were clearly just as thrilled as the Korean provinces to finally have meat, and even *more* pleased she hadn't had to talk Korea into sharing.

China sighed dramatically. "Once I put our Sichuan back together, she'll understand me."

"Organs!" South Pyongan cheered from the opposite log, pulling a slice of liver from her bowl.

“You don’t like the texture of organs,” North Pyongan pointed out, leaning away from her chopsticks.

“No, but I like protein.” She popped it in her mouth.

For the provinces ‘like’ and ‘don’t like’ didn’t mean much when it came to food. Most of them had spent the beginning days of the Occupation in poverty, living off scraps and forage. It had been a good month if SH and her brother managed to snag a fish from a rich fisherman. They’d eaten slightly better after learning how to hunt, but it was still mostly unseasoned meat, namul, and the occasional wild fruit. And every single piece of the animal had to be used. It didn’t matter if you didn’t like the texture of thoroughly-cooked brains when your stomach was empty. It was only recently that their preferences had started to mean anything, and that had stopped mattering once the war began.

SH had been given quality food in the cage, but… None of it had tasted good. Her brother could scarf it down on every visit, but it had only ever been ashes in her mouth, washed down with bitter unshed tears in a sakura-print cup. Especially after she had learned meals added to her debt, and couldn’t be skipped. It had felt like she was swallowing the money she and her brother had earned, the paper edges of the yen cutting her throat. Every spoonful of chewy brain scooped from a deer’s skull had been easier to choke down than the light miso soup and green teas.

She peered at her brother from the corner of her eye, perched on a large rock near the opposite log.

He’d taken a few swigs of his broth, and now reached in with his chopsticks, coming out with a chunk of meat. He ate it eagerly, then his face went blank.

Next to him, Chagang winced, turning his attention to North Hamgyong as he stared down at the bowl for a long moment.

Then to SH’s shock, he set it on the ground.

Korea noticed, and his eye narrowed. “Eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” North Hamgyong muttered.

SH felt a flicker of anger that the dark thing shared. Korea had spent all night hunting, butchering, and cooking, definitely not getting any sleep, to make sure they had a nice meal. Her brother had to realize what it meant that he was giving the meat to them, and not their people.

She closed her eyes, running the brush over the wall, painting a deer with a broken neck.

“You need it,” Korea growled, the clink of spoons stopping. *“Eat.”*

He maintained contact with North Hamgyong, who stared him down in return.

Then his jaw feathered, and he picked his bowl back up, grudgingly taking another spoonful of broth, his throat flexing like he had to force himself to swallow.

Korea sat back, face unreadable as he watched them eat.

Unlike her brother, SH *wasn’t* ungrateful, so she eagerly finished off her bowl, trying to savour it without letting it grow cold.

Next to her, Hae wolfed down her own, only pausing to gasp, “Korea, you gave me an entire half’a the heart?”

“You need it to recover your energy.”

Hae squeaked as he pointedly glared at her, hiding her face in her bowl.

North Hamgyong grit his teeth.

Hae and South Pyongan finished before the rest of them, the Hwanghae carefully using her tongue to chase down each drop of liquid around her mouth, not wasting a drop.

“Thank you, Korea,” she chirped. “You’re a real good cook! Your soup's always been my favourite.”

North Hamgyong stood abruptly. “I’m done eating. I’m heading into the city.”

“You’ll likely still be walking when we come by in the GAZ,” Hwang pointed out.

North Hamgyong ignored him, *'thunk'*ing his bowl on the ground, drained of broth, but not empty.

“You din’t finish your meat,” Hae pointed out, her eyebrows furrowed.

The man’s jaw clenched as he glanced at Korea. “You can have it.”

“Really?” their cousin chirped.

He was already storming away.

Hae looked askance at Korea, and he inclined his head. She dove across the clearing and happily started in on the rest of North Hamgyong’s meat.

SH glared after her brother, but refused to let his bad mood ruin the first time she’d had a good meal in months. She turned her attention to digging the marrow from the bones. It must have been a young deer, since they weren’t as thick as she was used to. But what was inside them was just as good as usual. She hummed in satisfaction as the buttery jelly melted on her tongue.

As they were finishing up, Korea said, “There’s enough for you to take seconds to your provinces. Just make sure to leave enough for two meals each for Kangwon and Gangwon. South Pyongan, no fishing out all the meat."

The azure woman snapped her fingers.

"And I made soondae with the rest of the intestine and some glass noodles," Korea continued, nodding to the bowls that he never used for himself, but were now filled with short steamed sausages the colour of dried blood. "Share it with your bodyguards.”

“In Kangwon’s absence, I’ll point out that he said to be careful

with blood products from wild animals," Hwang said, licking the last droplets of soup from his spoon. "They can cause parasites."

"I have parasites already," Korea deadpanned. "They're called provinces."

"A common infestation," China agreed, face buried in his bowl as he earned twin elbows from his own parasites.

As SH ran her tongue over her bowl, she moped a little. Korea's soup hadn't been anything fancy, and most of its impact had come from the fact that it was their first time eating meat in months.

But she knew it was still better than anything she could make.

"South Hamgyong."

She raised her face to see Korea glaring at her. His eye narrowed. She bit her lip, getting rid of the thoughts he knew she was thinking.

She would get better. When the war was won.

After they were all done, Korea stood up. He cast a slightly uncomfortable glance at the Chinese, then turned to his provinces, his face solemn.

"One day you will all be able to eat meat three times a day," he vowed, single eye burning with more intensity than the coals at his feet. "I promise."

SH smiled softly, answering for all of them. "We know, Korea. North Hamgyong knows, too."

At least he *should.*

Korea looked at them again, lingering on Hae, then turned back to the fire to douse it, billowing steam filling the grey dawn, enveloping him like soft white wings.

The soup had warmed SH from the inside out, and she resolved to find something to make Korea feel the same.

She examined the snow carpeting the ground beneath the canopy. The larches and hornbeams were thick around here, but there *were* glades. When planting season came, maybe...

SH nodded in resolve. It was worth a try.

For once she didn't fight to do dishes.

She looked off into the trees where her brother had gone, twisting her coat in her hands, then said, "I'm going to walk with North Hamgyong."

Korea shot a look at her through the clouds of steam. "I don't want you two going at it. You need to share a truck on the way to your capitals."

"He's the one you should be telling that."

He narrowed his eye, and she sighed.

"I just want to ask him something. I can bring him his second portion of soup, too. And I think he left without his pack."

Korea reluctantly assented, and she scurried to the men's room to grab her brother's pack, which was tossed haphazardly on his bed. SH filled his canteen with soup (it would encourage him to wash it, anyway), and went to hurry after him as her cousins cleaned up.

"South Hamgyong," Korea called warningly. *"Behave."*

She huffed, but agreed, heading off into the trees as the sky started to lighten overhead with the arrival of the pale creams and delicate blues of true dawn.

Her brother had made good time, and was already at the highway. SH had to jog to catch up, her firearms and their packs thumping against her back as she ran, not calling out until she was at distance he couldn't run from her from.

"North Hamgyong!"

He didn't look back. He actually started walking faster, which

meant she hadn't just been being paranoid.

Her lips pressed together in irritation as she caught up to him.

"You *could* wait, you know."

"So you can nag me?" he grunted. "No thanks."

"So you *do* know the word thanks," SH noted. "You could have said it to Korea."

"Why?" her brother scorned. "He doesn't want thanks for feeding us. He thinks it's shit he has to do. Did you seriously follow me just to hammer a nail into my 'ear?'"

Trying to keep her good mood, SH took his pack off her shoulder, holding it out.

"You forgot this. And your soup."

He took his pack, but looked at his canteen with thin lips. It made the dark thing growl.

"You know Korea made this as an apology," she said, keeping her voice light. "You should accept it."

"He-" North Hamgyong cut himself off, knuckles flexing. "Whatever."

He snatched his canteen back, looking at it with a tight jaw before attaching it to his belt, not allowing even a break in his stride.

"It would be polite to say thank you to me, at least," SH tightly.

"Why?" he asked flatly. "You could've waited until the truck caught up. You came to say some stupid shit that I probably don't want to hear."

SH's own hands clenched as she ran her brush over the wall in soothing patterns.

She could tell he was already in a bad mood, in the way she'd

become attuned to in the cage. It crackled off him, tightening her insides.

But she had to ask before they met up with their bodyguards. So she voiced the question that had been festering in her mind for the past two days.

"I came to ask why you didn't tell me you were giving away your rations, too."

"Because I didn't want my ass to be on the fire with all of yours," he grunted, not looking at her. "Some good that fucking did me."

"You told Kangwon," she said, frustrated.

Now that she knew what her brother had been doing, she could remember a few times Kangwon had hinted that he was in on the donations. She just hadn't realized it because the idea was so unlikely.

"So why didn't you tell *me?"* she asked, hurt. "Why did you sit there and insult us for months about something you were doing, too?"

"Is that all you care about?" he demanded.

SH blinked, baffled. "Yes?"

For over two months he'd been acting like all of them were the stupidest people alive for wanting to keep their people fed. He'd been vocally against it at the discussion where they'd decided on it, and said- and she quoted- *'Don't expect me to starve to death like **you** idiots. I'm not a bleeding heart moron.'* He hadn't known about her helping out Jin-suk before that, but she knew if he had, he would have said the same things.

North Hamgyong *'tch'*ed, looking away again as his stride lengthened.

"What else am I supposed to care about?" SH demanded, keeping pace as anger started burning in her chest. "Should I care that you were being 'noble' like us by going behind our backs? If you had

just *said* you were going to join us, I would have been impressed from the start. But you didn't. And you've been using it as an excuse to be mean to us, even more than usual."

The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like that *had* been his reason. She'd held out some kind of hope in her heart that if she got him alone, he might tell her something sympathetic like…

She didn't know.

And she supposed she'd been wrong anyway. It had been stupid to expect anything sympathetic from North Hamgyong, just as stupid as it was to ever expect sympathy from him.

"Why are you like this?" The words burst out of her in frustration, like they had last time. "Why are you always so *mean?* Even when you're doing something good, you always have to drag us, to drag *me,* down."

She swiftened her pace, grabbing his shoulder and hauling him around, making him stop.

"Why are *you* like this?!" he threw back at her before she could say anything. "Korea can call you an idiot all he fucking wants, he can scream at you and repeat all the *exact same fucking things* I did and that's just fine, but when *I* call you an idiot for starving yourself *that's* too fucking far?"

"Because Korea calls me an idiot because he *cares,"* she hissed, nails dug into her palms. *"You* say it because you *mean* it."

He curled his lip at her, exposing yellowed canines. "And you just *know* that, just like you just *know* why Korea does it."

"Why else would you do it?!" she cried, throwing her hands up. "Why else would you constantly put me down and belittle me?"

She knew she should just keep quiet, stop him from baiting her into another fight, but she couldn't help it. The words poured out.

"I've *tried* to give you grace, North Hamgyong, I've tried to tell myself for years that you're just grouchy or that being mean is how

you show you care. But how am I supposed to believe that when you look for every little opportunity to hurt me?! You made everyone think you were a selfish dog's son that doesn't give a darn about our people just so you'd have an excuse to remind me I'm an idiot at every other meal!"

North Hamgyong's shoulders hunched as he bared his teeth at her. His lack of retort just made her more furious.

"And I saw your face when we were listening to Korea's New Year's broadcast," she accused. "I *saw* the way you crushed Comrade Kim Il-sung's letter."

Her own was still neatly folded in her pocket, the hopeful words burning in her breast.

"I saw the way you looked at us." Her nails dug into her bandages as the thing's claws sank into the wall. "Because you *wanted* me to see. You wanted me to see you being a miserable bastard so I'd know you think we're idiots for thinking we can overcome America, and I'd feel worse because you just can't *stand* me being positive!"

"Because there's no fucking reason to *be* positive!" the male burst out, spittle flying at her. "We're fucked! How many times do I have to tell you that before you understand?! How many times do you have to see one less village on our way north before you get it through your skull? I was right about the talks not fucking working, I'm right about the Yank never letting us Reunify, and I am going to be *right* about him dropping a fucking nuke on us! The only way you couldn't see that was if you were a fucking dimwit!"

SH finally gave in to the urge she felt whenever she talked to him, baring her teeth back. "Well then you must be right again. I must be one. I must have been a dimwit for thinking we could get all the way to the Raktong, I must have been a dimwit for thinking we could come back from the Amnok and retake Pyongyang and Seoul, I must have been a dimwit for thinking we could withstand almost two straight years of being carpet-bombed, and I must be a dimwit for thinking we can beat America!

"None of that other stuff fucking matters!" North Hamgyong cried,

bristling over her. “You thought we could win and we *didn’t!* We-“

The dark thing's snarl came out of SH’s mouth. *“Don’t you dare finish that sentence.”*

North Hamgyong showed his teeth, and she could tell he wanted to, just to spite her, just to make her feel worse.

“I can’t *stand* you when you’re like this." Hot blood trickled down her fingers to steam on the frozen highway. “Every time I try to reach out to you, you have to pick a fight. You make me so- *so-“*

“Say it,” he growled.

“Mad!” she cried, resisting the urge to stomp her foot. “You make me so *angry!”*

It felt good to admit out loud for the first time. North Hamgyong made her *furious* and he always had. The way he was always so standoffish and mean, the way he did whatever he could to hurt her, the way he’d *looked* at her over that table as they sipped their bitter tea. He *enraged* her, and he *knew* he did. He *wanted* to, she could tell by the way his eyes gleamed in satisfaction as the words tore out of her.

“That’s all?” he challenged.

“No!” she cried. “You’re an irritating, pessimistic prick that doesn’t have one nice word to say, and sometimes I think I’d be better off without you!”

Her voice echoed over the plains and North Hamgyong flinched back like she’d struck him, but for once she didn’t feel any remorse. He could lash out at her as much as he liked and she was just expected to grin and bear it and keep trying to be *nice.* He acted just like all the men she’d had to deal with in her cage, the cage *he* had put her in.

SH advanced on him, refusing to let him retreat from the fight he’d picked. “I don’t want to feel that way about my own brother, but I do! And you *want* me to!”

North Hamgyong swung back. “You can finally admit that I piss you off,” he growled. “But that’s fucking all? Why don’t you tell me the damn truth?”

“That *is* the truth!” SH shouted, eyes flashing.

“The *real* truth, South Hamgyong.”

Blinding rage punched a hole in the wall, and the angry thing reached one long black talon through.

“Why don’t *you* tell *me* the truth?” she snapped. “What were you going to say the last time we fought, before Korea interrupted us?”

North Hamgyong’s jaw feathered, and she pressed her attack.

“Go on, *say it.* I thought you wanted to talk about the truth.” She shoved him backwards. “Come on, what were you going to say, *oppa?”*

“Don’t fucking touch me!” he snapped, slamming his palm against the shoulder he’d put a bullet in, making her stagger.

SH caught her balance and looked up at him, feeling a dark gleam of anticipation from the thing forcing its twisted body through the crack in the crumbling concrete.

“Tell me.”

Even though she knew when he did, it would be the breaking point between them.

North Hamgyong was a live wire, quivering from his jaw down to his legs, rigid with the force of trying to suppress what she so badly wanted him to say and so badly didn’t want to hear. SH sank her teeth into the side of her mouth, copper flooding it as the angry thing thrashed and growled.

The sound of a truck engine made them both look, and they straightened as they recognized the GAZ.

In wordless agreement, they turned on their heels, starting down

the road towards the city like they had been. SH could still feel the tension quivering from her brother, and her own jaw was locked as she hurriedly tried to paint over the thing, beating it back behind the wall, trying to think of anything but shattered tea cups and accusing eyes and swollen wounds leaking pus.

They stood off to the side as the truck pulled up, the Jeep behind it.

"Get in," Korea ordered from the driver's seat.

"I'm going to ride with our Chinese comrades," SH said, fighting to keep her voice at its usual bright level as her stomach churned violently. "If that's all right."

Korea looked between the two of them, his eye narrowed. SH could hear North Hamgyong's teeth creaking.

With a *'tch'* that said they hadn't fooled him, he said, "Go ahead."

The two walked around the side of the GAZ.

Before they made it, SH leaned over and furiously whispered, "If you *ever* say something like what you said to me about the war to the others, *you will regret it."*

North Hamgyong snorted. "And what would you do?"

"I don't have to do anything." SH smiled sweetly. "Korea would."

He glowered at her. "Don't bother waiting at the truck. I'll find my own damn ride to Chongjin."

"Good." She turned her back on him before he could see the hurt on her face, marching to China's vehicle.

"In the back, Tung'er," the Chinese man said, shooing his province back. "Gege drives better with a pretty woman in the passenger seat."

"You've never driven better in your life," Liaotung muttered, climbing over the bench to join her sister.

SH thanked her, jumping up and smoothing her coat.

"I assume the green one is being unpleasant again?" China asked as they started down the road again.

"'Again' would imply that he ever stopped."

And he hadn't. *Ever.* He'd been unpleasant since the day he woke up in that hospital, like *he* was the one who-

He was in the bed of the GAZ ahead of them, seated next to Hwang. SH made eye contact with him, watching his lip curl. Then she pointedly looked away, out the window.

She was done trying to reach out to North Hamgyong. He never did the same for her. Even when he did, it was just because he was looking for another chance to get a hit in, like he had when confronting her about her assignment to talk to the women victimized by the Yanks and their puppets.

'I wish I hadn't-'

SH grit her teeth, painting over and over that crack, trying to picture anything she could to drive the dark thing and its rage away.

It all came out a sea of red.

The only people that know North is lying are North Hamgyong (because every time he's eaten dog before he's felt awful, so it sticks with him), Kangwon and Gangwon (animal experts), China (world's most distinguishing palate), and Hwang has a suspicion (studied carcasses whenever Kangwon butchered them, was very sick of venison during the Occupation days, and has a questioning mind). Modern day, North Hamgyong doesn't eat at sweetmeat restaurants, but he doesn't call attention to it. He just conveniently has other things to do whenever he's invited by the others.

If you're interested in what Chagang sees during the meal, he's actually just having a good time before North Hamgyong's realization. North is not giving off any guilt. Or if he is, it's not

strong enough for Chagang to see. Would he have given off guilt when killing Ppang? Who knows.

Now real stuff. That Security Council resolution for the US being able to oversee Palestine and disarm resistance fighters makes me fucking sick. It's how seamlessly America manipulated shit, like usual. People are freaking out at China and Russia for not vetoing, but they literally can't. The entire Middle East supported it, the Palestinian Authority supported it. And while the PA is an Israeli puppet, they are also the legally recognized government of Palestine. If China vetoed the resolution, it would be played as them disrespecting Palestine's sovereignty, which is the thing they are always vocally saying they're vehemently against. And if the ceasefire 'broke' (Israel is breaking it frequently, but it's still held as being in affect) after the resolution was vetoed, Russia and China would both be held responsible for it. And the Americans heavily implied that it *would* be broken and worse things would come if the resolution didn't go through, which we all know is true. And we know the exact same thing that's happening now would keep happening even if the resolution was vetoed. No UN resolution will stop Israel or America, it never has. It would be nice if we lived in a world where morals could always come before geopolitical considerations, but we don't. China and Russia can't really do anything more than support Hamas and the other resistance groups from the sidelines with weapons and conferences, because if either of them got outwardly militarily involved against Israel it would start World War III. When you look at how fair their proposed draft that was rejected was compared to the American one that was accepted, it is just *so* clear what kind of people are in the United Nations. It makes me so furious. The Palestinian resistance will fight on regardless, but every trace of both America and Israel needs to be wiped off the map.

And A Happy New Year

Another fucking Christmas had passed. Another goddamn Christmas and America was still in this *shitty* country freezing his ass off in this *shitty* house while his Doughboys got slaughtered by commies and grew more ungrateful by the day, and Red China and North Korea were probably sitting together giggling about the fucking coup the Nork had pulled off with the POW holding camp last year, along with that doll.

And on top of everything America had to juggle, Truman couldn't even keep the one ball he had in his hands, and was letting their moronic workforce raise hell over wages back home. The man had been letting them go on their mini strikes damn near since the war started and steel began selling for more again.

It was natural for the price to go up as demand did, and it was natural for the steel companies not to want to raise wages unless the government started buying it for more. How else would they keep making enough to be the guys on top and not in the same boat as the rubes in the factory?

What *wasn't* natural was for those rubes to be so up-in-arms about it. It wasn't like they were working harder or had any right to the steel they churned out. So what made them think they deserved to make more pennies than they already did?

It was CCCP's influence, he knew it. Big Red sneaking his spies and rabble-rousers in to put ideas in honest, hard-working Americans' heads, spreading through America's workforce like a disease. It wasn't paranoia when he *knew*.

He'd seen how brainwashed the Norks and Red Chinese were firsthand now, how the POWs rejected the classes on democracy and refused to be screened so that after America was done with this place, Rhee and his boys wouldn't have to put them down like the other Reds, how so many of the ones that *were* screened had to have the commie beat out of them so they'd make the right decision.

And even then, America knew it still lurked inside of them like an illness, just waiting to flare up again.

That was what CCCP wanted to infect his country with, what Red China and North wanted to.

He wouldn't let it happen. He'd keep the virus out of his borders.

But first he had to save Korea.

America paced around the parlour, his cigarette jouncing in his fingers.

The groundwork for the prisoners of war had been being laid since October. But it wasn't enough. A few had had the scales fall from their slanty eyes, but nowhere near as many as there should be. The bulk still waved their red flags and chanted their slogans.

How was he supposed to just send them back to their Red masters? If he got his war with China before Korea fell, they'd go right back to killing for them, and their first targets would probably be the fellas whose minds had already been saved. They saw oppression in the men tasked with getting them on the straight and narrow, when all they had to do to be one of 'em was denounce North Korea and Red China.

They couldn't see that he was trying to save them, just like he'd tried to save the anti-Communists from Big Red's land after World War II. They'd needed to get free and clear before they got executed for being traitors, and he needed a bunch'a folks with weapons and a grudge. If fucking Britain hadn't been shaking in his knickers over the fate of his own POWs the Reds broke out of Nazi camps, America would bet his bottom dollar his steel workers wouldn't be succeeding at being so mouthy now. The best way to break up a strike was imported muscle with heavy accents and military training.

He turned on his heel, leaving a divot in the rug he'd had to have sent over to make this place a little fucking warmer.

But it would work this time. The Reds didn't have the leverage

they needed to make the others waffle.

And Britain was in his pocket.

Some of the heat left America's stomach, warming his skin instead as he stopped next to the crackling fireplace.

Good ole Churchill had won the last election, just like he'd suggested. America hadn't done anything, of course. He didn't need to. It might've taken the old man a coon's age to come around, but he really was a democracy now. The limeys had just shown sense for once in their collective lives and decided they were sick and tired of having a pinko in charge.

And Churchill, now *that* was a man who knew what needed to be done. He'd visited the White House just yesterday to speak in front of Congress and recommit his full support to taking back Korea, and to pinky swear that if it came to war with Red China, he'd back up the blockade a hundred percent, boots on the ground. Or ships in the sea, rather.

America smirked, leaning an elbow against the mantle as he took a drag of his smoke, letting the good Cuban tobacco fill his lungs.

He'd wait a few days to call Britain to gloat. Let him sweat a little, the way America had used to have to while waiting for correspondence from across the sea.

His lips fell flat, eyes fixed on the crackling flames.

And because he knew the old bastard would have something fucking smart to say, something about how America had 'needed' his support.

He didn't. *Britain* needed *his.* It was why Churchill had invited America to throw his hat in the Suez Canal ring.

But America didn't join ventures, not anymore. He *led* them. He'd led the war against the Krauts and the Japs, he was leading Korea, he'd lead Red China, and he would lead every mission of any consequence in the future. *He* would lead the final campaign against CCCP.

America didn’t raise his torch in the crusades of other countries. He was on his own, a more just and sacred one than any before, to claim his destiny and save them all.

He'd let Britain splash around in the Suez Canal for a bit, just so it would really hit home that he wasn’t in charge anymore. His land was rapidly shrinking, while America’s only expanded, soon to be with those same colonies that had formerly decorated his crown. His economy was going down the shitter, and even though old Churchy had said he hadn’t visited Washington to beg for money- the old man was still too proud to come crawling on his knees- he *would,* the way he’d expected America to do after the Panic of 1893.

But that hadn’t been the end of his Gilded Age. It’d only been a stutter, the mid-act crisis that would make America’s eventual climatic victory all the more satisfying. This *was* the end of Britain’s. The king was dead, long live the King, and et-cet-er-a.

America’s smirk returned, twisting up so the firelight reflected off his even canines.

Scratch that. He *wasn’t* going to call Britain.

He’d send him a letter.

Smoke filled the country’s lungs as he inhaled deep, the headiness of future victory swelling his head.

The pieces were coming together. His stay-behind army was in progress for if he had to switch horses, and the seeds of North Korea's destruction were being sown across the Parallel even as the smoke left his mouth in a billowing cloud of grey. America had Britain, he had Britain’s leadership, and he had the UN.

Now all he needed was Red China.

The front door opened, and he pushed off the fireplace, flicking his cigarette into it.

“Back from the market, Gracie-baby?” he called.

“Yep!” her voice echoed from the hallway. “I picked up the stuff

you had sent over. Can I make mashed potatoes tonight?"

America scrunched his face, joining her in the kitchen. "How 'bout roasted, babe?"

It was like she'd become obsessed with making mashed potatoes lately. She'd made them before, obviously, since a man had to have his taters, and it was a reasonably easy thing for her to learn. But ever since Christmas, she'd been taking the allowance he gave her to the market and buying up every potato she could, boiling them in the big cast iron Korean pot, then standing in the kitchen for hours as she mashed and mashed them with the potato masher he'd gotten her for the holidays until they were as smooth as a Jew's tongue. She was dammed focused, too.

Grace looked disappointed by his request, but didn't argue. 'Course not. He had her trained good by now.

America slung himself into the sturdy kitchen chair, deciding to watch her get down to business, lighting another cigarette as he did.

"I brought the paper for you." Grace folded it the way he liked, setting it in front of him, and pushing his ash tray over.

It was bronze, shaped like a hexagon and engraved with curling vines and Oriental patterns. It looked more like a bowl for soup than ashes, but it served its purpose well. Grace had learned her lesson from last year, and hadn't needed a reminder to get him more than a cheesy card, or to keep her sticky fingers to herself.

Well, he didn't *know* she had. But she'd kept them out of South's pockets, at least. The kid didn't smoke yet, so the bronze tray couldn't've been his. That was all that mattered.

His lips twisted as he tapped ashes into the shiny bowl, thinking about their little drive down to the docks on Christmas Eve.

There'd been something fucky going on there, he knew it. And more than South being an idiot and giving the dame the chance to kill someone by changing up her Commands. He thought he knew

who the Nork's agent was.

But it wasn't South. And that was really all that mattered. He'd reassigned a coupla Grace's guards to keep an even better eye on him lately, but all he did was lie on his heated floor and whine to himself, like usual. If anything, the little kerfuffle with the prisoner had just primed him for dealing with the others. He hadn't made a peep over America missing the ceasefire deadline.

It didn't matter which province that guy had belonged to- most of them were traitors. And if even the dame had been brainwashed… Well, South just fully understood now what America had all along.

The Reds could get to *anyone.* Even the people that claimed to despise them and everything they stood for could have their minds scrubbed clean until they were just as smooth-brained as the commies. How could they just hand over more drones for their hive?

How could they make peace?

The Reds might have whatever brainwashing device CCCP had cobbled together from spit and pure commie determination. But America's boys in the camps were changing minds. Red China wouldn't sign anything, not when his POWs weren't being handed back. He couldn't tolerate his guys being shipped over to Formosa for Chang Kai-shek's army, and America couldn't tolerate returning more bullets for his arsenal before he came for him. This was a win-win.

'For me, anyway.'

America blew smoke rings up at the overhead light as his mind drifted, and he admired the curve of Grace's waist, and the bruises exposed by her knee-length, checkered shirtwaist dress, nodding with satisfaction to himself.

Another bitchin' Christmas present, on top of the potato masher and the little red earrings he'd got her, another 'requisition' from a soldier who'd found them just lying around. He spoiled her really. And all she'd gotten him was an ash tray. *'Something to remember*

our time in Korea.' Like he could fucking forget it when he'd had to spend a damn year and a half here.

He felt a flicker of irritation as he tapped more ashes from the end of his smoke. It felt good. He hadn't felt much of anything exciting for the past few weeks, aside from the little thrill making the Reds snap their caps with the talks had brought, and being pissed at the dame. And he'd worked that out on Grace pretty quickly.

There wasn't much action at the front, things in the rear were mostly locked down tight, aside from a little guerrilla resistance and sabotage that wasn't anything Rhee's bloodhounds couldn't deal with, South had been behaving himself, and now that the POW camps were going to be seeing a little more limelight, America was making himself scarce from them. And his girl had been keeping herself on the straight and narrow, her lessons learned.

Frankly speaking, America was starting to get bored. Bored of watching the same films over and over, projected on the parlour wall, bored of hearing about shit back home instead of steering it, bored of Grace, bored of…

"Dinner's ready," Grace chirped, setting a plate down in front of him, a roast beef sandwich made with leftovers from the roast last night, roasted potatoes, and peas, all smothered with gravy.

She smiled as she did it, showing off her pearly whites in a real one, not like the nervous teeth baring she'd been doing for a few months after Britain had made him put the fear of God in her. The way she'd been creeping around the house like a mouse with a cat had been pissing him off, and he couldn't even teach her a lesson for being afraid of him because if he went too far, he knew it would feel like the limey was laughing at him for making him get rid of another girl.

She hadn't been going unpunished, of course. It was just whenever he found himself gritting his teeth over her downcast eyes and shaking hands, he'd go take a long drive and short boat ride to one of the camps.

Now that she was in a better mood, though, he'd have to remind

her it was pretty damn ungrateful for her to be afraid of her country. CCCP had gotten in those turncoats' heads back in November, but the Tennessean girl had no such excuse.

"Looks good, Gracie-baby," America appraised the meal. "But maybe you should put half of that sandwich back. You're finally losing weight, don't want to make all that progress for nothing. Carbs, y'know?"

She'd started taking walks every day, no matter how cold it was. He was pleased she'd finally decided to do something about her softening figure. Motivation, that was all it took.

"Mm." Grace smiled, obediently removing half of the sandwich from her plate. "Do you want it?"

"Read my mind, babe."

She spooned a few of her potatoes onto his plate, too, and in exchange, he offloaded half his peas onto hers.

"See, this is why we make a good couple," he told her around a mouthful of bread and beef. "We know how to trade."

Grace smiled, using her knife and fork- You know he'd seriously had to import those here, too? Even with how modern this manor was, it still hadn't had civilized cutlery- to cut her sandwich into bite-sized pieces.

America flipped a page in *The Washington Post* with his free hand, kissing his teeth as he came across another article on the steel industry bargaining.

"Is all that still going on?" Grace asked, tucking a strand of her long hair behind one ear.

"Yep." America got halfway through the article before he got bored of it, and returned his attention to his sandwich, sighing dramatically. "Some people just can't be happy with what they have, Gracie."

"I know you explained the whole thing to me before, but I sort of

like, didn't understand it at all," Grace said, making him chuckle indulgently.

He loved when a broad didn't know squat. It was fun to explain it to 'em and watch them nod and pretend like they got it. Anyone that said women could be military- *real* military- or get involved in politicking hadn't seen one's pretty blue eyes glaze over as you tried to explain the concept of profit margins to her.

That was why he'd gotten tired of… Katherine, Katy, that was it, pretty quick. She'd thought working at a paper company gave her an idea about how those things worked, enough that *she* could try to explain them to *him*. And when she'd mentioned joining a union, well, that was sort of it for her.

"Of course ya didn't, Gracie," he said, starting on the third sandwich half on his plate. "Here, let me dumb it down for ya. Basically to stop inflation- that's things costing more, babe- while the war's going on, our pal Truman unlinked wages and prices. That means the companies can't just raise prices when wages go up, 'cuz that would crash the economy. We did the same thing during last war."

"I was sort of busy in nursing school," Grace said, spearing a bite of potato. "Some of my friends would talk about it, but it was sort of like, we're nurses, you know? What does that have to do with us?"

America pointed his fork at her. "And if everyone had that attitude, the world would be a better place. Anyway, Big Labour feels like they got the short end of the stick last time, and the government was favouring Big Business. So now they're demanding we don't stabilize wages. They want 'productivity bonuses' for if the company they work for's doing better than usual, and price controls and crap."

Grace's pretty little brow furrowed. "And we… don't want that?"

"If wages keep going up, that's how we get inflation," America reminded her.

A few of ‘em were extra pissed because they’d missed out on pay rises before the wage control act passed. But that should be between them and the company they worked for, not the government. They had bigger fish to blow up.

He explained that to Grace, adding, “So the wages for those ones went up ten percent instead of twelve, and they’re not too gassed.”

Truman had basically been trying to pacify them for the past year, and failing miserably. A ton of workers had resigned.

Which was fine. If they weren’t happy with what they got, they could go elsewhere. That was freedom, baby. They weren’t going to find a better deal.

“And ever since Truman let the steel companies raise the price caps, they’ve been running on empty.”

Prez Pinko's engine had sputtered a bit, too, since it sort of screwed with his whole ‘wage and price control plan.’ But America had made sure it was pushed through. The companies were already pissed at revenue going down, since the State of Emergency and Defense Production Act saw them selling to the government at lower prices, and didn’t let them sell as much to the higher-paying civs. In the kind of wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am war Korea had been *supposed* to be, that kind of mass buying for cheap the government did turned a tidy little profit. Hell, he’d said before that this war had taken them out of the backslide, and he’d say it again.

But the economy, she was a fickle beast. And when shit dragged out like this, it started to get expensive.

Workers had to work. If they didn’t, they’d die. But the companymen could walk away at any time if they didn’t feel like their wallets were cushy enough. And America needed that steel for Korea.

“So long story short,” he said, tiring of his own explanation. “Labour wants higher wages, business obviously doesn’t, they’ve been talking it out for a few months, and haven’t gotten anywhere. Labour’s started asking for ridiculous shit like eight vacation days a

year, weekend overtime, and for me to step in."

Seriously, they were already overpaid. And they thought they could make demands like that? Working in a steel mill didn't take a goddamn genius. Anyone could do it. If two bucks an hour wasn't good enough for them, they could find work elsewhere.

Grace nervously watched his fist clench around his fork.

"And if they don't get it, then the workers are probably going to go on an industry strike," America finished with a false smile. "Which means no more steel for us."

The yucks already had one cooked up, but had been postponing it since December. They said that if they didn't get what they want, they'd strike for real at the end of February.

They were holding it over America's head, trying to threaten him into conceding, like he wasn't trying to fight a damn *war* over here.

The bastards didn't know how good they had it. They had the *freedom* to negotiate wages and make demands. He was using the steel they made to bring that freedom to Korea, to the *world,* and they wanted to cut it off over twelve more cents an hour.

Grace's dyed blonde brows were pulled in, her plump red lips pouted in thought.

"Something to say, Gracie?"

She bit her lip.

"Go ahead, babe, speak your mind," he encouraged. "I'm sure you've got one rattling around in there."

The woman took a sip of water from her glass, then tentatively asked, "Why *don't* you step in?"

America raised a brow. "Beg pardon?"

"If they want you to step in, why don't you?" she asked, curling a string of hair around her finger. "You could, couldn't you? The guys

that work in the factory want their wages to go up, but the guys in charge won't let them. If they're going to walk away if they don't…

"Why don't you just *make* them raise the wages?"

America stared at her. Grace stared back, and he could tell she had a mind because she already knew she'd made a mistake before he even pushed his chair back.

'SMACK.'

The girl's empty head rocked back as his palm met her cheek, and was just as quickly hauled back by his fingers in her hair. She stared up him with wide, childishly shocked eyes, like she hadn't just said the stupidest fucking thing in existence.

"Do we live in Korea, Grace?"

Her slim throat worked. "No."

"Do we live in Red China or Russia or any other backwards dictatorship?"

"No."

"No. We live in the *USA."*

The USA tightened his grip in her hair, forcing her head back to make her look him in the aviators. "So why the *fuck* would I do something Red like that?"

"Ah- I'm sorry," Grace stammered. "I d-didn't think it was Red, I mean, I just, my pa used to work in a steel mill and he said the fellas in charge could afford to pay him more, they just didn't want to. I-" Her blue eyes dipped to the floor, blocked by his broad chest. "I just thought maybe you could make them."

"Your pa was a crazy sumbitch that blew your ma's brains out of her head on a Tuesday afternoon," he growled. "And 'making' companies do anything is what commies do. We live in a *free country,* Grace. Our workers have the right to demand higher wages, and the guys in charge have the right to make as much money as

they want. And when they don't want to give any of the money that they worked hard for away, the workers have the right to pick up their stakes and leave. I'm not going to step in to deprive any of them of that freedom. And if that doesn't sound right to you, then that makes you a Communist."

He forced her head back more, lowering his voice. "Are you a Communist, Grace?"

"I'm not."

This time as she denied it, the tears in her eyes came solely from her hair pulling at its roots. Her voice was almost tired.

The reaction wasn't what he wanted. Instead of lighting a fire in his belly, it just made that dull feeling of boredom spread through him.

America's teeth grit as he prepared to swing her to the ground and try to reignite that spark.

The intercom went off.

They both looked at the hallway, and *there* was that spark, lighting in his stomach at being interrupted.

America wanted to ignore the chime and stoke it, but when the sound came again, he hissed through his teeth and shoved Grace away.

"Stay here for a sec, babe," he ordered.

She stayed seated, her blonde hair a curtain over her face, so that was probably a yes.

America went to the intercom, pressing the button. "What?" he snapped.

His gateman's voice crackled. "Guest list visitor, sir."

The Countryhuman clicked his tongue. "Send him in."

He straightened his collar, brushing invisible lint from his lapels, and a few seconds later, a nondescript man in civilian's clothing entered. Short brown military cut, ordinary green eyes, and an appropriate amount of stubble.

"Good news, I hope," America prompted, leaning against the entry wall.

"More volunteers willing to replace the South Pyongan-Hwanghae cells," the man clipped in a flat tone, pulling a neatly folded piece of paper from his pocket.

America scanned over the list of names, and where applicable, ranks and units. "Good man. But send some to the east coast, too."

The guerrilla units he'd had up north had been going through a little bit of an implosion recently after four entire units had gone dark when they were supposed to be carrying out a covert op. And judging by the transmission his listening post had received, they weren't going to be coming back in contact anytime soon. Now the others were having a leadership crisis and seeing mass defections.

So it turned out it *wasn't* just the Southern gooks that were spineless cowards. The Northern ones were, too, but specifically after pledging themselves to Rhee. The guy had to be some kind of bad luck charm.

"And a communication from Pyongyang," the man continued. "Agent Maine reports the retrieval operation was a failure."

America snorted. "Yeah, I put that together when I didn't have a province delivered to my door a month ago."

"Yes, sir," the man said, unsmiling. "Her only new movement updates are that Kangwon province has been travelling frequently, both at night and day. His movements are unpredictable, and he is frequently accompanied by both a medical team and North Korea himself."

The nurse. His movements were unpredictable to anyone that didn't know what he was looking for. And America had a hunch

that *he* did.

But if North was with him, it was a no-go. He'd taken out over two hundred of his Doughboys and South's guys- a puny little special task force wasn't going to bring him in.

Besides, America could run with the 'a province chose to defect, I can't possibly return him now' line. Selling that North himself had would be a little more difficult, especially with how publicly mouthy he'd been with the UN and other foreign governments.

Plus it was hard to say how his drones would react. They *could* work themselves into a fury and throw themselves at America's line to get their king back, maybe even giving him a chance to snag Red China (though he doubted the slippery bastard would exactly put himself on the line for his puppet), or they could panic and rally harder to sign a ceasefire immediately. Which would be harder to avoid when he had their literal Countryhuman in hand.

Unless he could get him to…

No. North Korea might be the brainwasher, not brainwashee, but those ideas would still have sanded his brain smooth. America had been able to tell how stubborn he was from their brief meeting alone. The fact that he was still holding fast with his country in ruins around him just proved the American right, as usual.

Best to stay focused on the provinces. That reaction would be predictable. Northie was barely tolerating making peace while the Southern ones were down here- there was no way he'd be able to sign if America had one from the North. It'd make him look even weaker than he was.

"No major operations for awhile," he decided. "The units will need time to rebuild and reorganize. But inform Agent Maine to keep Command updated on movements, just in case. Especially Gangwon province. And see if she can get us any hard proof of him being in Communist hands."

The broad had already told them he was, and America's boys were dual-lobbying his return with the prisoner of war topic, but

actual photo proof, or something like it, would make a possible withdraw from the talks more sympathetic.

He didn't *need* it of course. It wasn't like anyone but CCCP would actually give him a real challenge over it, especially now that Britain and the UN had fallen in line. But he liked to have his bases covered.

"Yes, sir." The man gave him a few more unimportant updates on sabotage operations, then left with a sharp salute.

Grace was still sitting at the table when he came back to the kitchen. Her blue eyes peered out from her waterfall of blonde locks. The red handprint stood out against her creamy white skin like a brand.

America grinned.

When the itch under his skin was satisfied, they lay in bed together, looking up at the ceiling in the dark. The fireplace crackled in the parlour, but it wasn't enough to warm the bedroom. America ran his hand over Grace's smooth arm, feeling the pebbles on it.

"America?" she said quietly.

Her voice was clear. He hadn't been any rougher than usual this time. She hadn't meant anything by her comment- she just had a crazy dad that filled her empty head with crazy ideas. And he liked her a little bit crazy, that was why he'd chosen her.

'Sides, she'd given him an idea for Truman. His term was up after this year, but there was nothing stopping him from running again after four more. He still needed to pay for thinking he could outmaneuver America, so the Countryhuman was going to make sure that didn't happen. And the best way to do that was to sour him in the eyes of the shareholders.

America wouldn't step in between Big Business and Big Labour. But Truman would.

Remembering he had a girl, he said, "Yeah, babe?" winding her

soft hair around his finger, a stripe of gold joining the red.

"What happens after the war is over?"

"We go home," he said. "Get to watch television and have proper heating again."

Grace was silent for a long while. "Ah don't think ah have a home."

"'Course you do, Grace," America soothed, running his hand along her silky locks. "America's home. I told ya you can count on me. I'm all you have left, aren't I?"

"Yes," she said, nuzzling into his neck.

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "Do you want to get circled, babe? Spend the rest of our lives together? Well, the rest of *your* life."

Grace's warm breath shuttered against his neck. "Yes."

"Then when the war's over, we'll get hitched," he said, sliding his hand under the sheets, along the knobby column of her curved spine. "I'll buy you a car, and all the fancy clothes and jewellery you want, and a nice house with a big kitchen so you can cook mashed potatoes for me all day. You like the sound of that?"

He gently pinched the swell of her hip so she'd know the question wasn't rhetorical, and she nodded into the crook of his neck.

"I do."

"Then that's what'll happen."

America held her in his arms, pressing kisses to her head as she drifted off.

Grace wasn't making it home from Korea. She'd seen and heard too much. He'd been forced to *do* too much to her by North Korea and Red China and Truman and CCCP and that Northern doll and Britain and this damn war. And sometimes by her. It wasn't all her

fault. But it was enough that he couldn't trust her around the newshawks back home. He knew she'd never betray him, but she wasn't the brightest, and those bastards could be tricky.

And she was getting boring.

He cupped the side of her neck, stroking his thumb along the soft skin, feeling her carotid artery beat under the pad, light and steady.

It was fine. He didn't need her for much longer anyway. The Northern doll would take her place soon enough. Soon North would break and bend the knee, or he'd get the proof he needed that the chink was here. Whichever came first, America could take the war to Red China. Then he would feel *alive* again, the growing boredom blasted away by new fights, new political chess matches, new land to conquer and people to save, ones whose brains weren't entirely washed yet, and would appreciate it more than the gooks.

Even with how crazily devoted the brainwashed Norks were to their master, there was only so much they could take. He bet that even now, Northie was learning his lesson.

The Reds weren't the only ones that could spread sickness into someone else's country.

America's lips curled up against Grace's skull, the moonlight through the window glinting coldly off his aviators.

Another Christmas had passed with the war in Korea still raging.

But it would be the last.

I cut my thumb open (again) while making tonkatsu, but I was busy frying, so I didn't stop cooking, and didn't really pay attention to anything but not burning anything. Then I took my plate to eat in the dark, did the dishes in the dark, worked out, and went to sleep. I wake up the next morning and wonder what all the weird black smears are all over the floor, stove, and fridge are. Blood. Everywhere. I don't think I want to know the colour of my sink water last night.

While going over American slang from this period again, I

found the term ‘candy ass’ to mean a weak or wimpy person. In the world of this book, I think that slang wouldn’t become popular, since ‘candy ass’ could easily be believed to be referring to a certain candy-striped Countryhuman. It would be seen as being anti-American by implying that America is a wimp. It would only catch on in certain American leftist circles after the war in Korea was over, sort of implying that America is weak for not being able to conquer North, mocking him without mocking him directly.

Hunger Is A Dog

1922

“Gochisousama des- Ah!”

Hae giggled as Korea launched himself across SH, straight into Sang, wrestling around with her as everyone tried to get out of the way. Chungbuk rubbed his side while he did, since he was still hurtin’ from getting shot.

“It’s not good for digestion to move so much right after eating!” Sang cried.

“You can prick your finger when I’m done with you.” Korea wrapped his legs around hers and flipped her sideways.

SH shook her head, gently nudgin’ Hae. “Why don’t we move a little so we don’t get kicked in the head?”

Hae jumped up, letting SH take her wooden bowl as she licked the last bit of soup from her fingers, makin’ sure not to miss a single drop. It’d been real good. Sang had made it with ginger root, leftover bones from the rabbits Kang had cut up a couple days ago, and some of the plants that grew around Changsu Mountain. It was the best thing she’d ever tasted. But still…

She rubbed her stomach with her free hand, ashamed.

“I hate when you do that.” North Hamgyong’s voice came from above her, since he was sitting as high up on the ridge as he could with the trees still hidin’ him if someone looked up from way down in the foothills.

Hae craned her head back to look at him, poppin’ the finger on her other hand out of her mouth. “Korea says we can’t waste anythin’.”

“Then don’t get soup on your fingers in the first place,” her cousin growled. “We have spoons for a reason.”

Hae knew that. Kang had worked hard on them. But she liked to fish the chunks in her soup out with her fingers. It helped her eat slower, which he said she had to do if she didn't want to throw up again.

Even though he'd always warned her about that, after she'd almost gotten stolen by the Kempeitei, she'd been so happy (and hungry) that she forgot. Kang had looked away to check out NJ's ankle, 'cuz she'd twisted it on the run, and then Hae was getting scolded for inhaling her bird meat and having it come right back up.

She didn't like throwing up at all. It was gross and hurt, and more importantly than that, Korea had scolded her for wastin' food.

And there was something else. Something from the hole she couldn't remember and didn't want to.

"And ah lick my fingers for a reason," she said to North Hamgyong, plantin' her hands on her hips. "It's either that or ah puke, and you'd think that's a lot grosser."

He made a funny face. "I have no idea what goes on in that fucking head of yours."

"Language," SH chided, and he made another funny face at her.

Everyone looked over as Sang shouted, "I have him! Wait. I don't! I don't have him!"

She'd been sittin' on Korea's stomach, and had almost pinned him down. But he'd got one of his legs up in between them and jabbed her in the stomach, like he'd done to Hae a few times now. Sang let go of him for a second, and then Korea was free and kickin' out with his legs like a rabbit. It probably wouldn't have done much but hurt, except they'd got too close to the edge of the slightly flatter part of the ridge they were camping on, so Sang went tumbling down it.

The slope was only a li'l bit steep, so Hae could still see her cousin as she rolled away, yelpin' as she hit every bump on the rocky

hillside before spreading her arms out and landing in a sprawl on her face.

'Ouch.'

"You killed her," Pyo remarked from up in a pine.

"I'm alright!" Sang's voice echoed up, a li'l dazed.

Korea had been watching her roll with wide eyes, but when she shouted, he straightened up, lookin' all serious again.

"A lesson on staying aware of your environment during combat," he shouted down at her. "And on not using Japanese."

"Ryoukaishimashita!"

Korea glared down at her, then looked back at the other provinces. "That goes for all of you- on staying aware of your environment, *not* on not speaking Japanese."

Hae wiggled sheepishly as he shot her a look.

"We are performing this mapping so that we will be better able to utilize our country's terrain for military operations," Korea continued. "That applies on a small scale as well."

Chungbuk raised an eyebrow. "You sure you're not just trying to cover for kicking Sang down a cliff?"

"It is a mild slope," Korea corrected in the same serious voice. Pyo called it his 'General voice,' since he was always givin' orders in it.

Hae thought that meant he was definitely trying to cover for sending Sang rollin'. But since he was saying it, it also meant they had to do it, so Hae burned it into her brain with all the other combat stuff Korea was teaching her.

She'd finally been able to start learnin' four months ago, as soon as Kang said she was strong enough. Now every morning when she woke up, she got to playfight- *train* with everyone else, instead of just watching. Korea was training her personally right now, since

the others ‘went easy’ on her. He’d also started jumpin’ her out of nowhere like he did to everyone, which Sang din’t really like.

But Hae liked it! She didn’t get left out anymore, and she got to wrestle with Korea (not that she’d ever won yet).

Plus it seemed to make Korea feel better. She thought she might’a scared him by almost getting kidnapped, so he wanted to make Hae tough enough that it wouldn’t happen again, something that Hae *also* wanted to make sure of.

*‘But even if ah **did** get got, Korea would come save me.’*

She beamed to herself, her eyes on Korea as he dusted off his jacket. It wasn’t Japanese to her anymore, just like her clothes weren’t. When she buried her face in the faded drab fabric, it didn’t smell like blood and dank dirt like the Japanese soldiers. All she could smell was the green pines they slept under, musky sweat, and gunpowder from the submachine guns they were learnin’ to use. Korea-smell.

Hae was about to go help rescue Sang as she sat up, but SH and Gyeong were already on it.

As they went down, Korea went up, calling back, “Start your reading lessons before it gets too dark.”

Hwang made a loud sigh as he started to pull their learnin’ stuff out, making Hae pout.

She knew he didn’t mean it, though. He probably didn’t even realize he’d started sighin’ like that when it was time to teach her to read and write.

Korea said Hae was learning how to fight pretty good (it was ‘cuz if a move didn’t work, she never repeated it because he’d told her not to, and she always remembered everything he said ever), but Hwang said she was a slow learner when it came to words an’ stuff. And she still heard things in Japanese, and didn’t have all the common sense she should.

But that was okay! Korea said she was doin’ good, and that was

all that mattered. She'd do even better, so then he'd tell her she was doin' great.

"Hwang, is it okay if we don't start right away?" she asked her brother, givin' him round eyes. "Ah need to ask Korea somethin'."

"Of course," he said, spreading their papers and stuff over the rocky ground. Hae could see her wobbly charcoal characters on them. She worked real hard to make them as neat as Chungnam's pretty handwriting was, but they were still squished and hard to read.

She always felt bad when she filled the sheets up, and wasted more paper. Hwang said it wasn't a waste, 'cuz she was learnin', but she knew it made him sad to run out. She got now why he always guarded his pencils and other things like a toad- it was real hard to get more.

Hae would work hard tonight. This would be the last night she had to learn her characters. She'd make her ㅅ's as graceful as Chungnam and SH's, and get the stroke order on her ㅎ's right. Screwin' up at reading and talking made Hwang frustrated, but didn't waste resources.

She skipped after Korea. Behind her she heard SH cry, "Gyeong!" and then the sound of someone else fallin' down the ridge. He was probably okay, though, since he shouted, "My glasses didn't break, guys!"

Korea looked back and saw her. "I thought I told you to stop following me to the toilet."

"You ain't goin' to the toilet," Hae chirped. "You're goin' to keep watch, and read your Russian books."

Korea *'tch'*ed, shifting the book he'd grabbed from Hwang's bag away from her. "Go do your lessons."

"Ah… wanted to ask you somethin'." Hae dug her toe at the ground, hopin' he wouldn't make her ask when North Hamgyong and the others could still hear them.

Her country sighed, and Hae brightened. He didn't sigh like Hwang, but in a way her brother said was 'exasperated.' She liked when he sighed like that, 'cuz it meant he was going to let her do something.

"Come then," he said, like she knew he would, so she skipped after him.

They were on Changsu Mountain, in her and Hwang's province. After Korea had said they 'needed to know their country like they knew their own bodies,' they'd come here to go over every inch of land. They were goin' to finish up the northeast, then move on to Kangwon. Hae couldn't wait! She'd mostly just seen parts of the north before this, like SH and Hambu's provinces, and the area around Pyongyang. Kang said they'd been in the Taebaek Mountains before, but she wanted to see Kumgang Mountain, since everyone said it was real pretty.

Gyeonggi said it was goin' to be hard to scout all those places, and take a long time, but Hae wasn't scared. Even though they'd be being chased by bad guys the whole time, it would still be better than the hole.

The hole had been small and dark and lonely, but Korea was big and beautiful and filled with her family, and nice people that cried happy tears when they brought them grain, and gave them gloves and things to stay warm. She wanted to meet more'a their people, to see Seoul and Paektusan and the Honam Plains and all the other places her family had told her about, and she wanted to see them with *them.* With Korea.

"Korea?" she said as they climbed. She'd wanted to wait until they got up top, but he was taking them on a long route, tryin' to stick to the patches of trees that covered the ridge, and she couldn't wait.

"What?"

"Ah'm…" She stopped, squirmin', and he stopped, too.

"What?" he repeated, exasperated again.

“Ah’m still hungry,” Hae admitted, looking down at her hands as they squeezed together.

“You just had soup,” Korea said, crossing his arms. “You want more?”

“No,” Hae said quickly. “Ah’ve got meat on my bones now, so ah don’t need any more than everyone else.” Even though some of them said she did. “Ah’m full, ah’m just… not.”

She didn’t know how to say it. She felt… hollow all the time, even when her belly was full of food and her heart was full’a her family. Like she had a second stomach that wasn’t a stomach, but was in the same place her real stomach was. She’d thought that was just what being hungry felt like, since she’d never got enough to eat before, she didn't think, and even when Kang and the others were stuffin’ her with jerky, soup, berries, and everything else they could after she was freed, she was still tiny and stick-thin.

But now her stomach wasn’t all hard and bulgy anymore, her ribs weren’t bumpy, and she was strong enough to get roughed up by Korea. And even though they had to go without eating some days, ‘cuz they were being chased, she never really got hungry, not the way she’d… used to? But she still felt hollow.

“Your common sense doesn’t tell you anything?” Korea asked.

Hae shook her head. There was a tickle in her head, but it got all jumbled up whenever she reached for it, just like her Korean.

She didn’t know how to explain it, even in Japanese. But Korea seemed to understand anyhow.

“It’s not *your* hunger,” he said, jaw doing its cute twitch. “It’s your people’s.”

Hae blinked. “Ah can… feel their hunger?”

“Yes,” Korea confirmed. “You all can. It’s part of being Provincehumans.”

Hae tried to reach for the tickle in her head again, using Korea’s

words as a crook to snag something from the jumble.

She thought maybe there had been a guy in fancy robes and a silly hat that'd been hungry a lot, and the idea of that felt right. But that was all she could get.

She tilted her head at Korea. "Can you feel it, too?"

"Yes," he said after a second. "Our people are being starved."

"By the Japanese," Hae said, frowning. It was why they had to rob grain and stuff from their carts and give it back to their people.

"And by some of our own." Korea sounded like he didn't want the words to come out, but they did. "I've told you about the landlords."

Hae bobbed her head. "They own more land than they should, and the people that harvest everythin' aren't allowed to keep it."

"It's more than that."

Hae didn't have to struggle to straighten as Korea did now, doin' it easily as he raised his head, looking off over the southern slope of the mountain.

She looked, but all she could see were the plains far below. The sun had gone away behind the far side of the mountain, but red light still crept over to streak them.

"The miners and woodcutters slave away to dig up ores and fell trees, and the workers in the factories break their backs making steel and commodities out of them. And almost everything they make is stolen from them by men whose only 'labour' is deciding how much of the value they'll allow the ones actually working to receive."

Korea's hand clenched tight around the spine of the book. Hae couldn't read the title- it was one of the Russian ones, dirty and beat-up, its cover torn off.

"Businessmen make others do the hard work, and if things go well,

they reap the profits. And if things fall through, they walk away." Korea's voice dipped into a growl as his hands flexed again. "And either way, the ones who actually *do* the labour suffer."

He dragged his gaze back to her. "It's baked into society. If we only defeated the Japanese, it would still be like that."

Oh! Hae knew this one!

"Which is why we have to make things better," she said confidently. "We're not fightin' to go back to the way things were- we're fightin' to progress."

She really liked Korea's speeches, so she'd asked Kang to tell her about all the ones she hasn't been around for. He'd sent her to SH for that one.

Korea nodded, makin' her beam. "Exactly. We are fighting to make a Korea where *no one* starves, where every single person can live under a tile roof and eat meat three times a day."

'Three times a day…' Hae's mouth watered at the thought.

"But until then, this hunger is a good thing." Korea pinned her with a look. "It reminds us that even if *we* are fed, our people are not. Our work isn't done."

Hae straightened up, putting the edge of her hand against her forehead like she'd seen the others do. "Yes, Gen'ral!"

Korea's short nail flicked her on the forehead. "Don't let South Pyongan influence you with that."

"But you are our Gen'ral," Hae chirped. "You're always sayin' we're not a family, we're an army unit. And Pyo says army guys give salutes!"

Korea gave another exasperated sigh, not saying another word before he went up the ridge.

Hae was relieved to hear she wasn't just hungry because she was greedy. She'd been scared to ask Kangwon about it because of that,

since he already talked about finding more food just for her. If one of her cousins wanted to give her their leftovers 'cuz they were full, that was okay. But Hae would feel bad if whoever was on hunting or foraging duty had to work harder just for her. She didn't want to be like those businessmen, which was why she was trying to learn how to hunt like the others. She was already real good at foragin'.

Hae kept following Korea, trying to walk quietly so he wouldn't remember she wanted to come with him to ask a question, which she just had. She knew he wouldn't let her read with him, since whenever he read the foreign books, he had to sound words out and repeat them to himself to understand, and he didn't like anyone hearing that (he'd chased her off a few times). But she wanted to see the view from the top of the mountain, and she wanted to see it with him.

But by the time they left the trees and were on the last bit of steep rock that led up to the peak, Hae was huffin' an' puffin', and he definitely knew she was there.

Korea stopped a few metres up, looking back down on her, crossing his arms. She made her wobbly legs keep moving, shaking as she tried to find the next spur of rock to hold her weight, thighs burning as her lungs ached. Just two more feet-

When she'd almost made it to Korea, he reached out and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her in to steady her, like she knew he would. She didn't get special privileges anymore (at least that's what he said), which meant he'd still help her if she needed it, but she had to prove she was willin' to try first.

But she was pretty sure he kept his arm around her longer than he would've for one of the others.

Korea crested the ridge, helping her up to stand on the narrow strip of rock with him, and it was a good thing Hae had already asked her question, because everythin' else in her head disappeared as the world unfurled in front of her.

The setting sun sat low on the horizon, bigger than she'd ever seen it, a ball of fire that turned the clouds pink and gold, and

washed the west side of Changsu Mountain. Its ridges fell away at her feet, carpeted in thick green forest, the leaves on the trees that had started to turn glowing all red and orange like embers in a fire. They stretched all the way down to the li'l village at the foot of the hills, nestled on the edge of corn fields that rolled to the edge of Unpha Lake.

From up so high, it was shaped like an eel, or the ryong from her common sense that Korea said weren't real, with scales the sun turned flaming crimson. It filled the valley between this mountain range and the one across from it, where they were headin' next, its head resting in the western foothills, a river leading from its mouth like a long red tongue, or a stream of fire. It wound away across the golden plains of Hwanghae, as far as Hae could see.

No matter where she looked there was always *more,* more mountains, more rivers and lakes, more villages and gold and green fields. She knew that if she wanted, she could follow that dragon's breath stream all the way to the sea, or wherever it led.

Her heart swelled, feeling like the sun was making it glow, too, fillin' her with warmth, and some nameless thing she couldn't describe, the opposite of the hollow their people's hunger brought her.

Hae felt something wet roll down her cheek, and reached up, confused. It hadn't felt like it was goin' to rain. Her fingers touched the moisture and followed it up to her eye, and her damp eyelashes.

Oh. She was crying.

She wiped at her eyes, hopin' Korea hadn't seen. She didn't want him to think she was sad, when really she was more happy than she'd ever been. Every time she got to see her country, it was more beautiful than before. Every day she was free with her family was better than the last, every day she was with him was the best day ever, and she never wanted him to doubt that.

But he wasn't looking at her. He was looking out at the valley, and even though she knew Korea didn't cry, the fiery light made it look like his eyes were glistenin', too.

“Look!” Hae pointed suddenly, excited to see small figures down below. “People are takin’ in the harvest, Korea!”

“Corn,” he said, blinking hard.

Hae nodded excitedly. “Wheat got harvested back in July 'round here, and rice ain’t until the end of the month.”

Korea gave her an odd look, but she was focused on the fields, watchin’ people walk between the rows of tall green plants, piling ears into carts.

Her excitement dimmed a li'l.

“Do ya think they’ll get to eat any of it?” she asked, looking back up at him.

“They’ll get some,” Korea said, all grim. “But not enough.”

Hae looked down, glum, then back up as Korea turned to her.

“But one day it *will* be enough,” he said firmly. “One day, our people’s fields will be in their hands, and our country will be in ours. Do you know what the most important thing is to a country?”

Hae wanted to say ‘its Countryhuman’ (specifically *her* Countryhuman), but knew Korea wouldn’t like that answer.

Guessin’ off of what the were talking about, Hae tried, “Food?”

Korea nodded, looking pleased. “The Japanese pretend that it is soldiers, the businessmen pretend it’s money, and the old nobles pretended it was status. But you can’t raise an army without food, workers won’t work without food, and none of those nobles would have even had that status if they hadn’t gotten it from owning land, land that was used to grow crops and raise animals.

“Food is *control.”* Korea’s eye flashed like fire, making Hae’s heart skip. “Whoever controls the food supply controls the people. If you’re dependent on someone else feeding you, whether it’s a monarch or a foreign nation, then you are bound to what *they* want from you. Whether you eat or go hungry is up to whether you are

on ‘good’ or ‘bad’ behaviour. And the ones in charge are the ones that get to decide what good and bad behaviour are.”

His jaw tightened. Dimly, Hae could remember a plate of rice being kept just outside of her reach, just like her language.

“That is why Japan ships all of ours overseas,” Korea declared. “That is why the peasants aren’t allowed to keep their harvests, and that is why the first thing every colonizer sinks their claws into is agriculture. People who are hungry are too focused on survival to focus on fighting back.”

“But not us,” Hae said, squeezing her fist over her heart.

“Not us,” Korea confirmed. “That is why we need to arm our people with the will to fight. They already know what is being done to them is wrong, and they want it to change. We need to give them the hope that it *can,* that the risk of fighting back is worth it. That a few years of starvation is better than a lifetime of dependency.

“One day *we* will control the food.” Korea’s hands clamped down on her shoulders as he stared intensely into her eyes. “One day our people will control the fields and our government, and we will control Korea. It won’t be up to landlords or foreigners whether someone has food on the table. Food will always be an incentive, but it will *never* be a punishment for us again.”

Hae broke into a grin at the words, at the idea of actually being full for once, and knowing that everyone around her was, too. She couldn’t stop herself from glompin’ onto her Countryhuman, burying her face in his neck.

“Thank ya, Korea.”

His response thrummed against her ‘ear.’ “Don’t thank me. I am only doing what I’m supposed to. And you will be just as much a part of it as me and the rest of our people.”

Only because he’d saved her. Only because he’d lifted her out of the hole and was teachin’ her to read and write and fight and how to make things better. He was the reason she got to eat tasty food

and breathe crisp mountain air, the reason she even knew their people weren't just something she'd made up in the hole to feel less alone, and the reason she could fight for them.

Hae turned her head slightly, peerin' up at her Countryhuman. His hands were at his sides, refusing to hug her back, but he wasn't pushing her away yet. His eyes were on the people down below, leaving the fields with carts piled high with corn. This year they might have to give it all away to landlords and for taxes. But one day they wouldn't have to.

"'To each according to his need,'" Korea murmured, then tilted his head like he'd just fit something together.

The sun was sliding down, and its light turned his blue skin the same rich shade of purple as the clouds above them. It wasn't filling his eyes with scarlet now, but they still had that fiery look in them, still glowed.

'Beautiful.'

Hae twisted her neck so she could see the sunset, nuzzling her cheek against his warm chest, savouring the few seconds she got to look out at their country with him, and Korea got to feel the same way she did about him.

—

1952

Hungry.

Hae bounced on the heels of her feet, looking around at the forest outside the bunker as she tried to wrassle with her impatience.

Ten more minutes. No, five? She hoped it was five. She'd been tryin' to keep count, but whenever she did, she always started to think about other things 'cuz counting was boring. Hae already knew which number came after which number. But thanks to that, she forgot which number she was on, so which number came after wasn't important.

She tried to make the time go faster by thinkin' about other things. She'd finally gotten those orphans into the orphanage before she came back to Pyongyang. That was good! Just 'cuz their folks had been no-good murderin' reactionaries didn't mean they were. They were just kids. And she'd been getting everyone ready for harvesting the winter crops and planting season. It was only January 10th, and they wouldn't start talking about sowing for real until February, when she'd get to start goin' around to take stock of all the seed stores and field space they had to make sure they were getting as many crops as they could planted.

'Let not an inch of land go idle!' Hae would make sure it didn't. And to do that, she has to get people excited way ahead of time, and just as impatient as her. It was her job as part of the Ministry of Agriculture. Like the Gen'ral said, the struggle for food was the struggle for the country, and victory at the front.

There were six hours in a night. They usually got back to the bunker at twenty-two hundred and got to sleep at twenty-three hundred (but it was a li'l later tonight since they'd had to give their provincial reports to Korea), and they woke up at five to get to Pyongyang or the assembly area to take off for their provinces. Not counting Kang (though he was here to give them check-ups tonight), Gang, or the cousins the Southern One still had trapped, there were seven of 'em to keep watch (Korea didn't want Comrade Liao Shī or Liao Juān doing it, even though they were really nice). But since SH refused to put Cha on the schedule again 'cuz he'd been all headachey after getting back from Kanggye, there was one province for every hour tonight. Which meant Hae had to wait an entire hour to go do what she needed.

'Dang it!' She'd gotten distracted thinking about other numbers. She'd lost count again. Had it been five minutes? It felt like five minutes. But North Pyongan wasn't here for last watch yet.

What if he didn't wake up in time? He'd never overslept for watch before, but he'd stayed up late whisperin' with Comrade Liao Shī, so what if he did tonight? It wasn't like Hae could go wake him up- Korea always said if you were on watch, you had to *stay* on watch. You couldn't drop your guard or walk away for even a second. And Hae never did. Even when she was losing track of time, she made

sure her eyes kept moving between the trees and the sky, looking for the planes she could hear in the distance. But going inside the bunker would definitely be droppin' her guard. And she couldn't call out 'cuz then she'd be waking everyone up, and Korea always said not to hum or talk to herself when she was on watch, so the enemy wouldn't hear her. So she definitely wasn't allowed to yell.

Her stomach growled, and she sucked harder on the rock in her mouth, tryin' to shush it.

Hungry.

If she was this hungry after eating her rice rations, how hungry would he be? What if he was back now and waiting for her?

Maybe she should-

The door behind her opened and Hae sprang back, spinning around.

"Pyobu!" she cried happily. "You're awake!"

Her cousin nodded, holding the door open for Liao Shī, who shuffled out, wrapped in her big jacket and both of their blankets, then quietly closing it.

"I thought I would relieve you early so you could get some more sleep."

Early? Oops. Good thing she hadn't gone to wake him up.

"You must be tired after your drive from Hwanghae," North Pyongan said.

Her an' Hwang had almost gotten bombed. A bunch of Yankee planes had shot up the checkpoint ahead of them, and they'd only just missed being exploded because Hi-chun- one of her bodyguards- was real quick with seizin' control of their truck and hiding them into the hills outside Sariwon.

They hadn't been trying to kidnap her or Hwang like they'd tried to do to Pyobu. They'd just wanted to kill their Public Security folks at the checkpoint.

Hae's hands balled up, but she smiled. "Thank you, Pyobu!"

She didn't have a watch, so she couldn't tell if it really was early. But she knew it was 'cuz her cousin wouldn't lie.

"You can sleep in my cot, if you pl-lease," Liao Shī said. She was shiverin' real hard, even with all her layers. Not Hae. She didn't get cold. "It should still be w-warm for thee."

Hae brightened, then remembered she really had to so something.

"Thanks a bunch, but ah have to go use the latrine," she said, inchin' away. "Ah might… be a li'l bit."

North Pyongan smiled. "Are you going to look for your dog?"

"Ayuh." Hae pouted, then quickly shook her head. "Ah mean no. Aw *shucks."*

She hasn't seen Ppang on the morning they left for their provinces, even though she'd snuck away with a piece of the meat from the tasty soup Korea had made to try and feed him. It was just a li'l nibble, and it hadn't been her rations- it was from the meat North Hamgyong gave her, so she was still followin' Korea's orders.

But she hadn't been able to find him, so she'd eaten it herself. And she hadn't seen him last night, either, even when she'd gone looking. Korea (who she'd accidentally told she couldn't find him, and promised she really really hadn't been tryin' to feed him anything (because North Hamgyong hadn't given her anything) said he'd probably just realized he wasn't going to get any more food and left.

But Ppang wouldn't do that! He was her friend, and he hadn't left any of the other times she went to her province. He at least would've stuck around to say goodbye.

"Ah've got to try and find him," Hae said defiantly, raising her head to her cousin.

Pyobu's brows furrowed as he looked out at the dark woods. "I don't like the idea of you going off alone."

“Ah can take care’a myself,” Hae told him, even though she didn’t really like it, either.

He gave a li’l smile, his eyes going far away. “I know you can.”

“I can go with, if you w-wish,” Liao Shī offered.

“It’s okay!” Hae chirped. “You’re cold, so you can stay and cuddle with Pyobu to warm up. Ah’ll be okay.”

Her cousin went purple. She couldn’t tell if Liao Shī went orange, since her cheeks were already a pretty shade of it from the cold.

“Hae-“

“Ah’m off!” she said, skipping away. “Ah’ll be back at muster time! And ah’ll be safe.”

She wasn’t letting some Yankee bastard or traitor kidnap her.

Once she was out of sight of the bunker, her legs stopped skipping, and she switched to walking. It was quieter. Just ‘cuz she didn’t want to scare Ppang away. She wasn’t scared or nothin’. Anything.

She checked near the latrines first because she had to pee after standing watch for so long. The smell didn’t bother her so much because it was bad, but more because it made her think of the hole.

She’d forgotten about all that stuff before, but ever since she’d talked with Yang Jeong-nyeo, she could remember why sometimes using latrines made her insides get heavy. How Big Nose and some of the other guys would refuse to change her waste bucket, and how after she’d got chained up, she couldn’t use one at all.

Hae realized she’d wrapped her arms around her chest and shook herself.

No time for that! She had an hour to find Ppang. And since he wasn’t around the latrine trench (he was gross and tried to dig up buried stuff), she had to go somewhere else.

She checked the place she'd gotten him used to seeing her next, but there was only a new dusting of snow with no paw prints in it. There weren't any at the old latrine locations either, or near the empty fox den at the bottom of a big, twisty larch, or heading up the mountain. She couldn't find any anywhere in the little patch of forest.

Hae stood at the edge, peering out at the stretch of plains leading to the highway, peppered with the stumps of felled trees.

She didn't like the idea of going out there. The forest was dark, and the trees rustling sometimes made her jump, but it felt cozy and safe. Hae had used to like wide-open spaces, and she still did. But…

She didn't like that someone could be watching her. Someone like the men that had hurt Yang Jeong-nyeo and her daughter.

Hae shook her head again, lightly patting her bandaged cheeks.

She wasn't scared. Korea was never scared of bein' alone, and neither was she.

The province hopped out of the shadows, making herself skip across the ground.

All the grass between the dead trees was gone, worn down by the woodcutters and the winter weather. It made Hae sad to see all the dead trees, but Korea said they were goin' to replace them all with more farmland and orchards after the war, so it didn't make her *too* sad and she wasn't thinking about how that one trunk kind of looked like a guy crouching off to her right. Nope!

She kept an eye out for Ppang while also keeping one on her surroundings, and her hand on her pistol.

Some of the others (Pyo and North Hamgyong) complained about always having guards on them, but Hae never did. And she never sent them away either, even though Korea said she could have a li'l bit of privacy if she had something private to say to anyone. Hi-chun and Chim-bom were good comrades, never complaining when she dragged 'em to just one more field. And more importantly, they

made sure she was never ever alone.

The wind picked up for a second, howling across the grassland, and Hae tucked her coat tighter around herself.

She made it to the highway without seeing any dog signs, and didn't see any as she darted across, either. Just tire tracks that made the white snow all dirty and gross. She did find a stain and some scuffed up snow on her way to the river that a brief peek with her flashlight told her was blood, making her stomach uneasy.

But it was just a li'l bit, and Hae could see fan shapes spread out on either side of it. Kang had told her that meant an owl had killed a vole, or something else tiny, and that its wings had brushed the ground as it swooped down from above.

'*Poor vole.'* But owls had to eat, too.

Her stomach rumbled as she looked at the red splash on the snow, feelin' her teeth sink into warm, furry flesh, and the spurt of hot blood in her mouth as the rat squealed.

She hugged herself guiltily. Poor rat. It would've been fine if she ate him, but she'd just bit him and let him go.

Her stomach growled.

Hungry.

The blood looked fresh, and she wanted to see if she could spot the owl somewhere, but she kept herself focused on Ppang.

What if an owl had gone after *him?* It couldn't swoop him away, but it could gouge him with its claws, or something else could hurt him. What if he was curled up somewhere, hurtin'? Hae had to find him.

She searched all down by the river, looking for prints in the snow and frozen mud along the bank, or a spot where something could have laid down, or anything that could tell her a li'l yellow dog had been by to get a drink.

Even though she searched until the sky started to lighten, she found nothing.

Hae sighed, shoulders slumping as she crouched at the edge of the river, poking sadly at the ice on the edges with a stick.

Maybe Ppang really had picked up and left. Or maybe he'd gone and visited one of the mines or military complexes on the other side of Jangsan, and one of the workers had taken him home. That would be good. They wouldn't have Korea telling them not to feed him.

Even though she'd miss him.

Hae stood, tossing her stick aside. She'd try and look again tonight. For now she'd better get back so she'd be at the bunker in time for muster. Korea had slept there last night, so it was extra important. So was breakfast.

But before she walked away, she paused, frownin'.

There was something in the river. A small shadow fetched up against the ice. Hae pulled out her flashlight, switching it on, relieved to see it wasn't a drowned animal or person.

It looked like a straw package, like the kind she and Hwang had kept their blood sausages in for the ride to Hwanghae (between them and their bodyguards, they hadn't lasted to Haeju).

Hae fetched her stick again, carefully testing the ice with her toe. It had been getting even colder lately, so the stuff near shore was thick enough to hold her, but the center of the river was unfrozen, and the ice farther out was thinner. She went as far as she could, then reached out with the stick, trying to nudge the container onto the ice. When that didn't work, she got worried about dislodging it and having it sink.

What did Pyobu say about crossing ice? Right- it was better to spread your weight out instead of concentrating it.

Hae got down on her belly and wriggled forward, reaching out her arms to grab the package. The ice creaked a li'l, but she didn't

weigh much right now, so it held, and her heart leapt as she lifted the box out of the cold water, and shimmied back to shore.

She popped up, opening the lid, and her eyes widened.

Clams! The box was full'a clams!

There were eight of 'em, all nestled in soggy straw. One of them had a smashed shell, but the others looked alright. She couldn't tell if they were alive or dead though, because she didn't really get how clams worked.

As Hae stared down at the stripy li'l shells and the pale meat poking out of the smashed one, she felt her mouth start to water, and the stone she'd been sucking on slid down her throat.

She didn't notice, too transfixed by the clams, and the memory they'd brought her.

Sitting tucked in a cove down near Gangneung, everyone gathered around as her, Pyobu, Pyo, and Gyeonggi spilled all the claims they'd harvested at their feet, dozens of them. They hadn't been able to make a fire 'cuz the Japanese were nearby, but it din't matter because clams were one of the few things Kang let them eat raw. Him and Sang had diced them up and they'd had jogae-hoe. Some of her cousins hadn't liked the thin slices of slimy meat. Korea hadn't, even though he didn't complain. But Hae had. Kang had sliced them thin enough to melt in her mouth as Pyo tossed them to her, and she hasn't missed a single one 'cuz if she did, Korea would scold them for wasting food. They were fresh and fishy and chewy and

Hungry. Hungry hungry *hungry hungry hungry hungry* ***hungry***

Hae didn't know what she was doing until she felt the squish of raw flesh between her teeth, ice water spurting out and filling her mouth. As she swallowed it down, the shock made her start thinkin' again, and she realized she'd dropped the box and was on her hands and knees in the icy mud, gloves tossed aside. Her face and hands were wet and cold, and the side of her finger stung where the broken shell had cut her as she tore the clam meat out of it.

Guilt flooded her like it had with the rat, but not for the clam. It was already dead. But these could've belonged to someone, and even if they weren't looking for them, she should share them with her cousins. But there already weren't enough for all of them, and she'd just eaten an entire one to herself.

For once she didn't feel happy about eating something tasty. She felt guilty and sick, her stomach sloshing the clam meat around as she curled up into a ball, her forehead to her knees.

She didn't like how being hungry made her feel, like she was back in the hole, like she was a small trapped animal that would sink its teeth into anything. Even Ppang sniffed his food before he ate it.

Hae shouldn't feel like this. She was *used* to being hungry, and this wasn't as bad as the hole, it *wasn't.* Korea had made her soup and soondae and she was able to pick her rations up every day and she was finally eating most of them again. She was used to feeling like her belly was eating itself.

But not as much as she'd used to be. She'd gotten used to comin' home to the house on the Taedong to see North Pyongan or SH had made supper, both equally delicious to her, to walking through the door and smelling the thick warm smell of steaming grain and cooking meat, to being given apples and persimmons and whatever else her people had grown with their own hands and wanted her to try, having dinner with 'em, a whole bunch of different foods she'd never had before, some her common sense hadn't even known about, even after it had started working right. She'd had more types of meat and vegetables and fruits and spices in the last two years before the Southern One started the war for real than in the thirty-eight years before that, and even though she'd never gorged herself 'cuz she knew plenty'a people still couldn't, and their people down south still had nothin', she'd always had *enough.*

She'd been fine when they started runnin' out of rations down at the Raktong, she'd been too focused on savin' people when she was scrounging for food in Haeju with Hwang, or Sincheon with her guerrilla unit, and as hungry as she'd been in the POW camp, even though she knew she would've eaten a beetle if she got the chance, it hadn't been like this, howlin' inside her and making her hollow.

It wasn't her hunger, and the clam couldn't fix it. The rat wouldn't've been able to either. It was her people's and she wasn't *used* to it nomore. She wasn't used to seeing them line up for their rations and know they weren't just another part of their meal but the only thing they'd get to eat all day. She wasn't used to seeing them thin and tired and starving and she wasn't used to how it felt to be hungry for someone else, for *thousands* of someone else's. To have all their desperation and hunger forced on her until it burst out and turned her into a dog that would eat rice if you offered it to it.

Hungryhungryhungryhungryhungryhungryhungry

She wanted to cram the rest of the clams in her mouth, shells and all, and try to fill up the hole inside her. To eat enough that her people would be full, too, to eat enough that no one would ever be hungry again. It was unfair that she could be hungry with them, but she couldn't feed them.

'You'll make sure they can feed themselves,' Korea's words came from the place she kept each and every one of them safe. It was what he'd said to her after he'd found out that she could farm, and learned stuff about crops real easy.

'Our people will be in control of our food. And when you're ready, you will oversee the agricultural arm of our future government. You'll make sure they ***keep*** *that control.*

'You'll make sure they can feed themselves, South Hwanghae.'

His voice made her trembling stop, just a li'l.

She would. Not right now, but soon. The weekend was comin', and she could give her rations away to Comrade Ae-ja so her grandson could make juk to keep her strong enough to beat her lung infection. And then she could work even harder at sowin' than she did last year, and encourage everyone to grow their own food and bring it to market, and feed tons'a people. And then when the war was over and Korea had won, she could make sure everyone was fed, and they really could live by 'From each accordin' to his ability, to each accordin' to his needs.'

She wasn't a dog- she was a person, and one of Korea's provinces. She could bear her own hunger. It was everyone else's she had to fix.

Hae took a shaky breath, slipping her hand under her to wipe at her face. She wasn't crying, she just… still had water from the clam on it.

She sat up and carefully replaced the lid on the straw box, holding it in her freezing hands, putting her gloves in her pocket so they wouldn't get damp. Looking both ways down the shoreline didn't show anyone, even though the light was that pretty shade of blue-grey that let her see all the way across the river to the stumps stickin' out of the snow on Undu Hill, and she'd been sitting here long enough that if someone was looking nearby, she would have heard them. Calling out a few times didn't get any reply either.

She hadn't seen any bootprints while she was looking for Ppang, so it seemed like the only way these could've got here was if they floated from way upstream. She'd feel really bad if she was stealing the clams from someone, but the only thing worse than that would be letting them go bad. The ice-cold river would've kept them fresh so far, but they'd still turn eventually.

Hae nodded decisively, starting back to the bunker, not looking at the straw package in her hands.

She wondered if Korea would want her to give the clams to their people, but she didn't know how long they'd been in the river. Kang said they had a higher tolerance for parasites and stuff (gross), so it was probably safer if her and her cousins ate them, though she knew Korea wouldn't.

And thinking of the deer soup he'd made them, she bet he'd be happy if she brought in some more forage for everyone. He might even say she'd done a good job!
Andshewouldn'tgetintroubleforgoin'lookin'forPpang.

The idea washed away her worry, letting her skip again, excitedly making her way back to the bunker, where everyone was already up and about, Pyo doing stretches to warm up while Pyobu

splashed his face with water from the basin before it was boiled, and Hwang was already readin' over his notes for the articles he was editing. Usually they'd head to the barracks chefs to get their breakfast, and everyone had to wait with their stomachs clenching. But today Hae could make the truck ride in a li'l easier.

Korea was doing his own stretches by the door, and he looked up as she skipped in, eye narrowed.

"Were you looking for that dog again?"

Hae skidded to a halt in front of him, enthusiastically holding up the box of clams.

"Ayuhahwasbutahwasn'tgoin'tofeedhimahpromiseahwasjus'tryin'tomakesur

"South Hwanghae, Military Report," Korea ordered.

Hae's heels slammed together as she straightened up. "Ah found this box of clams floatin' in the river, Korea."

His eye zeroed in on the box, and he snatched it from her hands before she could blink, makin' her huff.

"SH says to say 'please' before grabbin' things."

"Where did you find these?" he demanded, looking at the clams.

He didn't sound as excited as she hoped. Hae pouted.

"Down by the fork where we get water." Realizing why he was probably worried, she added, "Ah din't steal them or anythin'. No one was around."

Korea still looked tense. Raising his voice, he called, "Did any of you see any planes last night?"

"Yeah, a few," Pyo said, stoppin' her crunches. "I didn't see them, but I heard a couple fly by to the northeast."

Everyone else said they'd heard them, too, gatherin' around as

they realized something was going on. Hae's belly was starting to do flips.

Something was wrong.

"Did anyone see them?" he snapped. "Did they fly close?"

Hae was the only one who nodded. "Ah din't really see it, but one flew low over the highway around…" She'd lost count of time, right. "Maybe four-thirty. Ah think it was a pamphlet dropper, 'cuz ah heard a bang, but no explosion."

Stupid Yankees, droppin' lies on their people, telling them their People's Army were the ones rapin' and killin' and torturin', pretending they weren't the ones putting babies in women that didn't want them and throwing her people down mineshafts.

Korea hated the pamphlets, too, but she'd never seen him react this way to them before. Him and Kang gave each other really serious looks, then he stormed towards the GAZ.

"Everyone in the vehicle, we need to go to the river."

Disappointed he didn't like her present, Hae said, "Ah don't think there's anythin' wrong with 'em. They tasted fine."

Korea whirled around violently. "You ate one?"

Hae nodded, ashamed. "Ah'm sorry, ah know we're supposed to cook everythin', and ah should have shared, but ah was so…"

She bit her lip, twisting her hands together. She couldn't tell Korea that. SH had said not to, and she didn't want to hurt him.

"Vomit."

Hae looked up, confused. "What?"

Korea stared back at her, his eye blown wide open in the way it didn't do unless he was worried.

"Make yourself throw up."

Hae blinked. “But-“

“South Hwanghae, you need to throw up *right now.”*

“Korea-“

He shoved by SH. “Do it. Now.”

Hae cringed back, wrapping her arms around her stomach. She felt guilty about eating the clam, but she didn’t want to waste it. And she was still so *hungry*.

“But ah don’t want-“

Korea didn’t let her finish the sentence. He lunged at her, swinging her into a headlock, one hand grabbing her jaw hard enough to hurt, forcing it open as he stuck the fingers of the other one into her mouth.

Hae cried out in surprise, the sound gargled by Korea shoving his fingers down her throat. Her cousins started yellin’ in alarm and trying to pry him off’a her.

Hae was too confused to understand what was going on, the clearing spinning as Korea swung her away from the others, fighting off their efforts to stop him as he stabbed at the sides of her throat, trying to make her puke. She gagged and her mouth told her to bite down, to protect her meal, but she didn’t want to hurt Korea. His fingers already tasted like blood and burnt as they dragged over her tongue. Her throat clenched around them, and Hae bit the side of her own cheek instead of him before she was suddenly being pried away.

Pyo dragged her back, pressing her chest protectively to her back as she demanded, “What the hell was that?”

Hae gagged and spluttered as SH and Kangwon stood between her and Korea.

“What-?!”

Kang held up a hand to SH, his voice all soothin’. “Korea, there’s

better ways to handle this."

Korea ignored them, locking onto Hae again. "South Hwanghae, throw up *now."*

Hae really *really* didn't want to, but his eye was so wide and panicked, and Korea wouldn't have done that to her unless he had a good reason, and he was tellin' her to.

Closing her eyes, she pulled away from Pyo, bending over as she jammed her fingers down her own throat, touching the swingy thing at the back of it, not stopping when it started to convulse as she gagged, even though it felt gross and hurt. Her stomach didn't want to let go of its food, gripping painfully as it tried to hold on.

But then it surged, and the clams and last night's rice and soup came up, splattering on the frosty ground.

Pyo jumped back. "Gross."

"My food," Hae whimpered mournfully, eyes stinging.

"Did you just fucking Command her?"

"No!" Korea snarled at North Hamgyong.

Hae's throat hurt, but she made herself say, "Korea wouldn't do that." Her voice came out all raspy.

"What is fucking wrong with-?!"

"Shut up!" SH snapped at her brother, and Hae wanted to tell them not to fight over her, but she started coughing, throwing up more bile, her stomach clenching around nothing as the last bits of dinner came up.

Korea grabbed her by the arm, hauling her back. "Get away from it. And get away from the clams, all of you!"

North Pyongan and Hwang stepped back from the box real quick as Korea gripped Hae's shoulders, his fingers digging in as he looked her over like he did after a battle, his eye still wide.

“Ah’m sorry, Korea,” Hae said, still confused and hurt, but knowin’ he wouldn’t be upset like this if she hadn’t done something really dangerous. “Ah just wanted to bring everyone some food.”

His grip on her tightened.

“Korea, it’s alright,” Kang soothed, stepping in. “Let’s just explain calmly, okay?”

Hae’s burn scabs felt like they were about to tear as Korea put more pressure on them. Then he let her go, shoving her away from him to be caught by SH.

“During November, the enemy was making suspicious flights over the northeast and west,” Korea clipped. “We are concerned they were conducting more germ warfare operations.”

Everyone’s eyes went wide now.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Hwang asked.

“Because we didn’t know for certain, and you didn’t need the extra worry.”

“And now this idiot might be poisoned because of your heavy mouth,” North Hamgyong growled, thrusting a hand at Hae.

“I told you all to watch out for suspicious planes!” Korea snapped, rounding on Hae. “I *told* you to watch out for them dropping objects that weren’t bombs! Why is this the one time you didn't listen?!”

“Ah thought you meant to look out for pamphlets an’ stuff.” Hae tried to keep her tears inside as SH stroked her back. She knew Korea wasn’t really mad, he was just scared for her. “Ah din’t think it would be clams! If ah thought they’d came from a plane, ah wouldn’t’a eaten ‘em.”

Or maybe she would’ve. She wouldn’t have said she’d bite a rat, after all.

“We didn’t expect clams either, Korea,” Kangwon said, sliding in between them again. “It’s just been pamphlets, clothes, and those

beetles that one time."

"Beetles?" Liao Juān asked, and Mao Zhilong whispered something into her 'ear.'

Korea scrubbed his hand over his face, then demanded, "Why would you find clams in the Taedong? It's polluted, and our fishers haven't been able to bring anything in from the sea for *months."*

"Ah- Ah wasn't thinkin'," Hae confessed, hanging her head. "Ah was just hungry."

The word slipped out, and she clapped her hands over her mouth.

Korea's jaw clenched, and she quickly said, "Ah'm sorry, Korea, it's not yo-"

"You're *going* to be sorry!" Korea snapped, eye flashing. "What if you get smallpox?!"

"Smallpox hasn't been documented from eating animals," Kangwon cut in.

"It could be on the box!" their Countryhuman snarled. "They put it on chicken feathers, they could put it on *anything!* And smallpox isn't the only thing that can make you sick. What if it's something else, something worse?"

Hae's stomach churned, and she couldn't tell if it was because he was yelling at her or because she was already getting sick.

"Am ah goin' to die?" she asked in a small voice.

"If you do, it's your own fault." The words had barely left Korea's mouth before he spun to Kangwon. "Get her to the Quarantine Hospital *now,* and get those clams to a lab after. Don't take your gloves off and burn them once you're done. Take the Jeep."

Kangwon saluted, catching the keys that Mao Zhilong tossed him, and carefully picking up the straw box.

"Come on, Hae."

His voice was easy, but Hae could see the way he looked at her, like he was waiting for symptoms to set in.

SH reached out for her, but Korea snapped, “Don’t touch her! If she’s infected, it can’t spread.”

Hurt flashed across her cousin’s face, but she pulled away.

Hae wanted to hug her, she wanted to hug Korea and have him tell her she’d be okay, and tell *him* she’d be okay, and she’d promise to never ever eat anything she shouldn’t ever again, and then everything would be okay.

But if she was sick, she didn’t want to give it to him, too.

“Ah’ll be alright,” she assured SH, making herself smile. “Even if ah’m sick, Kang’ll fix me right up.”

“Go!” Korea ordered, and his voice was so tight that Hae threw herself into the Jeep right away, sitting as far away from Kang as she could, the box of stupid *stupid* claims between them.

“You’ll be okay.” It was Kang’s turn to reassure her as he drove them through the trees. “We don’t know for sure the Americans dropped these.”

But he kept his eyes facing forward, and the second they got out of the trees, he hit the gas hard, the engine growling like Korea as they rocketed towards the hospital.

As Hae sank down in her seat, her stomach roiled uneasily.

I'm still sick. Write what you know. uu

Hae, oblivious: Ah’m goin’ to finish learnin’ Korean soon!

The nefarious Hanja:

The conversation was something like this- Hwang- Well done, Hae. I would say you have a mastery of written Korean on a par with the others now.

Hae: Ura!

Hwang: Now we move on to Hanja.

And then the despair on Hae's face convinced North to stop using Hanja, which is why the DPRK only uses Choson'gul now.

'Individualist' types tend to say Communist societies are 'authoritarian,' and rant about dependency, but they never want to hear about how the DPRK encourages bootstrap behaviour way more than America. The American system does its best to completely alienate the bulk of society from where their food and commodities come from, and has so many laws against public gardens and fruit trees and distributing food or selling your own for the exact reasons North describes in the flashback- because if you control the food, you control the people. While the DPRK teaching Marxism already makes their society more aware of their relation to products on a base level, and from day one they encouraged people to take care of themselves. During the early years of the DPRK they were very honest about 'the Japanese ruined industry behind them, and never developed the North for agriculture. We have limited land right now and cannot feed you. So everyone needs to pull up their bootstraps and start feeding themselves.' They encouraged home gardens and selling produce at market to make money, and the sheer act of taking away the right of landlords to control more land than they could farm put the method of food production directly into the peasants' hands. During the war, they encouraged even more gardens, driving for every factory, military unit, and office to have one to feed their people and sell on the side. The state provided equipment, animals, and seed, but the bulk of food was in the hands of the masses. And with the cooperative farming system, the feudalist peasant system was changed while still keeping control of the majority of agriculture with them. People were also encouraged to keep gardens during the Arduous March. And nowadays, they still heavily encourage personal gardens, even on the rooftops of apartment blocs. I saw this article once (I think it was on DailyNK or one of those other CIA sites), that

said the DPRK was ‘encouraging capitalism’ to fend off starvation, and it was literally just them encouraging selling produce from personal gardens as usual. Which shows that whoever wrote that either genuinely has no idea what capitalism is or was being purposefully malicious (it’s probably that one). Capitalism is when the means of production (including agricultural means) are in the hands of a few private owners, and the bulk of people are employed under them, with no direct ownership. Socialism is when those means are in the hands of the people (personal gardens included) and the state, which gives the generated surplus value that would go to capitalists back to the people in the form of healthcare, and those seed loans and agricultural equipment. Even in a complete Communist society, 'trade' would still occur, so of course it occurs in a Socialist society with money involved. The DPRK encourages self-reliance on a personal level as well, but it isn’t the self-reliance of individualist types, who have an ‘everyone should take care of themselves and no one else, and if you can’t cope, then you should just die’ mindset. It’s the self-reliance of being able to feed yourself *and* your society, and having the state to support you in that. Pull yourself up by the bootstraps *for your country* , not because you’ll die on the street if you don’t.

Also I was cooking offal soup. One guess on what happened to my finger. Again.

Little White Lies

Kangwon knew something was very wrong as soon as Hae threw up again.

He'd stayed with her in the Quarantine Hospital for a day, unable to leave her side, both because of Korea's orders and his own worry. Then on the second, she'd bolted out of the room and into the hospital toilet, just making it in time before the onset of diarrhea.

Kangwon had stood outside, hoping for the best. Maybe the mollusks had just been bad. He'd used to think eating raw seafood was alright, since so many people did. But he knew now they could be dangerous. Maybe it was just a bit of bacteria affecting Hae's gut.

He kept telling himself that until the distinctive sound of vomit splattering on the floor met his ear slits, more than bile.

His stomach dropped.

He whirled to the door. "Hae, did you just throw up?"

"Ayuh." Her voice was thick and weepy.

"I need to come in."

"Don't," she half-sobbed. "It's gross."

"It's alright. You know I've had to deal with stuff like this before." Kangwon tried to keep himself steady, even though his heart was pounding fast enough to overload a heartrate monitor.

He'd just had to listen to his cousin empty her bowels for an hour. There shouldn't *be* anything left to throw up.

"Please," he pleaded when Hae didn't answer.

"Alright." She sniffled, and he could hear the sound of fabric

rustling. “Ah’m decent.”

Kangwon slid in, not flinching as a foul, fishy odour smacked him in the face. He was careful not to open the door more than a crack, even though the hall was empty.

It was good he did because Hae was curled in the corner behind it, tucked into a little ball with her head between her knees.

“Kang,” she whimpered, clutching her stomach. “Ah don’t feel good.”

“You’ll be okay,” he automatically soothed, even as his eyes strayed to the puddle of vomit on the floor, and his own insides clenched.

It wasn't half-digested food or the clear bile that came from an empty stomach. It was thick and cloudy white, like water after rice had been soaked in it overnight. Peering into the porcelain toilet bowl showed that her diarrhea was the same.

With a scrabble and a sudden burst of movement, Hae lunged past him, shouting, “Turn around!”

He did, and she made it to the toilet before her bowels exploded again.

Kangwon stared at the cream wall as his cousin sobbed miserably, fighting the urge to put a fingernail on his mouth.

She’d been vaccinated against it, like him. But vaccine science wasn’t anywhere close to being perfected yet. They only cut the chance of catching illnesses, they didn’t eliminate it.

“Kang,” Hae slurred when her bout was over. “Ah’m thirsty.”

She would be.

“I’ll go get you some water,” he said.

Before he could leave, she asked, “What’s wrong with me?”

Kangwon didn’t hesitate. “I’ll tell you as soon as I get you that

water. Don’t lock the door.”

He slid back into the hall, then sprinted until he found a nurse leaving a room with a chart in her hands.

“Comrade Kangwon,” she said, looking up in surprise. “What-?”

“Find someone to get me as much boiled water as possible,” Kangwon interrupted. “And don’t let anyone go in Comrade Hae’s room without proper protection.

“We’ve got a patient with a case of cholera.”

Kangwon hadn’t dealt with cholera much in the past. It wasn’t endemic to Korea, and the only outbreaks he’d heard of had been in port cities and villages, brought there by maritime trade. He’d only ever seen one patient personally, a young man near Wonsan whose home had been rural enough that Korea had let him try to help when his family mentioned it while they were sheltering in their barn.

Kangwon had stayed in their woodshed with him for three days, feeding him as much rice and water as possible, trying to replenish the fluids his body ejected before he could dehydrate.

He'd died with his sunken eyes wide open in his pale blue face, that thick rice water diarrhea leaking from between his legs. Cholera killed quick.

That’s why Kangwon started the treatment before the stool test even came back, getting the hospital cooks to prepare as much steamed grains and boiled water as they could. Hae needed a constant supply of food and water to keep from dehydrating, especially with her burns.

He told her this as she sat on the corner of her cot, shaking. The toilet was being disinfected for other patients, but several buckets sat in the corner. He’d made sure she was in an aboveground room with a window. The light coming through it made her white skin even paler than usual, and leeched the gold from her flower. The

dark shadows under her eyes were stark against it.

“You’re going to be okay,” Kangwon reassured her, placing a gloved hand on her knee. She was in a thin, striped hospital gown to make it easier for her to get to the bucket in time. "We just need to make sure you stay hydrated. And you need to eat, even if it just comes back out.”

Hae looked down at the bowl of rice in her lap. “How long will it last?”

“Probably around a week.” The vomiting and diarrhea would stop around then or… Well.

But Kangwon wouldn’t let that happen.

“You’ve already gave me a lot,” Hae said, still looking at her rice. “Ah’ve had two days’ worth’a rations at least.”

Her cousin nodded. “You need to eat constantly. Otherwise the only thing your body will have to get rid of is fluids.”

Hae stared down at the tin bowl, unmoving.

“Hae,” Kangwon prompted, keeping his voice steady. “Go ahead and eat.”

She raised her eyes to his, and he already knew what she was going to say.

“Ah can’t. Ah can’t let you waste that much food on me.”

He exhaled. "Hae, It isn’t a waste if it’s part of your treatment. Medicine is meant to be used.”

“But it’s not just medicine,” she insisted. “It’s-“

Her eyes widened and she lurched forward. Kangwon just caught her bowl as she shoved it at him, turning away as she dove for the bucket, and more of that strong fishy odour filled the room.

Hae let out a pained whimper that made Kangwon want to

comfort her. But he kept his back firmly turned.

"See?" his cousin moaned miserably. "It all goes right through me. Ah'm just goin' to waste it all."

"It's not a waste," Kangwon insisted to the wall. "Even Korea wouldn't say it's a waste if it makes you better."

"But *ah* say it's a waste." There were tears in his cousin's voice. "Ah was stupid, and made myself sick, and now ah'm takin' food we need for our people. What if the Yankees give more people cho-cholor-"

"Cholera."

"That." She groaned, followed by another wet splatter.

"We don't know it was the Americans," Kangwon said. "We need to investigate first."

It was suspicious that clams had appeared near Pyongyang in winter, especially when they weren't making it to market even in season, like Korea had said. And it was also weird that they were clams from the East Sea, not the closer West Sea. But Korea's search had only turned up one other basket, and they hadn't got the lab reports back yet, so Kangwon wasn't going to jump to conclusions.

"Ah bet it was," Hae muttered with bitterness that usually didn't come from her. "They're destroyin' our fields and murderin' our farm animals to starve us, and now they're feedin' us poison to kill us. They're evil, all of 'em."

"They're people, Hae," Kangwon said gently. "And there's no such thing as innately evil people. Just people that get taught bad things and make bad choices because of it."

"And evil miguk-nom."

"Hae-"

"It doesn't matter *why* they're evil!" She cut him off with sudden heat. "Ah don't care if they were born evil or they got evil by doin' a

lot of evil stuff! They *are.* They're the ones that poisoned me, and they're goin' to poison more of our people, and you're goin' to need more food for them 'cuz they can *die.* Ah can't."

There it was. Korea's exceptionalism rubbing off on her, finally in a way that was genuinely harmful.

There was a pause. "What if…"

"Hae-"

"Don't turn around," she said quickly, and while he twisted back, took the opportunity to say, "What if you let me die?"

"No," Kangwon said immediately, hands fisting on his legs. "We're not doing that."

"Pyobu died," Hae reminded him. "And he said he was only dead for less than an hour."

"He would've been dead for longer if he hadn't been woken up," Kangwon told her. "And drowning is different than an illness, especially if you didn't want me feeding you while you were out."

"It can't be that much longer," his cousin protested. "You said ah'd die from dehydration. If you just gave me water, ah bet ah'd be better in no time."

"Hae, we don't even know if you wouldn't die for real," Kangwon said, sitting on his gloved hands. "No one entirely knows how Provincehuman deaths work. You chose to eat that clam, even if you didn't know it would make you sick. We don't know if that counts as suicide or not."

"Hwang said he thinks Countryhumans have survived poisonin's before," Hae stubbornly argued. "It doesn't count as killin' themselves, 'cuz they don't know they're doin' it."

"He also says it's difficult to know for sure since no Countryhuman's ever wanted to *admit* they got successfully poisoned," Kangwon shot back.

He heard his tone rising, growing thin like his brother's, and tried to rein it in.

"I'm not risking your life off of rumours from decades ago," he said firmly.

"But-"

Hae cut herself off with a guttural groan, and Kangwon's nails sank into the underside of his thighs as he heard her convulse, spraying more diarrhea into the bucket at the same time as vomit splattered onto the floor.

There was a clattering sound, and a loud sob that sent him to his feet, his worry forcing him to turn around.

The bucket had spilled over, foamy white stool carpeting the cement floor. Hae had fallen the opposite way, trying to avoid it, but her knees had still landed in the puddle of vomit.

Kangwon went to her as she raised herself on shaky arms, her eyes wide and glazed.

"You're okay," he soothed, kneeling down to help her scoot away from the vomit, holding her upper half against his chest.

"Don't touch me," she mumbled, something none of their family had ever heard from her before. "Ah'm gross and ah'm goin' to get you sick."

"Cholera doesn't pass person to person," he reassured her, rubbing her shoulder. So long as he kept his gloves on when handling the buckets, he'd be safe. "I'll be alright. And so will you."

He took her shoulders, making her look him in the eye.

"I'm not losing you, Hae," he vowed.

Korea couldn't be talked out of his martyrdom once his heart was set on it, but there was one thing he could use to sway Hae from hers.

"If I let you die, and you really did die, how do you think that would make me feel?" Kangwon asked, staying steady. "I'd have to go the rest of my life knowing that I pretty much killed you. And everyone else would know I killed you, too. *Korea* would. Do you think he'd ever forgive me for that?"

Hae's eyes flickered down. "No."

"No. And I wouldn't forgive myself." He squeezed her shoulders. "And even if you can't die from it, you can still feel pain. You'd feel how it felt to die of dehydration. You don't deserve that."

Just like Korea didn't deserve all the knife wounds and bullet holes he always came back from his ventures with, or the burns that carpeted his body that he refused all relief for.

"I can't let you die, Hae." He tilted her chin up with a hand. "I'm a doctor, and I've sworn that I would always do everything in my power to help my patients and nothing less. I'll never change my mind on that, especially when it comes to you."

Hae's eyes filled with tears. "Ah know, ah'm sorry. Ah just-" Her round face crumpled. "W-What if ah actually die, and then you get real upset 'cuz you tried everythin' to save me but couldn't, andthenyougetmadatyourselfan'Koreagetsmadatyaan'Koreagetsmadathimse

"Hae." Kangwon cut her off with another soft squeeze. "I won't lose you. And nothing I give you will be a waste. The only way I'd be mad at myself is if I didn't do everything I could to save you."

Hae sniffled. "And Korea?"

"I won't lose you," he repeated, pulling her into a hug.

"Ah'm sorry, Kang," she whimpered. "Ah din't mean to upset ya, ah'm just- Ah'm *scared."*

Hae's voice broke, and she finally wrapped her thin arms around him, squeezing tight as she shook against his chest.

Kangwon couldn't help but add the tears soaking his chest to the list of fluids she was losing, and his eyes strayed to the bowl of rice

to the side. But he held her for a minute, murmuring reassuring words into the top of her head, giving her the part of her treatment even she couldn't see as a waste as he stroked her back comfortingly.

"You didn't upset me," he eventually soothed, even though his insides felt just as shaky as her body. "Now let's get some more water and rice in you while we have a chance."

He helped her back onto the cot, getting a cloth to wipe the vomit from her knees.

"Kang?" Hae asked after she'd guzzled down a glass of water. "Can you do me a favour?"

"Sure."

"If ah do die, please don't blame yourself." She looked up at him, small brows furrowed. "Ah know you don't do that so much anymore, but ah don't want you beatin' yourself up if ah don't get better."

If Hae died for real, Kangwon knew there was no amount of reassurement he could give himself that would ever lift the guilt from his shoulders.

"I won't," he promised.

She looked relieved. "And try to make sure Korea wouldn't blame himself either."

"I'd try," he said, which was all he could do.

They both knew he wouldn't succeed.

"And…" She bit her lip, looking down at her bowl of cold rice. "If ah die not for real… Don't tell Korea until ah'm better."

Kangwon's brows went up, and she hunched her shoulders.

"Ah don't want you to lie to him, and ah know he'd get mad if he found out-"

That was an understatement. Not telling him about Kim Mi-ju's passing had been bad enough. If Kangwon didn't tell him Hae had 'died…'

"But if you tell him, he'll be super worried about me, and he's got enough to worry about right now." Hae rubbed her thumb along the edge of the bowl. "And he'll get mad at you, even though he shouldn't, and then you'll be super upset, and you need to focus on makin' sure more'a our people don't get sick. So please…" She raised her big watery eyes to him. "Don't tell him."

Kangwon hesitated, then let out a long breath.

"I won't."

Hae's shoulders slumped, and she finally lifted the spoon to her mouth, eating her medicine.

Kangwon knew Korea would insist on seeing Hae, but he could keep him away from the Quarantine Hospital by reminding him that he couldn't risk getting sick. And out of all the provinces, Kangwon was the only one that ever had any real success at lying to their Countryhuman.

Because Hae was right. Korea *would* blame himself. And with everything else he was carrying right now, none of them could afford that.

"But I won't lose you," Kangwon repeated, wrapping an arm around his short cousin, smiling at her. "We'll have you healthy again in no time, guarantee."

Hae looked up at him, smiling tremulously back, her freckled cheeks bulging with rice.

She died four days later.

—

Pens, papers, clothes, food. As North sent out the word, these were some of the things his people had reported being dropped from American planes since the start of January. Items all in short

supply, that his people needed, and some of whom wouldn't be able to resist taking, even after they were warned they could be contaminated.

And North knew that was the word for it. It didn't matter that cholera could come from raw seafood naturally- he knew someone had infected those clams, *contaminated* them with deliberate intent, just as they'd been dropped near where the provinces usually drew their water from with intent.

And there were the other things being dropped.

It was America again, spreading plague amongst his people. His smallpox last year hasn't done enough damage, so he was trying again.

North strode down the empty street, heading for the military hospital for the fifty time in as many days, his skin prickling like it was being stabbed full of needles.

He'd been vaccinated, like the others, like *Hae,* as they'd been trying to do to their entire population, especially after last year's outbreak. Hae should have been *fine.* But now she was sick, and it was-

North grit his teeth.

They weren't making accusations yet. Kangwon and most of the other officials in the Ministry of Health wanted to investigate first. They were seeing cases of smallpox again, and an increase in dysentery, but not enough for an outbreak, or to say confidently that it was intentional.

But North knew it was. Most of the cases had been coincidentally near areas where witnesses had seen American planes dropping non-explosive bombs, and the smallpox had only started appearing in the past couple days, a week after the first reported sighting. Once another week passed, they would undoubtedly see more. Fourteen days, the average incubation period for smallpox, and how long it had taken last year for symptoms to start appearing after the Americans had retreated.

Hwangju, Kuni-ri, Chunghwa, and just south of Pyongyang. Those were some of the places they had reliable reports from so far. All coincidentally in the path of their supply line from China to the front, and all coincidentally in areas where the MiGs didn't operate in force.

Like last year, it was too many coincidences.

North barged into the hospital, announcing his intention to see Kangwon to the receptionist before striding to his provinces' room.

Gangwon wasn't there, likely off helping with hospital tasks. He still couldn't perform surgeries, but North thought his practice with sign language was making his hands steadier.

He snatched their notebook off the pile of neatly arranged materials on the counter along the wall, trying to go over their notes to distract himself while waiting for Kangwon.

But after a few minutes of shaping his hands around the gestures, he set it aside and started to pace around the cramped hospital room, unable to fight off the other worry circling in his mind.

America had finally done what he'd been fearing- accused North of harbouring Gangwon directly. But instead of the word 'harbouring,' he'd used 'holding him captive,' and claimed that the fairness of the peace talks was shaken when one side was 'in possession' of a province they shouldn't be.

North grit his teeth, heel grinding against the cement as he turned.

One side *was* in possession of provinces they shouldn't be. Rhee and America had nine provinces that didn't belong to them, and an entire half of their country. They had his *brother*.

The Americans hadn't threatened to call the talks off again yet, but it was implied. And it was a punishment.

After 'Christmas,' Joy and Libby had proposed that North trade refugees from the south for his own imprisoned soldiers, which was *not* happening. Some of the refugees were guerrillas, but many were

civil servants that had sided with them and followed one of the retreats, or men and women from the Worker's Party and other organizations, or just civilians that had chosen to come north. No matter what they were, they would be targeted by Rhee's government on their return, either with attempts to recruit them into their own guerrilla operations or for punishment for choosing North.

His soldiers had training, and knew what they had signed up for. The refugees didn't. He wasn't going to treat them like bargaining chips by trading them head-for-head as you would stock animals. They had chosen him, and he was going to honour that.

He'd managed to dodge the proposal by reminding the American negotiators that Admiral Joy himself had said there would be no discussion of political matters at the table, so political refugees were off of it.

But Gangwon wasn't a discussion- he was a demand. North had refused to trade his people, so now to remind him who was 'in charge,' they wanted his province.

North pivoted just before he hit the wall.

They weren't getting him. Gangwon was *his.* He had been his ever since he'd appeared in the cave mouth with his armful of wood, looking more relieved than anyone North had ever seen. No, before that, as soon as he'd leaped out of that tree and looked at his Countryhuman with fearful, awed, achingly familiar eyes.

America had put that fear back in them after North had worked so hard to take it away. And S- *he* had also driven him to maim his own body just so he could keep fighting for their people. North wasn't letting the foreigner do anything else to him.

He slammed his palm off the hard wall, violently slinging himself around again as the door opened.

Gangwon flinched as he whirled on him, but Kangwon just blinked in greeting, shutting the door behind them.

“How is she?” North demanded without pause.

“Hae was fine this morning,” Kangwon said, walking by to strip off his gloves and place them on a surgical tray. “I’m heading back to check up on her right now.”

“I want to see her,” North demanded, not for the first time.

“You can’t risk getting infected,” his province reminded him.

Gangwon’s brows furrowed as he read his lips. “Are you saying he could catch it? B-But cholera isn’t contagious. Well, it doesn’t pass person to person like that.”

“It doesn’t *usually* pass person to person,” Kangwon said, pouring a bit of antiseptic on his hands, focusing on the liquid as he rubbed it into his palms. “But it also doesn't usually show up in clams in the Taedong in early January. And I’d rather not have Korea visiting the Quarantine Hospital. We’ve got other sick people there. And you’re more likely to catch something if you’ve got a compromised immune system, say from things like lack of sleep or not eating enough.”

He shot North a side-eye.

“When will she recover?” he demanded, ignoring it.

“Probably in around a month,” Kangwon said, also not for the first time. “Maybe two.”

Gangwon swivelled his head to blink at him. “W-What did you say?”

They had all collaborated to decide which signs would represent which province. Kangwon made the one that represented South Hwanghae for his brother, sliding his thumb against his index finger. “Hae should get better-“ He tapped two fingers to his chest, then raised them.

The bits of sign language that had been being taught in Seoul hadn’t been tailored for medical scenarios, so North was letting the Kangwons invent their own with whatever was convenient to them.

“In one to two months.” One finger, two fingers, and four quick motions to spell out 월- month.

Gangwon looked uneasy as he read his brother’s gestures.

North narrowed his eye. “What?”

His province looked at his brother, then said, “N-Nothing, Korea. I’m just worried she’ll miss sowing s-s-season. Hae w-would hate that.”

She would. But North stared at him longer.

Gangwon squirmed, his green cheeks dusting with red, the way the old Kangwon’s had used to do when North watched him in the cave.

North swung his head to the other Kangwon, who had already returned to tidying up his counter space, and was carefully placing a patch over his newest track mark. He saw him looking, and sighed.

“Korea, she’ll be fine, really.”

North stared, piercing into his eyes. Kangwon stared back, lifting an eyebrow slightly.

“What?”

“…Nothing.” North broke contact, looking down at his arm. “We’re going to be travelling a lot for the next few weeks. Give less blood.”

“Whether or not any outbreaks turn out to be intentional, our blood is going to be the best line of defense we have against losing people,” Kangwon said, rolling the sleeve of his white lab coat down over his bruises.

North grit his teeth. *Medication* should be their best line of defense. The blood was a last, desperate measure when they had nothing else.

“But if you want me to give a little less, you should, too.” His province turned back to him. “Or maybe stay behind. You don’t have to investigate personally.”

“I do.” He couldn’t stay still while his people were being poisoned.

“Korea, you can trust me to get to the bottom of things,” Kangwon said. “I know what I’m doing.”

North knew that. And he knew he wasn’t much use when it came to medical investigations.

But he didn’t say anything.

“Go check on South Hwanghae,” he ordered instead.

Kangwon exhaled slightly, but nodded. “Alright. See you tomorrow morning in time for a check-up.”

“I will see you at the rendezvous point.”

His province shook his head, patting his brother on the shoulder as he passed.

North watched the door shut.

He wasn’t letting Kangwon go off around the countryside, even with a team of doctors and lab techs. *Especially* with a team of precious doctors and lab techs. Not when they still hadn’t found out who had told the enemy that North and South Pyongan would be using the north highway that night.

And when those clams had been found where they had been.

Ssi-bal, Hae had better be okay.

“Korea?” Gangwon ventured, bandaging his own arm. “Have they s-said anything about me at the talks yet?”

“No,” North clipped.

“If they d-do-“

“We have spoken about this,” North interrupted. “Focus on present issues, not ones that haven’t happened yet. Come take my blood once you’re finished with your arm.”

Gangwon blinked at him in surprise. “I th-think I read your lips wrong.”

North repeated what he’d said, cobbling together gestures to convey he hadn’t.

His province stammered, “You w-want m-*me* to draw your blood?”

“You’re steady enough to take your own,” North said. “You can take mine.”

He didn't like letting the Kangwons do even that, but he couldn't give the task to Kim Yong-hwan today. It had been too long since his last check-up.

He couldn't take their routine today, not when thoughts of Hae were making even the dead nerves in his skin feel raw.

Gangwon smiled, his eyes lighting up as he hurried to put his supplies away, successfully distracted.

He and Kangwon had enough to worry about, and more to come.

As they left the room, North took their notebook and the charcoal stick they were using to write.

He eyed the rooms as they passed them, catching a glimpse of a man swathed almost entirely in bandages as a nurse slid out of Room 7. His head was buried in the hand of one arm. The other ended just below the shoulder. North’s jaw creaked, but he didn’t let himself look away.

They had the lab to themselves, the distant chatter and beeping of medical equipment muted by the door Gangwon slid shut. North folded his tunic neatly, and took a seat on the chair as his province set up the IV pole.

"You probably shouldn't be giving blood this much," his province said as he attached the clear bag.

He had decided that since he was deaf, he could take advantage of it to nag North without hearing his protests. He did it frequently when the Countryhuman read their sign language textbook.

"Like Kangwon said, you don't get much sleep or food, so your immune system's already compromised," he continued to babble.

North flipped open the notebook, using the charcoal to write something down.

"There's already sickness going around," his province reminded him, preparing the needle. "We don't want you to catch anything."

North tugged on his long white coat, holding up the notebook. The man turned to look at it, slumping as he read *'SHUT UP'* in bold characters at the top of the page.

"Yes, Korea," he sighed, continuing his work in silence.

Pleased, North set the book down on his lap.

His eye strayed over to the other page, and the words Kangwon had been writing to communicate with Gangwon. He didn't want to read the half of a conversation, but he took notice of Sip Tal-sun's name, Kangwon confirming for his brother that the man was back with his family and recovering well physically, and would recover mentally as well.

North read between the false comfort his province tended to give. 'Would recover mentally' meant he hadn't. And the Countryhuman didn't think he would.

He should go to the Quarantine Hospital when they got back, no matter what Kangwon said.

Gaze drifting, he read a sentence at the bottom of the page.

'I'm alright. Just tired.' The words after it were discussions about treatments for patients, a clear misdirect.

North shut the notebook, setting it aside.

"You're s-sure you want me to do this?" Gangwon checked, holding the IV tubing in a hand that shook slightly.

"We wouldn't be here if I didn't." North crossed his arms, then uncrossed them, rolling up the sleeve of his undershirt, and holding his arm out for the man to disinfect.

He did, trembling as he dabbed the cotton ball against blue skin.

Gangwon didn't use a tourniquet, able to find his vein with an old familiarity. But once he had the needle pressed against it, he hesitated.

A russet hand with a sewing needle trembling over a boy's bloody back.

North's jaw feathered, and he snapped his fingers in front of his province's face, making him look at his mouth.

"You are fine, Gangwon," he enunciated. "Even if you screw up, it's not going to kill me. Just do it."

His province squeezed his eyes shut, breathing out. Then they opened again, and he took North's arm more firmly.

"S-So I'm looking for your cephalic vein," he said, his finger already on it. "It hurts a little more than the m-median cupital, but we've already punctured that one a lot, so I'm going to let it heal, and use this one instead."

North didn't bother reassuring him of his pain tolerance. He was just doing what he'd used to when he would treat him, explaining his actions to put them both at ease. Though it was just for his benefit now.

"That's why I'm taking from your forearm, too," Gangwon continued, growing a little steadier as the cold tip of the shunt dimpled North's skin. "Your antecubital fossa is too bruised, and… burnt. Th-That's the crook of your arm, by the way."

North felt a flash of pride at the scientific terminology. Gangwon hadn't received the same medical training as Kangwon had during the years before the war. He had been stuck with their old knowledge, cobbled together from experience. But he'd been absorbing the medical textbooks as easily as his brother had.

"Here it goes," his province said nervously. "Three, two-"

North didn't react as the needle slid into his vein. Gangwon flinched more than him.

He stared anxiously at his arm like he expected his Countryhuman to start bleeding out, then slumped in relief as red started to slowly work its way through the tube.

"I did it."

"Obviously," North replied, flexing his other hand impatiently.

Drawing his blood only took around ten minutes, but he could never stand the wait. He should be speaking to their Minister of Health, Ri Pyong-nam, or investigating the countryside for more suspicious illnesses, or visiting Hae to make sure she really would be okay.

He shouldn't have shoved his fingers down her throat the way he had. He should have just calmly explained why he needed her to throw up, and she would have. But as soon as she'd said she'd ate one of those damned clams…

"K-Korea," Gangwon said, sitting down in the other chair. "You're going to shake the needle out."

North made himself stop his restless jittering. Kangwon was right. Without enough antibiotics, their blood would be needed in the fight against a pandemic. It couldn't stop it, but it could minimize casualties.

'I should get some braised soybeans.' He could get Kim Song-ae to make them, and have Kangwon give them to Hae. She needed as much food as she could get to recover, and would probably be glad to break up the steamed grains Kangwon said he was feeding her

with kongjang.

And she would understand what they meant.

"S-So how are the talks going?" Gangwon asked.

"They aren't," North replied stiffly. "They still haven't turned over the list of missing POWs. And they brought up the repatriation issue again."

America had finally laid his card on the table and flipped it over, the card North had known was coming since the moment he and China's proposal for the complete return of all prisoners had been denied.

'Voluntary repatriation,' America's newest way to postpone peace. He was demanding that POWs be allowed to choose where they were repatriated to.

It was a complete reversal of the international law codified in the Geneva Convention, but he claimed that North and China's soldiers would be 'subjected to inhumane treatment' if they were returned, and so they should be given a choice.

"Damn." Gangwon- who if North suggested be allowed to choose where he was repatriated to, would surely be ignored- sighed. He shifted a little in his chair. "K-Kang suggested maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. Getting rid of our reactionaries, at least for a little while. Y'know, if it would get peace."

"It wouldn't," North said stonily, grabbing the notebook to write the words their fledgling sign language couldn't convey. "America would just come up with something else. And any traitors we turned over would be turned into fodder for Rhee's youth groups."

In a broadcast a couple days ago, the degenerate had claimed that over five thousand KPA soldiers wished to stay in the south. Even if it could be trusted, it was a relatively small number, considering the amount of his soldiers in captivity. And North knew the Yankees had volunteers, guerrillas, and civilians from the south in the camps-

His jaw tightened as he thought of Song Kum-jeong.

-that would want to return to their homes, not the north.

But he also knew that since they had been forced to turn to conscripting, there would be some ideologically weak soldiers that genuinely wanted to join Rhee's side. Soldiers that could be sent back over to sabotage them and maraud around their villages like the group he and South Pyongan had lain waste to.

More than that-

"And we can't trust that our soldiers wouldn't be coerced into refusing to be repatriated."

The decision of a prisoner of war couldn't be trusted, not when they were in active captivity. There was no way of knowing if they truly wanted to stay, or if they had been told that was what they *had* to say. Fear or threats could have swayed them. Especially when he not only had his sources in the camps reporting being taken into interrogation rooms and told that all of the atrocities America and Rhee's army's had committed were on the KPA's hands, and were routinely inundated with other lies about Socialism, the northern government, and North himself, but Libby himself openly declaring that prisoners on Geoje Island were being 'taught democracy.'

And some had said worse was going on.

"Or tortured," North growled, hand closing around the charcoal, his blood rushing faster into the IV.

"I k-know, Korea," Gangwon said quickly, moving his hand like he could lower his country's blood pressure with his mind. "You don't need to tell me. And that's what I told Kangwon."

"He spent time in America's holding camp," North said coolly. "He shouldn't *need* to be told."

Gangwon winced, clearly regretting bringing his brother up. "He knows Am-merica's awful. He just thought since there's other UN troops at the camps that t-torture and stuff wouldn't happen." His

jaw clenched. “But I said it would. America would *make* them.”

He slid down in his chair, thin shoulders hunching around his ear slits.

“America wouldn’t have to,” North replied. “The other nations are just as complicit as him.”

Especially Britain, who was the only other one with guards in any force at the camps.

Gangwon shifted as he read the words, his eyes casting down to his lap. “I k-know. *We* know.”

North exhaled soundlessly. He knew they didn’t, not entirely. Kangwon had always tended to give foreigners the benefit of the doubt. Not when it was clear they didn’t deserve it, like with Japan himself, but with their people as a whole.

And he had been right. It was the ruling class of countries that were different, wrong, not the masses.

But some of the masses agreed with them, like his own reactionaries that wanted to stay with Rhee, even after they had to know what his forces had done. There might be good people in America and Britain, he knew there were good people in the other colonized or formerly-colonized countries that had troops here, like the Philippines and India.

But even the most compliant or open-minded of the American POWs that fervently denounced their own army after being told even some of what they’d done had killed Koreans. They shouldn’t have had to be taught that being sent halfway across the world to murder people that had never done anything or wanted to do anything to them was wrong. They should have *known*.

There might be good people in the nations invading them. But none of them were in Korea. And there were definitely none in the enemy camps.

He would talk to Kangwon again to try and impress that. He didn’t necessarily want his province to lose that hopeful part of

himself, but he didn't want it to get him in trouble either. He had been lucky it hadn't with that black soldier in Taejon.

Gangwon fell silent as North turned his head, watching his blood fill past the halfway mark on the bag.

'Voluntary repatriation.' The blood rose faster.

This wasn't the first time America had tried something like this. It was why he had known to expect it, even before CCCP had raised the possibility in his New Year's letter.

He and Britain had attempted it with the Soviet after the World Anti-Fascist War, citing that since he had declared soldiers that didn't fight to the last as the Nazis tore their way across his land traitors, they would be in danger of being executed if they were returned to him.

They hadn't cared about Soviet citizens when they were attempting to put down the Bolshevik Revolution or supporting the White Army in their pogroms. All they had wanted was to keep the men willing to defect to give them a supply of armed reactionaries to fight Communism in their own countries.

And neither North nor China had the same order as CCCP had. While the Chinese Communist Party members were expected to kill themselves before being taken, they wouldn't be eliminated for failing, only shamed and thrown out of the Party. America's 'concern' was based on nothing but the massacres he had lain at North's feet, the massacres *he and Rhee's soldiers* had committed.

Nazi soldiers hadn't been given a choice during the World Anti-Fascist War. Neither had Japanese. Sick soldiers had been returned to their brutal states during the conflict, knowing that the price for their capture could end up being death, and afterwards they had been returned to American-controlled Japan and West Germany, and Soviet-controlled East Germany, where there would be many reasons for occupying soldiers to get revenge.

But now that it was Korea and China, the law had to change. Or more, now that *America* wanted it to. And they didn't have the

power or leverage to fight it as CCCP had.

North knew that so long as the Reunification talks after the ceasefire succeeded, he would get all of his people back. It was more dangerous for China to lose any Nationalists in his ranks to Chang Kai-shek on Taiwan, since they would be used to attempt to retake the mainland. But he had the broad support of his masses. He could beat them, and even retrieve them one day.

But they couldn't accept this. If they let this happen, it would set a dangerous precedent. Laws had already been bent and broken to justify America's invasion of him- not having North at the vote, his planes already bombing Korea before allowance was given, the United Nations being involved in a civil war at all, and America *being here,* holding his brother captive.

If North just rolled over and let them impose this new decision, it would let the entire world know that America could break and change any laws as he pleased. It would let *America* know that. He couldn't accept that, and America *knew* he couldn't accept that.

And so the war would continue.

When the sides of the IV bag were bulging from the blood inside them, Gangwon removed it from the pole, hurriedly preparing to get it to storage.

'At least this winter isn't so cold that's it's freezing there.'

North let his province whisk the droplet of blood on his forearm away, and place a small patch over the area, even though it shrank the amount of skin not already covered in bandages even further.

"Make sure you eat something," Gangwon advised, knowing it was hopeless.

North didn't reply, hiding his wince as he stood, feeling warmth spread across his knees as they straightened. He subtly peeked to make sure blood wasn't seeping through his pants.

"Korea, do you want me to give you a check-up?" Gangwon offered tentatively. "I could clean your wounds after I-"

“No,” North said sharply, then sighed as the man flinched. “It isn’t you, Gangwon,” he repeated what he had to Kangwon. “You did fine with taking my blood. I just have things I need to do.”

Like his brother, he didn’t buy it, looking hurt, though his lips tilted up a bit at even the slight praise of ‘fine.’

It really wasn’t them. Or it was, but not for the reason they were thinking.

North had to take that fear out of Gangwon’s eyes again. And he couldn’t ever let it come back to Kangwon’s.

“Before I leave,” he started, extending the offer he'd been thinking of to make up for it. “I’ve been thinking about transferring you to the Quarantine Hospital. Do you accept? ”

Gangwon’s eyes widened. “Me?”

His Countryhuman nodded. “America won’t stop at a few contaminated air drops. There will be more sickness coming, and we need every hand possible there. I have Kangwon busy investigating, and you could do more work with the ill than the injured.”

The military hospital involved more surgeries, and they couldn’t risk exposing Gangwon to any soldiers that would return to the front and possibly be taken prisoner. The province was relegated to sanitation and tending to permanent casualties, tasks that any nurse could do. His talents would better serve where he could diagnose diseases, distribute medicine, and use treatments that didn’t require steady hands.

“Of course, Korea,” Gangwon said quickly, his eyes glowing. “But I’m a little scared to tell Comrade Kim she won’t have anyone to do laundry anymore.”

When he was excited enough to lose the stutter, his voice became less high-pitched, deepening to a more mellow tone that sounded almost exactly like his brother’s.

North couldn’t remember if he had ever sounded like South. His

brother's voice was imprinted in his memories from the first time he'd heard it, coming from behind him as Japan loomed over them, but his own was lost to them.

Had his voice been smooth and melodic in the beginning, before years of screaming and being pummeled in the throat had changed it, or had it always been rough? He knew South would know.

The chord inside him twinged. He hadn't felt any pulls on it since his brother had reached out back during Liberation Day, though he'd tried pulling on it after his Foundation Day speech, hoping that it might spur South to try and listen to the broadcast, and hear the promise under his words.

'I won't give up on you. Not ever. Not again.'

He hadn't received a pull back.

North realized Gangwon was watching him in concern, and clipped, "Kim Yong-hwan will live."

"Then I'll pack my stuff up and get Kangwon to take me over after." His province smiled. "Thanks, Korea."

Hae would be thrilled. She was likely going stir-crazy.

And while he and Kangwon were in the field, North wanted someone watching over her that he could trust.

Before Gangwon could leave with the blood, North said, "Wait."

The man tipped his head at him in question.

"Do you think Kangwon would lie to me about South Hwanghae's condition?"

Gangwon's nail drifted to his mouth, silent for a second. Then, "N-No, Korea. I know we kind of d-downplay stuff sometimes, but it's just so… B-But I don't think he'd do that for her."

North examined him for a long moment. Gangwon met his gaze.

"Hm." He walked by his province, buttoning his tunic back up. "Get that blood to storage."

"Yes, Korea."

North strode down the hospital hallway, hearing soft weeping coming from behind the door to Room 7.

He knew those clams had been from the enemy, and he *knew* America was using germ warfare again. It hadn't worked to his satisfaction last time, so he was trying again, trying to break them, to kill as many of North's people as possible before the ceasefire was signed.

The Yankee had better pray to his god that they managed to combat it as well as they had last winter. Because if plague swept across he and China's people, then North was going to make sure devastation rained down on his.

And if *anything* happened to South Hwanghae, America was going to wish he had signed the armistice while he still had the chance.

I was making hanami dango after writing this chapter, and as I boiled them, the mochiko floated on the surface of the water, creating a thick white scum, and I thought, 'Ah. Cholera diarrhea.' I fear that's a thought I will have often in the future. So that's great.

We are in the germ warfare arc now (amazing name, I know). I'll put some sources and do a full write up on the accusations of germ warfare in 1952 (and why I believe them) towards the 'end' of it to avoid spoilers, and just put non-spoiler clarification information where it's needed. My only clarification for this one is that *this* clam drop is a made-up incident (though not entirely fabricated as we will see later). But unless I say otherwise, the incidents will all be reported as they happened in real life. Also if you recognized some of the voluntary repatriation lines, it's because this is where I relocated them to, as I said before. ^^

Also yes the sign language symbol for Hae that they're using looks like the modern day finger heart. It's completely a coincidence, but it hurts modern day Gangwon's heart to see it every time.

Long-Cherished Desire

1942

Kangwon made the hike up Paektusan alone, seemingly.

He should've taken people with him, at least Hae and Gyeong. Ever since the bulk of the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army had fled Korea to carry on the fight in Manchuria and the Soviet Union, there was no major force left to stop the Japanese from crawling across the northern mountains.

But they were busy, and he needed to get away.

He passed under the pines, their needles scratching at his face, until they were replaced by the high branches of bare birches, and those gave way entirely, leaving him exposed on the mountain face. His breath steamed, freezing to crystals almost as soon as it left his lips, and he could feel the cold seeping through his boots, even with all of the rags he'd stuffed in the toes.

But he kept climbing until the peaks towering above him parted like the spears of palace guards, and he stood on an outcrop of rock, looking out at Heaven Lake.

It sat in the cradle of snow-capped mountains, even blacker than the sky above. But it wasn't the black of the old cave, or the dark under the trees that could conceal anything, and made him uneasy even tonight. It was the dark behind his eyes when he finally snuggled down in his bedroll next to GG and Hae after a long watch, or of the womb.

Kangwon had never experienced that, but he imagined if babies could remember it, that was what they would- soft, warm dark. Though instead of a fetus, Heaven Lake carried stars, caught in the water like they belonged there, glimmering like hundreds of coins.

The sight made Kangwon feel a bit better, like it always did. But

it couldn't get rid of the weight in his heart. He'd washed his hands already, but he kind of wanted to go plunge them into those dark, freezing waters.

He bit down on the tip of his gloved finger instead. He couldn't afford to get sick.

His other hand uncurled, trying to get the frigid air on top of the mountain to cool the fevered warmth he could still feel clinging to his palm.

A rock clattered behind him, bouncing all the way down to the lake to land with a splash, but for once he didn't flinch. He'd known he wasn't really alone. Though he hadn't thought he'd actually come out.

But it turned out he was even less alone than he'd thought. Instead of who he expected, it was a human man in the uniform of their guerrillas, one of the few who'd remained in Korea. Most of them were from the old core of Korea's Army, but not him.

"There you are, Doctor," Bong-nam panted, gasping for air as he jogged over to stand next to him. "I saw you heading up the mountain from down in the camp. Thought you might like some company."

Kangwon smiled. "Thanks."

He hadn't really wanted to be alone. He just needed to get some air.

Bong-nam let out a low whistle as he looked out at the lake. "Isn't that something?"

Kangwon kept his voice low to stop it from echoing over the water. But the man's was a whisper brought on by awed reverence.

"Yeah," the province agreed, watching the reflected stars twinkle. "It really is."

"Do you think the first Korea was really born here?"

Kangwon appreciated what he was doing, playing along. “Who knows? Hwanung and Sinsi were probably just myths, same with Dangun being divine. But there’s no reason Gojoseon couldn’t’ve really been formed here.”

“Wonder what he was like?” Bong-nam only waited a second before answering his own question. “Definitely not as great as our Korea.”

Kangwon didn’t know if he’d caught sight of his other tail on the way up. But knowing he was there didn’t change his own answer.

“Definitely not,” he agreed.

Bong-nam shoved his hands in his pockets, shivering as a cold wind blew off the lake.

“You should say what you want so you can get back,” Kangwon advised. “I don’t want you getting sick.”

“You knew I was trying to distract you?”

The province gave a half-smile. “You got the doctor small talk from me, so yeah.”

“I guess that’s true.” The man chewed on the inside of his cheek, then finally said, “It wasn’t your fault.”

Kangwon looked at the lake again, exhale pluming in front of his face. “I know. I did everything I could have.”

And he’d still had to hold the boy’s burning hot hand as he died, breath rattling in his little lungs.

Bong-nam put a hand on his shoulder. “Then don’t be so hard on yourself, comrade.”

“I’m not,” Kangwon assured him. “I know I couldn’t've saved him. But…”

It had just been typhoid. And yeah, when it came to kids there was no ‘just.’ But it *was* a preventable disease. There were old

immunization methods and a modern vaccine, and it was easily curable with antibiotics.

"That's what's so frustrating," he murmured, heart squeezing with his fist.

He had confidence in his abilities now. He could remove a bullet, disinfect a wound, and have it sewed up in under ten minutes, he knew how to amputate a limb with no regrets because he knew when there was no other way, and he never even trembled. The Kangwon whose hand had shook as he stitched the shallow cut of the boy that was now the man standing next to him would've keeled over if he saw any of what the Kangwon now had dealt with in the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army.

But he couldn't save a child with an upset stomach.

Typhoid was worse than that. But it was *curable.* Kangwon just couldn't do it. No amount of confidence or steady hands or medical knowledge could've helped. Only the antibiotics.

"I know what you mean," Bong-nam murmured, and it seemed like he really did, because he said, "Watching someone waste away, knowing that there's a cure, that there are pharmacies *full* of medicine you could use to save them. But knowing you'll never be able to afford it."

"Who did you lose?" Kangwon asked. He'd never mentioned a personal loss from sickness before.

His friend looked out at the womb full of stars, his hand clenching around nothing.

"Lot of people in the village," he said eventually. "Not your fault, Doctor. You couldn't have saved them even if you were there."

Kangwon sighed, but he couldn't do it heavily enough to exhale the grief out of his lungs, or the lingering taste of the sick room.

He'd have to walk Do-cheon's mother back to her village tomorrow. He'd have to carry that small, frail body in his arms and help her lay her last son to rest.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, hearing soft footsteps behind them. Their watcher was finally coming out, though he didn't know if it was to comfort them or just stop Kangwon from being vulnerable. Probably both, knowing him.

"North Chungcheong and the others should return by tomorrow night," Korea said, coming to stand next to his province, ignoring Bong-nam's surprised yelp. "The local villages will know to avoid the area for the next two weeks, and to take precautions for another couple months."

"Good." Two months should be long enough for any other villagers' symptoms to show. At least they could help prevent an outbreak.

"How long were you standing there?" Bong-nam asked nervously.

Korea side-eyed him. "Long enough to have put a bullet in your skull if I was an enemy."

"Big Brother's still so scary."

Three years of combat and more years of harsh living conditions had carved deep lines into the corners of Choe Bong-nam's eyes and mouth, but he still called Korea that.

And Do-cheon would never hear his little sister call him 'oppa' ever again.

"Kangwon."

He raised his head to see Korea looking at him. His Countryhuman flicked his eyes to Bong-nam almost uncomfortably, then turned slightly more towards his province.

"This is why we do this," he said firmly. "This is *why* we fight. Because every day we lose people that we don't have to. Because the hospitals have the equipment to treat their wounds, and the pharmaceutical companies have the medicine to cure their illnesses." His jaw feathered. "But our people don't have the money."

“It isn’t fair,” Bong-nam muttered, his hands balled at his sides.

“No,” Korea said fiercely. “It isn’t. And when Korea is in Korean hands, it *will* change, I promise.” He looked back into Kangwon’s eyes. “I told you it would. That’s why you followed me.”

It wasn’t the only reason.

“Japan is going to burn in this war,” Korea said with certainty. “His country is going to lose, his people are going to bring him down, and even before they do, Korea is going to be *ours.* And then you will never lose anyone that is capable of being saved again.”

His country's fingers dug into Kangwon’s shoulder. “I know it.”

Kangwon ducked his head at the surety in his country’s voice.

For so long, it’d been Korea’s confidence that had kept him steady. It was his belief in him that had allowed him to heal Bong-nam, to treat sick villagers on their travels, and mend the soldiers of Korea’s Army. He’d finally found his own confidence during the years with the KPRA, but it always filled him with warmth to be reminded that if it ever gave out, he’d still have his Countryhuman’s.

“I know it, too, Doctor.” Bong-nam slung his arms around his shoulders from behind. “You’ll be the best doctor in Free Korea, and every time I get a cold, I’ll come straight to you.”

Kangwon opened his mouth to joke that a cold wasn’t worth a hospital trip, then closed it.

Because that was the goal, wasn’t it? To have it so that if one of their people was even a little worried, or even if they weren’t worried at all, just inconvenienced, they could come to a hospital and be healed. They wouldn’t have to keep suffering through their work because they couldn’t afford to find out what was wrong or buy medicine. They wouldn’t have to worry about losing their home or selling their heirlooms to make sure they could afford it. All they’d have to worry about was being healthy again.

“Thank you,” he said to them, swallowing. “But I can’t let that

make me feel better about losing a patient."

He'd never been able to follow Korea's advice about cutting out pointless emotions.

Of course, he'd never tried.

"No, you can't," Korea said, tugging his hand out from under Bong-nam's arm. "Because until then, we will lose more people. And every single one of them needs to be remembered."

"And avenged," Bong-nam added fervently.

Korea dipped his head. "And carried forward." He fixed Kangwon with his eyes again, stars glimmering at the bottom of them. "But for every patient you lose now, you will save hundreds in the future. *Thousands."*

And Korea would save millions.

Kangwon breathed out, then nodded. "I know. I'll remember that."

Korea returned the nod, and the fire in his voice banked. "Good. Now get back to camp. It isn't safe out here."

But it was safer than before. Since the battle against Japan on the slopes of Paektusan, they hadn't seen a single Kempeitei unit hunting them.

Bong-nam slapped Kangwon on the chest, pushing off of him. "Comrade Korea, Comrade Kangwon."

They looked at him, and he put a fist over his heart. His brown eyes shimmered under the starlight.

"I just wanted to let you both know that I'm honoured to serve in the fight to Liberate our country. That's all."

The soldier's formality didn't suit him. But maybe that was just because Kangwon could still see the round-faced boy with gap teeth beaming up at him.

“And your country is honoured to have you in the fight,” Korea replied, the formality fitting him better than most things, but never as well as the fire. “One day we will bring your family home.”

Bong-nam’s lips pressed tight to hold in his emotion, and he raised the edge of his hand to his brow. “We’ll bring yours home, too.”

Korea’s expression didn’t change. Only Kangwon or one of the other provinces would’ve seen the tightening at the corners of his lips.

“Yes,” he said simply, and Kangwon knew if it hadn’t been for that article in the paper, Korea would still be the only one that knew ‘South’ even existed.

“We should get going,” he said, saving him.

Korea turned away. “You go first.”

“Korea-“

“I’ll be down.”

“And he just said it isn’t safe,” Bong-nam loudly whispered.

Kangwon just shook his head. “Don’t spend too much time up here,” he advised. “You won’t be happy if *you* become one of the patients I have to save from a cold.”

Korea didn’t respond, his eyes fixed on the stars in the lake.

“’Night, hyung,” Bong-nam called quietly, rubbing his hands together to warm them, and part of Kangwon wondered if that was what Korea’s brother had called him.

He knew Korea hadn't called him ‘big brother’ at least. He’d called him South, even before he’d put years between them.

Strange how one person could recontextualize almost everything someone had ever said.

The boy sighed, padding back up the small ridge, looking back at Korea again, his silhouette cutting a person-shaped swathe out of the lights in the lake.

At least Kangwon wasn't afraid to leave him alone up here. He'd reined himself in after Japan.

Kangwon still didn't know why he'd spared the other country, none of them did. But he liked to secretly hope it was because he'd accomplished his *other* reason for following Korea when he'd left his cave. The thing that had given him the confidence to.

'Even just a little.'

And in time, they'd accomplish what they'd both set out to do- save Korea.

Kangwon left his Countryhuman staring out at Heaven Lake, and the stars trapped down in its depths.

—

1952

The hospital room was neat and bright, the fishy smell that had filled it just yesterday smothered under the acrid smell of disinfectant and antiseptic. A pitcher of boiled water sat on the side table, and a fresh hospital gown was draped over the back of the small chair.

And Hae's body was laid out on the cot, unmoving and unbreathing.

Gangwon stared at their cousin's peaceful face, his eyes wide. Kangwon had told him what to expect so he wouldn't have to experience the same heartbreak and fear he had when he got back with more rice to find her sprawled on the floor, dead. But it still took him a second to collect himself.

"Korea is going to k-k-kill you."

Kangwon winced. "We can't tell him."

“He’s g-going to find out. He was alr-ready- already s-s-suspicious.”

“I know.” He’d been hoping to avoid telling his brother about Hae’s condition at all so he wouldn’t have to lie to Korea with him. But his surprise over the prediction of a month or two to recover from cholera had almost given him away, and now he'd be working here. “But it’s what she wanted.”

Gangwon tentatively approached the cot, reaching out a hand. It trembled as he reached under the white cover, taking Hae’s wrist before moving to the left side of her torso.

Pain flashed across his face. “Sh-sh-she’s- Her heart’s not beating.”

“She’ll be alright,” Kangwon soothed, coming to stand next to him. “It'll probably start up some time today or tomorrow.”

He sounded a lot calmer than he’d felt yesterday, as he’d held her on the bed and poured litres of water down her throat, trying to rehydrate her, then tore through every single book they had on Countryhuman anatomy again. He’d had to get the Premier to requisition them for him when he saw Hae’s condition degrading, since Hwang would pick up on why he'd wanted them.

One of the old Chinese texts had said the heart of a Provincehuman would stay silent until the wound that had killed them was fixed, but there was no source for the knowledge, and Kangwon hadn’t been able to sleep, thinking about how Liaoxi and Pak Ga-ram had said North Pyongan’s heart had only been stopped for around a half hour.

Gangwon seemed to be thinking something similar as he looked down at their cousin, holding her hand now. “B-But…”

“She hasn’t dissolved,” Kangwon pointed out.

And that was a firm fact with multiple sources- when a Countryhuman or its wards were formed, they formed out of golden dust. And when they died, they dissolved back into it.

“I think it’s just taking awhile because she’s so low on calories,

and her body has to deal with her burns, too. Plus her internal organs need to recover first."

Cholera killed through dehydration, and dehydration caused organ failure. North Pyongan would've only had a bit of lung and brain trauma to heal- Hae's body had to repair all of hers.

Kangwon bit his tongue on telling his brother that. Gangwon didn't need that reassurance, since everything about North Pyongan's mission had been as classified as possible from him. He knew their cousin had been in rough shape in the hospital, but not why, or how bad.

Gangwon eased a little, though Kangwon could see he was still worried. He would've been. He was.

"Look after her for me while I'm in the field," he said to him, trying to sound as relaxed as possible. "I'll try and keep Korea away once we're back, so you don't have to deal with him. And if he does find out, I'll take the blame."

"You d-don't need to do that," Gangwon said.

Kangwon turned the corner of his lips up. "I'm the one that lost her."

His brother reached out to take his arm. "Kang, I kn-know if there was a way to save her, you would've."

"Yeah." He looked at Hae's face, her brows smooth and her purple eyelids completely still, and thought about how dehydration shouldn't have given her a fit. She had to have thrown herself out of bed to try and make it to the hallway to find him.

Instead she'd died, scared and alone on the floor.

"Yeah," he choked again, then leaned down to hug Hae, squeezing her against his chest.

She was as cold as a corpse should be, but rigor mortis had never set in. She was limp and frigid in his arms, and not hugging him back and it was so unlike her he wanted to keep squeezing until he

could make her heart start beating against his again.

But it didn't.

Kangwon took a steadying breath, and carefully lay her back down, rearranging the blanket around her, pulling it snugly up to her chin. Gangwon put his arm around him, rubbing his shoulder.

"Don't try and give chest compressions or anything," the russet province said calmly. "Just keep her burns clean, feed her rice slurry and water, and let the recuperative coma do what it needs to."

Gangwon nodded wordlessly, still gazing at their cousin's cor-body.

Kangwon put a hand on her pale cheek. "I'll be back, Hae. I've got to go make sure no one else is getting sick. Gangwon will take care of you while I'm gone."

"I'll m-make sure you're not alone," his brother murmured.

That was the important thing. That she wasn't alone.

Kangwon took a deep breath, then set out to see if he could prove America had killed his little cousin.

For three days, he and Korea travelled around South Pyongan, Hwanghae, Pyongyang, and the western edges of his own province. From before dawn to almost dawn again, they interviewed villagers for more accounts of American planes dropping things that weren't bombs, spread the word to be careful of anything that's origin wasn't known, performed check-ups with a unit of the Mobile Medical Corps, and treated minor ailments.

Kangwon could tell it made Korea antsy when he took the time to check an old white phosphorous injury or give a prescription for a common cold, but he never stopped him, just disappeared into the hills to look for more witnesses.

And they found more. Most people only reported hearing a non-explosive bomb go off, but the few that went to check the area the next morning found nothing. A handful had seen the American jets dropping pamphlets, which wasn't out of the usual.

But a few had seen something way more suspicious than that.

"And it was right around here?"

The older woman nodded anxiously, looking around the misty mountain path. "It was."

It was early in the morning of the fourth day, and they were in the foothills of the mountains north of Koksan Town, a town on the Pyongyang-Wonsan highway.

"It happened just two nights ago. I was up early with my granddaughter fetching water, when I saw one of those Yankee planes coming in."

Korea cut the woman off. "What type?"

The grandmother shook her head of black curls. "I don't rightly know the official names, or what have you. But it was one of the smaller ones."

A fighter-bomber then, like most of the sightings.

"It came in over that way." The woman traced a path in the pale grey sky from the southwest to the northeast, then circled it around the mountain. "Then on its way back, I heard that damned whistle what means you're about to be blown up."

Yeah. Kangwon didn't think he'd ever be able to get that sound out of his head. Every time he almost dozed off, that high-pitched screaming whistle would make him jolt back up, even when he was safe in the underground hospital.

"I tried to run with my granddaughter," the woman continued, her hands fisting in her skirts. "But my joints aren't what they used to be, and I tripped on the other side of that ridge there."

Korea shifted impatiently as she gestured, and Kangwon subtly nudged him with his shoulder.

"And then?" he prompted.

"Well I was damn near sure we were going to die," she said. "But Pong-dol was crying up a storm, so I pulled myself together and tried to keep her calm."

Her raspy voice was matter-of-fact, but Kangwon could see the way her frail shoulders shook at the memory.

"That was very brave of you," he told her. "I'm glad you survived."

The woman took a shaky breath. "That we did. I was waiting for the blast, but it never came. It was more a *'pop.'* Then the damned plane went back the way it came."

"You must've been relieved."

She snorted. "That's a word for it. Once I knew it wasn't one of those bombs that takes a lifetime to go off, I sent my granddaughter over to look around while I collected myself. I figured we could use any papers for kindling."

"You shouldn't touch anything that comes from the planes," Korea said, tension quivering in his voice. "Call Public Security or contact the Worker's Party from now on."

"Oh I will," the woman emphatically agreed. "Pong-dol wasn't gone a minute before she started screaming, and came blubbering back to me, talking about a swarm of bugs."

Kangwon's heart sank.

"I thought it was nonsense and told the girl to give my heart a break, but she insisted. So I followed her over here." She gestured around the area. "And what did I see but a bunch of flies buzzing around. Flies! In January!"

"That is strange," Kangwon agreed, watching as Korea started to

poke around in the blackened leaf litter.

“Nothing here now,” he reported.

“There wouldn’t be,” the woman said. “I went straight back to town, and sent some men over to deal with it.”

Kangwon toed at the ground, confirming that the mulch wasn’t blackened from rot, but from being burnt.

“Good,” he approved. “Anything the planes drop should be dealt with the same way, even if it’s something useful.”

“Did they capture any of the flies?” Korea asked.

“Mr. Pak said there weren’t many left when they got here, but they burnt up all the ones that were.”

“That’s fine.” Kangwon would rather they didn’t have civilians handling possible biohazards anyway. “Getting rid of the immediate threat is more important.”

The grandmother rung her chapped hands, her brow furrowed. “I heard last year that the Yankees were spreading smallpox. Is this the same as that?"

Kangwon was going to say *‘We don’t know yet,’* but Korea cut him off.

“We believe so. Which is why it’s important that you make sure everyone you know is aware of the proper protocol for handling suspicious objects.”

Kangwon didn’t correct him. He supposed if people thought there was deliberate malice behind the drops, it would be a better incentive for making sure they followed those protocols.

He got more details from the woman- the exact time she’d seen the plane, the number of flies she guessed there’d been, and the information of the men that had dealt with them- then let her go.

“It’s germ warfare,” Korea said as soon as she was gone.

“Probably,” Kangwon admitted, scanning the nearby bare bushes. “We've got those other stories, too, and I’ve never heard about flies appearing this early, especially as many as she said.”

He also really didn’t like that the majority had gotten away.

They searched the immediate area to see if they could find any of the dead flies outside of the burn zone, but came up empty-handed. Finding a fly in the forest was about the same as looking for a Mr. Kim in Seoul.

“At least the good news is they shouldn’t be able to get far in this cold,” Kangwon said.

Korea didn’t look reassured. “Come on. Let’s go find the men that got rid of them.”

They found the Mr. Pak the old woman had mentioned, and he confirmed that she’d came to his door early in the morning, and he’d taken some materials out to the area to burn. He also said that there had only been around thirty flies when he got there.

After that, they sent Mobile Medical Corps on while they turned back for Pyongyang. The Premier was giving instruction to officials from the Ministry of Public Health, and Korea wanted Kangwon there.

He mulled over his notes as they drove, keeping one ear slit open for planes.

Most of the reports had taken place in the early morning, after three and before six, usually while it was still firmly dark out. That wasn’t exactly unusual, since the enemy pilots would want to avoid their anti-aircraft teams. And it also wasn't so strange that Koksan was another place on the supply line to the front, or Wonsan. The Americans would want to sway people who could sabotage the war effort most.

But he thought it was weird that most of the drops were outside villages instead of in them. The pamphlets earlier in the year were usually dropped directly, since their aircraft-hunting units couldn’t

cover an entire city, and not every village had one. But aside from a few pamphlet bombs dropped over Sariwon and Pyongyang, most of the witnesses over the past few days had said the bombs were dropped outside residential areas. There was a sort of… secretiveness to that.

Kangwon tapped his charcoal against his chin, realizing something. “We never found a container.”

Korea slowed as they approached a checkpoint. “Could they have sprayed them like the leaflets?”

The province frowned. “I don’t think so. That’d be rough on the flies.” Even more than the cold. “And they were pretty clustered, if the witnesses saw correctly. Plus there's that popping- *Mrgh.”*

Korea had grabbed his jaw with one hand, rubbing at the charcoal spot on it so he’d look presentable for the Security Force men.

Kangwon stayed silent as they checked their identity cards, thinking.

“The woman that saw those beetles near Kanggye,” he said when they were through. “She said they were spread out, right?”

Korea nodded, accelerating down the muddy road towards Pyongyang. “Her letter said there were some caught in the trees in both directions. She was just able to see the ones that landed in a clearing."

He guessed beetles were sturdier than flies, and could probably take being sprayed better. And it didn’t sound like the woman had stuck around, so there could’ve been the fragments of a container, and she just didn’t see them.

Kangwon pictured a bomb exploding mid-air, raining shrapnel far away, like the leaflet bombs sometimes did, and those fake ‘atom bombs.’

But he and Korea had searched a pretty wide radius, and hadn’t seen anything. And they were both pretty good trackers. Plus the clustering.

There was a missing piece there, and with the white-marked spider beetles. They weren't out of season like the flies and other things, but…

"It's weird, isn't it?" he said, looking over at Korea. "Those beetles were found back in November, same with the other strange drops. But we barely saw anything in December, and no one else reported insects until two weeks ago."

This wasn't the first appearance of suspicious insects. Alongside the supplies being dropped, people around Chunghwa, Hwangju, and the other areas had reported seeing clusters of mosquitoes and flies, and even small rodents that came from nowhere, but after an American plane had passed.

"We didn't really see any unusual cases back then either." The flights had been unusual, targeting isolated villages, but the beetles had been the only strange ordnance, and there hadn't been any sudden spike in illness.

Korea's jaw worked for a few seconds. "Test flights."

Kangwon nodded in realization. "Studying distribution methods, maybe. Or seeing which areas near the border they could get away with infecting."

As he used that deliberate word, he realized he'd accepted that America was using biological warfare again as soon as he'd heard about the beetles.

He ran a hand over his face as Korea said, "You know what this means then?"

"Yeah." Kangwon exhaled tiredly. "The tests are done. We can expect to see more animal drops."

There were only certain bacteria that could be caught from non-organic materials. You could get smallpox just from wearing a shirt or using a blanket infected with it. But something like cholera only came from infected water or ingesting infected waste.

'Or shellfish.'

Using living vectors not only increased the amount of possible diseases, but added other methods of transmission. An infected fly could bite a human, or just land on food and leave bacteria behind. And some sicknesses couldn't pass directly from insects to humans, but they could with another animal as an intermediary, like a bird or pig.

Smallpox, typhus, typhoid, scarlet fever, yellow fever, malaria. Cholera. All the diseases Kangwon had read about and experienced flooded his mind, along with their symptoms, incubation periods, and how they killed.

And it was *his* job to stop them, when he hadn't even been able to save Hae.

"Kangwon."

He winced as Korea slapped his hand away from his mouth.

"We will handle it," his Countryhuman said firmly. "We avoided major outbreaks last year, and we will avoid them this year."

Last year had been a last-minute measure. The Americans and Rhee's clique had dumped germs on their way out, expecting the smallpox to soften them up, but not cause their own troops problems when they came back north.

But they should know they weren't getting back north now. They wouldn't be trying to weaken them, but to destroy them.

Still, he nodded. "Yeah. And I'll try and get us enough proof to expose America to the rest of the world."

"There is no amount of proof that could turn anyone that matters against him," Korea said coolly, and Kangwon shrunk a little as he remembered their conversation from when they'd first set out.

But he said firmly, "I can't believe that, Korea."

"Was last year not enough to convince you?"

"We didn't have enough solid proof last year to convince someone

that didn't want to be. But flies and mosquitoes appearing mid-January can't be just hand-waved, not when we have so many non-army witnesses." Kangwon patted the eyewitness accounts. "Even if the UN is completely bought out, the other countries just need to be shown what he's really doing, in a way they can't turn away from. And even if they don't care, their people will. They voted against war with China, didn't they?"

"Because they didn't want to bear the cost," Korea snapped. "Not because they suddenly care. And Churchill just reaffirmed Britain's support for a naval blockade." His hands throttled the steering wheel as they reached the outer limits of the city. "Do you think Gangwon knows about China?"

"Nothing's changed from the other five times you've asked."

Kangwon knew there wasn't any getting through to Korea on this, at least not when there were germ bombs and real bombs being dropped on their country. Any mellowing on foreign countries he'd done over the years had been undone by the United Nations vote to invade them.

Well, not all of it. The fact that he'd told them not to kill America unless they had to was proof of that.

Korea drove him straight to Moran Hill, cutting the engine.

"Korea, are you sure you want me to go to the talk?" Kangwon asked. "The lab results on the clams Hae ate should be back."

"Gangwon has likely already received them," Korea responded, pulling a strip of white cloth out of his bag. "I'll get them from him."

Hiding his alarm, Kangwon said, "Make sure you get him to meet you outside. The Quarantine Hospital is isolated enough you don't have to worry about him hearing any broadcasts."

Korea eyed him in piercing silence. Kangwon stared back steadily.

"I really don't want you getting sick."

“Fine,” his Countryhuman clipped after a moment. “Blindfold.”

He sighed. “Korea, we all know where the complex is. You don’t-“

“Blind.*fold.”*

Kangwon sighed again, but obediently let Korea tie the fabric around his eyes, then help him from the Jeep, guiding him around stumps, and under the shadows of the last trees. He could hear voices, then felt walls close around him, before Korea helped him down a set of concrete stairs. Kangwon was fairly skilled at walking blind from all his time in the forest (he had good night vision, but sometimes the things he could hear made him screw his eyes shut so he couldn’t catch a glimpse of something he didn’t want to), so he made it down without taking long enough for Korea to carry him, which he wouldn't put past him if no one was watching.

They came to a stop, and his Countryhuman tugged the blindfold off, stuffing it in the pocket of Kangwon’s lab coat.

“It’s starting soon,” he said. “In.”

Kangwon went to reply, but Korea was already marching away. He sighed, entering the room.

He spotted Ri Pyong-nam in one of the wooden pews, and hustled over to discuss their investigation until the door opened and the Premier walked in. He smiled at Kangwon as he passed, a twinkle in his eye.

From the first words out of his mouth, Kangwon realized why, and why Korea had been so insistent he attend a twenty-minute lecture.

When the instruction was over, Kangwon thanked the man profusely, who watched him with amusement, since he wasn’t doing a good job at hiding his vibrating.

He couldn’t help it. All his exhaustion had been blasted away.

“Thank you,” he said again, bowing his head.

“Don’t thank me,” Kim Il-sung demurred. “It’s only the long-cherished desire of the Korean people, planned out by our Public Health officials, like Comrade Kangwon. I’m only here to convey it.”

Kangwon thanked him again, then tore out of the room, only just remembering to put his blindfold back on as he retraced the route Korea had brought him, taking the steps carefully, but quickly, until the cold of the afternoon air hit him again.

“Comrade Sip and Comrade Ri,” he called as he fumbled for the door out of the building that covered the complex entrance, knowing Korea would have sent them over. His fingers grazed rough wood before it swung open.

“Comrade Kangwon?” Ri Il’s deep, smooth voice said with bemusement. “I’m not entirely sure you need the blindfold when you’re inside.”

“Try telling Korea that,” the province replied. “Can you get me off the hill? I need to get to the Quarantine Hospital.”

The two men guided him by the shoulders until they were clear, and he could tear off the blindfold and take off for the hospital, feeling lighter than he had in months, certainly in days, making his feet fly.

He had to tell Gangwon, and the fact that had been his first thought after hearing the news made his heart soar.

‘I have to tell my brother.’

To his joy, he saw him before he even entered the hospital, as soon as the foothills opened up. He was standing beside the low building, talking to Korea.

“Korea!” he called, and his Countryhuman looked first, his brother not reacting until he realized he had, deafened even more by the fabric-stuffed ushanka on his head.

Korea turned his way, and Kangwon couldn’t help it. Even though there were nurses smoking around the side of the building, and his bodyguards were behind him, when he reached his Countryhuman,

he wrapped his arms around him, careful not to apply too much pressure as he buried his face in his shoulder.

“What are you doing?!” Korea snapped. “Off!”

Kangwon pulled back, grinning, keeping his hands on his shoulders. “We’re really doing it? We’re setting up free healthcare?”

“You knew we were.” Korea twitched, but not strong enough to knock his hands off. “You were involved in calculating the logistics.”

“I didn’t know we were doing it *next year.”*

Kangwon had thought they’d have to wait until after the war was over, and maybe years after that, until the State was wealthy enough. But Premier Kim Il-sung had just stood behind the podium and declared, *‘We must introduce universal, free medical care from next year.’*

“I was too busy to tell you,” Korea dodged.

His province beamed, pulling him in for another hug as emotion swelled in his chest. Joy, relief, and the aching feeling that someone else should be here, but the surety that he'd given his life for this very thing.

“This is what we were fighting for,” Kangwon murmured into the rough fabric of his uniform, and Korea’s arm returned to his side, deciding against hitting him on the head.

“We’re already taking care of soldiers, factory and office workers, and their dependents, and doing emergency aid and treatment for war injuries for free,” his Countryhuman said stiffly. “If this war has exposed anything, it’s that we don’t need as many funds as we thought we did when we put enough effort in. No cost for protecting our people is too high.”

Kangwon pressed his face against him tighter, then pulled away, leaving Korea with a brighter red band on his flag than usual as he tried not to look at Ri Il or Sip Yung-su standing off to the side.

“W-What’s going on?” Gangwon asked loudly, and Kangwon didn’t waste time trying to sign it out, grabbing the notebook Korea had dropped and scrawling the news in it, his handwriting sloppier than usual.

His brother's eyes widened as he read the words, filling with the same light glowing inside Kangwon. He whipped his head around to their Countryhuman.

“You mean it, Korea?”

He huffed in annoyance. “Why are you acting like you doubt it? I told you we would be doing this someday.”

“I d-didn’t doubt it, I just-“ Gangwon shook his head, then raised shaky hands to sign as he said, “Thank you. And I want you to know I’ll never regret doing this-“ He gestured to the damaged ear slits under his ushanka. “When it let me stay with you. This is *why* I did it.”

“And this is why we followed you.” Kangwon slung an arm around his brother, smiling at Korea. “Thank you, Korea.”

“You don’t owe me any thanks,” the man said, averting his eye. “You had the same desires as me, and you helped make this possible.”

And he had given them the wings to take flight.

“Then thanks for keeping your promise.”

Not that he’d ever doubted him. Ever since the tiger-boy in his cave had leaned across the fire with burning eyes, Kangwon had believed he could do anything. And Korea had made him believe that *he* could do anything, too.

“I haven’t kept it yet.” Korea’s arms crossed, then uncrossed, and he spoke slowly enough for Gangwon to read his lips, adding some rough signs to it. “But I will. I will get us through whatever the Yankees throw at us next, and by 1954, whether the war is over or not, Korea will have free, universal healthcare. Because *nothing* is more precious than the lives of our people.”

"'And there's nothing we can't spare for them,'" Kangwon echoed Kim Il-sung's words from earlier, breaking into another grin, unable to stop himself from turning to his brother.

Gangwon met him halfway, embracing him tightly as he laughed into his shoulder, and Kangwon laughed, too, as the reality of it kicked in.

No more struggling to cobble together cures out of food and herbs, no more villages depending on one person with shaky hands and sewing expertise, no more children dying of curable illnesses while antibiotics rotted in pharmacies. He knew it'd take years to build a perfect system, but this was a start. The start they'd never dared to imagine in any of their daydreams in the cave.

Kangwon would deal with the germ warfare, no matter what came their way. He'd nurse Hae back to life, save every one of their people that he could, and stamp out any pandemic before it could begin so that as many as possible would live to see their bright future. And he *would* get proof of America's crimes to the rest of the world, and make them understand they shouldn't support him or this war anymore.

And maybe if he did, Korea could hug his brother like this, too, and their entire country could be happy and healthy, like they'd always dreamed.

"Cauterization," Kangwon murmured against his brother's ushanka. He wasn't sure if he heard it, but he had to be thinking it, too.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Korea's expression soften, just enough that only one of their family could've caught it.

It said what words or sign language never would.

North and the long string of little brothers he's lost. Kangwon and the childish exuberance that only the thought of free healthcare can bring out.

I have survived another earthquake. Now I can do my

clarification for the test flights in November. Korean civilians and soldiers, and Chinese soldiers reported strange flights over the northeast and west during that month, and a captured pilot later said they were test flights. So they weren't contagious, but were more designed to find out how bacterial carriers would spread once dropped. I can't find anything that specifically says insects were being tested at this time, and the first confirmed reports aren't until January, when the real flights took place. So I'm only saying beetles were tested once during this period to be safe. Did I just really want to have the menacing drop scene as foreshadowing, and beetles were much more dramatic than leaflets or toilet paper? Yes. But I'm being honest about it, so it's okay.

Her Shackles Are Different Than My Own

Hwang held the back of his bandaged hand to his forehead. It felt warm, but that could very well simply be because the underground office he was in was stuffy.

Next he took his pulse, counting the way Kangwon had instructed him to. Ninety-five beats per minute was in the average, but a tad quick for him, and irregular. But ever since Hae had been transferred to the hospital, he felt that his heart had been beating anomalously. It was why he had to monitor his stomach extra carefully. Was it sloshing around from illness, or concern over his sister? Right now, he decided it was the latter.

Finally, he took out the small blush compact of Hae's. He had attempted to bring it to her in the hospital, knowing that being able to spread make-up on her cheeks and admire herself in the small reflective surface would cheer her up, but Kangwon had refused him entry, and advised instead that he keep it to reassure himself.

Hwang had never quite understood the reasoning behind keeping objects to remind you of a person when they were no replacement for the person themselves. But he had to admit that being able to run his thumb over the tiger embossed on the silver casing did provide some small comfort.

Perhaps it was just the calming repetition, similar to rewriting the draft of the speech he was working on for tomorrow's joint meeting of People's Committee chairmen and Party officials for the fourth time.

He would get back to that. First he had to check his face.

The cheek exposed by the bandages was concave, but that was usual. He was also pale since his flag base was white, obviously. His eyes were perchance the slightest bit bloodshot, but he could

attribute that to late nights and rubbing them as he tried not to think about Hae's condition. The dark circles likely came from that as well.

All in all, he would need to freshen up before tomorrow's meeting, but he didn't believe he was sick. At least not yet.

Hwang let out a long exhale as he closed the compact, setting it on the corner of his desk as he picked his pencil back up to finish the final draft, eternally grateful he still had no major burns on his dominant palm, just a few that pinched between his fingers.

With the positioning of their provinces compared to the areas hit by possible germ warfare so far, he and his sister were the most likely to develop sympathetic fevers, alongside South Pyongan, the Kangwons, and Korea himself, of course. But Hwang knew that between his travelling through villages to the POW camps at the border, his interactions with the prisoners there, as well as his work with students and refugees around Pyongyang and Hwanghae, he was the most at risk of developing an actual ailment. Even before the dreadful business of this second wind of germ warfare, he had been conducting these health checks, though slightly less obsessively.

Hae was at risk, too, with the amount of socialization she sought out, and her admittedly lax health standards. Hwang should have told her to be more careful. He should have instructed her to wear a mask, and not to eat anything she found, and realized she had been giving away her rations to that dog, and-

He sighed, setting his pencil down, removing his glasses to rub at his eyes again.

There was no point in dwelling on things that had already transpired. But he couldn't stop himself from dwelling on what *could* transpire, and no matter how hard he thought on the matter, he couldn't think of a more comprehensible word for his speech than 'bespeaks,' and he had no Hae to turn to to ask for one, or to inquire whether she thought it was clear enough.

Hwang swept his papers aside, regretted it, and picked them up,

arranging them neatly in the ‘Party work’ stack to be returned to later. Then he removed more from the 'POW work' pile to peruse, along with Kangwon’s copied notes on the biological warfare.

Part of his work was to inform the POWs of the germ warfare their own government was engaging in, emphasizing that any pandemic would likely wreak havoc in the camps were it to spread. Which was true. It showed an astounding lack of care for their own captured soldiers on the American military’s part, though it made sense. The more prisoners that died in their camps, the worse they would look.

But he needed to be cautious with what he shared. Hwang wholeheartedly believed Kangwon and Korea’s conclusion was right- America had undoubtedly used germ warfare last year, so there was no reason he wouldn’t use it again, especially with more time to refine his methods, and now knowing that the other nations didn’t seem to care about the truth of the matter. Yet he didn’t want to share half a story to American prisoners only to be called a liar if any facts turned out to be wrong in the future.

Korea had informed him that they’d shot down two American pilots back on the 13th that appeared to have been involved in the drops, and were in the process of convincing them to divulge information on their work. Hwang didn’t entirely trust a prisoner of war not to simply say what he knew his captors wanted to hear, but they should be able to get at least the seeds of truth out of them.

A pity he couldn't be the one to interview them. Korea didn’t want the influence of a Provincehuman associated with any account they gave, but Hwang wanted to know the exact specifics of *everything.* How the pilots had transported the flies, mosquitoes, voles, beetles, and other creatures, what they had been told about their cargo, how they had infected them.

China had mentioned sending scientists from his country to work with their own to run more tests on the captured specimens to find out the specifics of the bacteria, as they had with the mollusks Hae had brought back.

They had been positive, of course. *Meretrix meretrix,* contaminated

with *Vibrio cholerae*. Quite normal, unlike everything else about the situation.

And targeted, if he had to say. Hwang could see no other purpose for dropping them near a running river.

He let out a burdened sigh. All chains of thought led back to the prison of worrying about his sister, it seemed.

Luckily, he was saved by the door opening.

Hwang looked up to see a white, red, and olive blob, and slid his glasses back on, seeing it was someone he'd been meaning to speak with lately.

“SH?”

She was dressed in her officer’s uniform, unlike him in his Party suit, and her white brows were slightly furrowed. “Korea wants us.”

Alarm brought Hwang to his feet, hands on his desk. “Did he say for what?”

SH blew a puff of air. “No. But it’s not Hae. I got him to say that much.”

That was good, but still worrisome. It sounded like a work matter, but the only sphere the two of them tended to collaborate in was information and publicity, and if something was urgent enough to pull them away from finalizing their speeches for the joint meeting-

Ah. There was another thing they were both involved in.

Hwang lurched forward, then back, stuffing all his papers in his briefcase, not forgetting to grab Hae’s compact before hustling after SH, making sure to lock the office door, though it was now empty.

“I wish he wouldn’t do this to us,” he fretted as they hurried down the underground halls of the local Party headquarters. “Would it kill him to offer even vague assurance about what he wants to discuss?”

“You know,” SH said, dodging around a man carrying a stack of paper taller than him. “I think it would.”

They found Korea in the abandoned Party Foundation building, which he seemed to enjoy using for clandestine meetings. Likely because no one could overhear it if he decided to yell at them.

Hwang had realized another worry on the way over. Korea hadn’t been predicted to return from the field until tonight. Something had been important enough to summon him back to Pyongyang early.

As soon as they burst into the office, Hwang blurted, “Is it Choi- I mean, him?”

To his alarm, Korea dipped his head. Hwang didn’t relax until he said, “He’s fine.”

“You could have led with that,” SH pointed out, hand over her heart.

“You didn’t give me the chance,” their Countryhuman said, but without his usual snap.

A serious matter then. Hwang wouldn’t rub his chest just yet.

“He has intel for us.”

Korea sounded slightly reluctant as he said the words, and didn’t immediately follow up. The provinces didn’t prompt him, knowing he would speak when he felt like it, though Hwang sometimes wanted to shake him when he did this.

After what felt like far too long, he *‘tch’*ed. “Or he could. He says he believes he can get information on who our leak is.”

SH perked at that, though Hwang said, “I assume there’s a catch.”

“Yes.” Korea ground his jaw.

“The Yankee woman has it.”

—

SH's eyes widened alongside Hwang's as they exchanged glances, and she bit down on saying Grace's name.

"How does he know that?" Hwang asked immediately.

Korea didn't look pleased as he said, "He told her he's our operative."

Hwang gaped, and SH put a hand over her mouth.

She hadn't known Choi Jung-nam well, but he'd been an informant of theirs for years, and involved in the anti-Japanese struggle for just as long. He should know better than to just *tell* someone he was a spy.

"I'll admit he wasn't exactly the most subtle as a young man," Hwang said, echoing her shock. "But he grew over the years. I refuse to believe he would reveal himself so carelessly."

"At least not without a good reason," SH added.

"Here it is." Korea pulled a paper from his pocket, tossing it across the desk. "You decide if it's good or not."

His tone said what *he* thought about it.

Hwang snatched it up before SH could, eyes scanning the entire thing in just a few seconds before passing it to her.

"He's aware of her abuse," he said grimly.

SH snatched the letter, reading the frantic, messy handwriting as fast as possible. The message was personal enough that it had to have been handed off to another agent personally, not left in a dead drop.

'Can get info on problem. E-' She guessed that was Grace's codename. *'Has it. Got close, made friends. He hits her, she wants away. Told her my mission, says she knows a mutual friend. Wants to meet me somewhere. She'll give me intel if I get her out. Want to get her out. Can we trust her?'*

At the bottom, in large, slanted characters like it had been added last minute, it read, *'SHE LOOKS LIKE MY DAUGHTER.'*

"I suppose that's the issue with field agents," Hwang was saying, pinching the bridge of his nonexistent nose. "You need to strike a balance between someone good-hearted enough to want us to be victorious, but ruthless enough not to throw the mission away out of compassion."

"It doesn't sound like it's thrown yet," SH said, setting the letter down.

"No, but it will be once he lets her lure him into a trap."

"That's what I want your input on," Korea interrupted. "Do we risk letting him meet with her on her terms?"

"No," SH said immediately. "It's too dangerous."

Hwang frowned at her for a second before looking at Korea. "I know my previous words would make you think my answer would differ, but I think we should."

SH's brows shot up. "You *just* said it's probably a trap."

"It is," her cousin admitted. "But it's a risk we need to take."

"He could *die."*

Hwang's jaw ticced. "I am aware. But we can't pass up the chance for information on our leak."

"I don't think she'd even have information like that," SH pointed out. "I'm sure she's picked up on some things that would be worthwhile, but the identity of what has to be a high-level operative?"

She'd been willing to chance that Grace might slip up and tell Choi Jung-nam something she shouldn't, or been desperate enough for company to invite him into America's base. But the idea that she would risk her Countryhuman's wrath to tell him directly, or that she'd have the exact information they needed…

“We’d be risking a comrade for nothing.”

“Not nothing,” Hwang said sharply. “This leak has likely been responsible for the attempted abduction of North Pyongan- which resulted in several comrades being injured- as well as, I suspect, the placement of those clams.”

He swung to Korea. "Mollusks infected with *Vibrio cholerae* could taint a body of still water, but not a river like the Taedong. I believe that they were purposefully left at the fork where we gather water, either to tempt us into eating them or in an attempt to contaminate *our* drinking water in specific. This, along with the ambush on North Pyongan, implies that the location of our bunker has been compromised and our movements are being watched, likely by this very operative.”

Korea’s jaw feathered. “I agree. I’ve ordered more soldiers to be stationed nearby in case of aerial attack.”

“And I assure you I’m not coming solely from a place of emotion, but they helped poison my sister,” Hwang stressed, looking back to SH. “She’s recovering from her illness, but what if she wasn’t? Or what if North Pyongan hadn’t been able to fight off his would-be kidnappers? What if one of us isn’t able to next time?”

He looked back to Korea, laying a hand on the desk. “I don’t wish for anything to happen to our comrade. But this *is* what we sent him to do, and we agreed the risk of speaking with the target was worth it. We can’t allow compassion or personal feelings to compromise the mission.”

SH made a frustrated sound. “That’s not what I’m doing. I’d be willing to risk him if I thought there was less of a chance of it being a trap, but there isn’t.”

Grace was being abused, yes. But even if she had fully woken up to that and wanted to leave America, why would she want to help them? The only reason she’d helped SH with the holding camp layout was because the province had manipulated her emotions with that sketch of a family.

SH felt pity for the girl carved from marble and obsidian that had talked about being cursed and cried into her breast, with bruises on her creamy skin, and big, childlike eyes that had gazed at that picture so tenderly.

But she felt no pity for the Yankee that had called her people's skin 'exotic,' referred to the prison yards as holding pens, and spoke so blithely of the destruction of their country.

Grace might be a scared, lonely, trapped woman. But before that, she was an American.

Hwang sighed, tapping the desk. "I will admit our comrade's judgement is likely being hampered by emotion in his desire to help her. We can see that by how he appears to have told her his allegiances solely based on her story of abuse, and how he compares her to his daughter. I doubt a Caucasian American woman looks anything like a half-Korean, half-Japanese one."

No, but SH did know what he meant. She hadn't looked anything like Eonni after all.

"But do you think America would truly permit her to open up about what he does to her, even as a ploy?" her cousin asked. "Surely there would have been better ways to lower our comrade's guard, ones that didn't compromise his image. You yourself told me he seemed to care about that."

SH crossed her arms. "I just find it hard to believe she would suddenly turn on America after tolerating him for so long."

Grace had came to her with that bruise in November. It had been over a year of her being mistreated by her Countryhuman, and things had almost definitely gotten worse once she wasn't around witnesses in Gyeongmudae.

"Why would she only want to leave now?"

"Maybe she wanted to leave before," Korea said. "And our comrade is just finally giving her a chance."

SH turned her head to him so fast her neck cracked. He gazed

back at her with an unreadable look before looking away.

"Make up your minds. Once a decision is made, we need to move fast."

Hwang tapped his chin, thinking, and SH's eyes fell to the letter again, finding that line.

'Says she know a mutual friend.'

She wondered if those had been his words, or if that was how Grace had described her. A friend.

Big blue eyes turned gunmetal grey in the moonlight, and a child's awed whisper. 'You actually drew me.'

Suddenly, shame cascaded through her entire body with the force of a flood, dousing the dark thing. Or at least making it retreat.

"It is true that the timing seems coincidental," Hwang admitted. "To suddenly attempt to leave now-"

"No," SH cut him off firmly. "She couldn't leave before. She didn't have a chance."

Hadn't she thought that while in captivity? That there was no way for Grace to escape? That she was trapped, at America's mercy? And she'd just told herself that would have only gotten worse.

Grace no longer had even the thin walls and full rooms of Gyeongmudae to protect her. She was alone with America, constantly monitored by guards. It was a miracle she'd been able to speak with Choi Jung-nam to tell him what she had at all, or that he'd managed to make contact with her in the first place. And yes, that could be another sign that it was a set-up, and that America had allowed it.

But if it wasn't, it meant Grace was desperate enough to risk trying to escape. And there was nowhere else to escape *to.* Anyone in South's puppet government would turn her over to America immediately, and she couldn't speak Korean to ask a civilian for

help. She also couldn't risk going to another Yankee. All of the ones surrounding her were her Countryhuman's butchers, ready to assault and kill at his order. Her own country was full of them, too, full of greedy sick people that would turn her over in a heartbeat for a few dollars. SH knew it had been foolish to plead with the nurse to go home and help her people. She would find no freedom across the sea. Even if she made it back to America, Grace was trapped.

Caged.

"We should trust her," SH said firmly.

Hwang arched an eyebrow. "Did you just receive some new information I'm unaware of?"

No. She'd just realized she couldn't let the dark thing's growling drown out her *own* compassion.

It didn't matter if Grace was American before she was a woman. SH was a Korean and a revolutionary before she was one, and she wasn't like the foreigners. If she could help give another woman the chance to fly, she had to try, even if they were a Yankee.

Grace had given her hers in Gyeongmudae after all.

"Our comrade should be careful," SH said, ignoring Hwang. "But I think he should meet with her, if he can."

"Okay, well." Hwang blinked in confusion. "I concur. As I said several times."

"Then I will get word to him." Korea pocketed the letter.

SH watched him carefully, attempting to discern what he thought about their decision. But his face was still as unreadable as his voice.

"Will we actually attempt to rescue the target?" Hwang asked, pushing his glasses up.

"We have to now," their Countryhuman responded, showing a tint

of irritation. “And soon. Otherwise she could just tell America about our operative.”

“Which would also jeopardize her own safety,” Hwang pointed out. “She would almost definitely have to divulge why she knew who he was in the first place."

“But she’d be scared,” SH countered. “So she probably would tell him everything.” She looked to Korea. “I know we had a good source with our comrade, but maybe we should just recall him?”

Her cousin pursed his lips. “He could still get us intelligence once she’s safely away.”

SH shook her head decisively. “America won’t just let her get away. He’ll track down everywhere she went, everyone she even *could* have talked to. He won’t stop until he gets her back.”

She’d had ‘clients’ that would grow jealous and bitter when their acquaintances told them they’d slept with her, too. They would take it out on her, demanding to tell them she’d never sleep with the other again, and to say she was *theirs*.

Her stomach surged unsteadily as the thing behind the wall returned in full force, panting darkly. Hwang gave her a concerned glance.

And that had just been men paying for her body, who had no claim on her. Part of her job educating peasants was to look for signs of domestic abuse in the women isolated out in the countryside with no one but their husband, bringing them the word that divorce was legal now, and helping them seek it if it was needed. And more than once she had to call in protection when their ex-husbands came after them, not content with the law declaring them free. The men didn’t love their wives, didn’t see them as anything other than son-bearers and slave labour. But they did see them as *theirs*.

Grace was America’s woman. And men didn’t take losing what was ‘theirs’ well. A country like him wouldn’t be the exception.

She would give anything to see his face when he lost Korea.

"If our comrade stays after she's gone, America will find him," she said to the other two. "And then he will find his family. We can't protect them in Japan."

Hwang adjusted his glasses, looking slightly guilty. "Ah, yes. I didn't consider that complication. Perhaps it might be best if this is his last mission then."

Korea's foot tapped behind the desk for a few moments, then he said, "Fine. The order will be to get the intel, then get the target and himself to a handler who will transport them north."

"Once he gets here, could we get his family's address and arrange for transportation for them out of Japan?" Hwang beat SH to asking. "I don't need to remind you of our comrade's wife's trustworthiness, I hope?"

Korea lip twitched. "I won't abandon her. Or their children and their families. But we're trying to cut down on non-productive workers, and we're tight on resources as it is. I'll-"

Korea lost the battle to his facial muscles, his lip curling in a grimace as he reluctantly finished, "Arrange with CCCP to have them stay in the Soviet Union until the war is over."

Hwang bobbed his head, satisfied, but SH hid her own face scrunch.

She didn't dislike the idea of going to the Soviet for things as much as Korea did (not possible), but she couldn't help but feel like the more help he gave, the more strings he had to tie around them. It didn't matter If he didn't want a puppet. Like she had told China, CCCP was still one of the countries that wanted *something* from them.

'He'll have just as much luck as America.'

"What about the target?" Hwang asked. "Will we keep her? A nurse with Western medical knowledge could come in handy, especially with recent events."

"No," SH said before Korea could. "We can find her somewhere else safe. She doesn't belong in Korea."

She wanted to give Grace her chance, to free her from her cage. But her thoughts on where she should fly after hadn't changed.

Korea nodded. "I don't want an American anywhere near our sick or injured. For all we know, this could all be a set-up to get her into our hospitals and infect more people."

SH didn't entirely trust Grace, but that was still a little…

She exchanged a look with Hwang, raising her brows. *'Do you want to say it?'*

He inclined his head. *'You may have the honour.'*

"A bit paranoid," she said out loud to Korea.

"We shot down another pilot who we are almost certain was engaging in germ warfare," he replied blankly. "And may I remind you that three days ago, more masses of flies, fleas, spiders, and mites were found in Pyonggang County. I am not letting *any* Yankees anywhere near our hospitals."

"A fair point," Hwang admitted.

SH's brows furrowed. "Is Kangwon okay?" Pyonggang County was one of his, and she hadn't seen him since then.

"He hasn't reported any fever yet." Korea eyed them both, like he could see into their immune systems. "How do you feel?"

"I'm healthy, by my examinations," Hwang said immediately. "If any of the people in my province are sick, it isn't a great enough number for it to affect my body-"

He bent his head with a sudden cough, clearly biting off *'Yet.'*

"No fever, Korea," SH reported, anger broiling inside her, agitating the dark thing.

Between the joint meeting and Army Foundation Day, she would be going to her province to warn her people of the air drops. The bugs were horrifying to think about, but it was the other objects that made her blood burn.

It was bad enough when the Yankees were dumping non-infected things, foreign clothes and food with stupid little surrender slips and lying leaflets attached, trying to win their people over by acting like they were their saviours, like it was so benevolent of them to relieve their suffering when *they were the reason they were suffering in the first place.*

SH thought of America telling her it was a good thing he was here to stop people in Seoul from starving, like he was doing it to help and not trying to put their country in billions of dollars of debt to him, and making sure their people starved *permanently.*

'Good thing America is here to help, huh?'

She should have shoved that too-sweet chocolate down his throat while they were fighting, should have made him *choke* on it.

SH grit her teeth as the thing bared its fangs, before she realized Hwang was looking at her in concern again, and quickly painted American dollars on her wall, the edges singed and the flames coming off them a mix of gold and blood scarlet. It allowed her to straighten, giving Korea a smile.

He looked at her with that piercing look, like he knew what was churning inside her, but just said, "Good. Report to me the moment you feel one come on. If there are other symptoms, report directly to the Quarantine Hospital and Gangwon. Try to be discrete."

"It wouldn't be good for morale if our masses knew their Provincehumans were ill," Hwang dutifully repeated.

It was the reason they weren't telling anyone about Hae. Only they and maybe a few nurses in the hospital knew what the Yankees had done to her. And the General, of course.

The dark thing flipped and thrashed, but SH painted over it to ask

Korea, “And what about you? Have you felt any fever?”

“No,” he clipped, like every time she’d asked last year.

“And if you *do* get one, will you tell us?”

“There’s no point,” he said bluntly. “Telling you wouldn’t make it go away.”

“Yes, but-“ SH sighed, knowing there was no point in finishing her own sentence.

She wasn’t sure how the sympathetic fevers worked, whether if a province had one it meant the Countryhuman would, too, or if it was a percentage thing. Even if enough people in her province were sick to make her sick, maybe there wouldn’t be enough in the country to make Korea sick.

Hwang had already begged him for an answer, but he refused to give it because somehow having a fever that they *all* had because of something they couldn’t control would make him weak, presumably. They would likely never know the answer for sure because of that. Kangwon might, but his ‘patient confidentiality’ face could win money in a card game.

“Just stay healthy,” SH advised instead.

“Don’t tell me what to do. Now I need to go pass my instructions on to our comrade’s handler.”

Korea brushed past them, but paused abruptly at the door.

“Did Kangwon say anything to you about Hae’s condition?”

“He won’t let me visit her,” SH said. It saddened her, but she knew it was for the best. They couldn’t chance more of them getting sick. “But he says she’s recovering well. He said she says ‘Howdy,’ and wanted to know if we’re all healthy.”

Hwang nodded. “He said much the same to me. He purports she’ll be better at the end of next month, or perhaps mid-March.” He frowned slightly. “Why are you asking?”

Korea's eye flicked between the two of them for a second. "I just wanted to know."

Before either of them could say anything else, he whisked out of the room.

SH sighed, leaning her palms back against the chilly desk. Hwang mimicked her.

"What are you willing to bet he's not sleeping when him and Kangwon are in the field?" she asked him.

"Absolutely nothing," he replied. "Only a fool takes a bet he knows he'll lose."

SH sighed again, tipping her head back. Korea hadn't been back to the bunker since Hae had gotten sick, and probably wouldn't be until any pandemic was averted.

***'If** it's averted,'* her thoughts muttered darkly, and the thing growled.

Painting, painting. Dead soldiers with pallid skin and rice water vomit crusted around their slack lips, like the kind Kangwon had said came out of Hae.

She wasn't sure if she or China was more put out by her Countryhuman's absence. The Chinese man had been absent, too, so she had a feeling Korea's presence was really the only reason he slept at the bunker. And since he was sending those scientists over, she would paint away any suspicion at *that.*

"I also wouldn't bet against him not eating," Hwang said, rubbing his face. "Even with Kangwon's presence. Our cousin doesn't usually have the wherewithal to force him into self-care."

"Not unless he gets down on his knees," SH muttered.

"Beg pardon?"

Right! She wasn't supposed to tell anyone about the time she'd walked in on that.

“Kangwon’s focused his efforts on trying to make sure Korea doesn’t die of gangrene,” she said, pretending she didn’t see Hwang’s intensely curious expression. “Which means we need to get him to do the other things.”

Her cousin accepted he wasn’t getting an answer, and nodded sagely. “The united front, as it were. Though you’re the only one I’ve ever seen successfully convince Korea to eat.”

“Sang has,” SH pointed out. “And Hae and North Pyongan. And Kangwon, too, actually." *Without* the embarrassing begging she hadn't been supposed to see. "And South Pyongan got him to drink that moonshine that one time.”

Holding up a finger, Hwang said, “Correction- you’re the only one I’ve seen manage to convince him to eat when he doesn’t want to.”

“Korea never wants to eat.”

“Yes,” Hwang agreed. “But sometimes he doesn’t want to eat because he feels like he *shouldn’t* want to, and sometimes he doesn’t want to eat because he truly doesn’t.”

SH had thought almost the same thing before. Korea was that way about a lot of things. She could still remember that night in the village at the foot of Chilbosan, when she’d held her hand out to him, and the way he'd looked at it before denying her.

But it was sort of shocking to hear those thoughts echoed from Hwang.

“That’s surprisingly emotionally intelligent of you to notice,” she appraised.

“I’m quoting Hae,” he admitted.

That was why the words sounded familiar. They *were* SH’s thoughts. She’d said them to her little cousin when she first asked why Korea didn’t eat much.

“And when it’s the latter, you are the only one of us I’ve seen sway him,” Hwang continued.

"You all could if you tried." SH didn't do anything special to convince their Countryhuman to do things. She just refused to back down when he got growly. They all knew he wasn't actually going to follow through on any of his threats, so there wasn't any reason to cower.

Even North Hamgyong could convince Korea to eat. He'd just never care enough to try.

SH flexed her fists, pushing off the desk. "We should get back to work. I have a painting to finish by tonight."

The halls were dim, all the other offices locked in their disuse. Hwang hustled after her as they made their way down them.

"I've never quite understood why you dodge compliments," he said, pushing his glasses up. "I think it's quite impressive you have the spine to push through when he gets as he does."

SH didn't really know why she was dodging this compliment either. She just…

'I'd rather be able to convince him to eat by making him something he'd ***want*** *to.'*

She had never given up on her original reason for wanting to cook. But at his rate, she would never learn how. All those years during the Occupation, they'd never had enough food for her to waste learning. And when they finally had, Kim Jong-suk had passed before she could give her the lessons she had promised. And then the war came, and even after they won, it would be years of recovery before they would have enough resources that she wouldn't feel guilty wasting meats or spices.

"How long is your speech for tomorrow?" she asked blithely. "I want to make sure I didn't overwrite mine."

"You never over or underwrite," Hwang answered immediately, adding before she could speak again, "It's one of the things I admire about you, alongside your previously mentioned forcefulness."

SH pursed her lips at the word. She *really* didn't want to bring up

the topic, but the tension inside her had been building for months. So as they reached the entry hall, she stopped, prompting Hwang to look back at her.

“Don’t pretend you admire my ‘forcefulness,’” she said, keeping her voice light. “You’ve been eyeing me since Hungnam. You’re scared I’m going to snap again.”

For an entire year, whenever the thing scratching at the wall made her voice lower or her teeth grit, her cousin would give her those furrowed brows and side-eye.

His cheeks dusted violet where his flush reached his ice blue flower. “I wouldn’t say I’m scared, and I don’t consider you to have ‘snapped.’ You gave into a perfectly reasonable fit of emotion. I recall telling you I had my own.”

Alone, with no eyes to judge. And when he said he’d given in to hysterics, she just knew he meant tears and hyperventilating. If she had done that, it would have been forgivable. Tears and tearing at her clothes would have painted her as unreliable just as much, but they were expected from a woman.

But SH didn’t want to cry. She had *never* wanted to cry. All those times she’d pressed herself into the corner and covered her body in clothes to protect it, and sobbed into her hands it had been because she’d wanted to *scream* instead, to smash those sakura cups and rip the fine silks apart at the seams, to rend the next man that tried to use her limb from limb and *rage.*

But she never could because she knew it would make her undesirable, and only put her more in debt. The pressure had built and built until she had to cry because if she didn’t, the next pig that fell asleep on her arm wouldn’t wake up.

“And I don’t look at you like you’re about to blow someone’s brains out,” SH said tightly.

“In my defense-“ Hwang saw her narrowed eyes and seemed to think better. “Ahem.”

“Yes, ‘ahem.” SH painted the dark thing back with a pistol that *hadn’t* been just out of reach, firming her tone. “I was angry, Hwang. I’d just had to walk through the ruins of a city I lived in for years and governed for even longer. I had to climb over the wreckage of buildings I *knew,* that I helped oversee being built, and see my people homeless and dead.”

Her fists squeezed as she remembered those rows and rows of white corpse shrouds, still so many even after all that time, and the thing’s weight made the fresh paint crack as the wall bulged.

“I had a right to be angry,” she said, struggling to keep her voice calm. “I’m not going to let you make me feel ashamed of that.”

Her cousin had been watching her with raised brows since her first statement.

“I’ve never heard you use that word or any of its synonyms for yourself before,” he said, then shook his head. “I mean, I’m sorry, SH. I never meant to make you feel as if I was judging you.”

He straightened up, putting his fist over his chest. “I saw Hungnam fall. There is no reaction you could have had that would be disproportional to me. I wouldn’t have reacted the way you did, but in a way… that makes me envious.”

SH blinked. That was the last thing she’d expected to hear.

“Envious?”

Her cousin nodded, removing his glasses to polish them on his lapel. “I’ve always been envious of your passion, and your fortitude. If I had half of it, I wouldn’t have spent so long being a cog in the machine during the Occupation.”

They hadn’t helped SH.

“It’s why I was thrilled when Korea said you would be joining me in information work.”

“And Sang,” SH said automatically.

“Yes.” Hwang’s slender throat bobbed. “And Sang. The same qualities that make you so skilled at convincing Korea to take care of himself will serve just as well for our people.”

He slid his glasses back over his eyes, tightening the chain as he looked at her in the light coming through the small glass windows flanking the door.

“That’s why I’m truly not judging you for Hungnam. The only way I would think you had something to be ashamed of was if you hadn’t backed down from killing that prisoner.”

‘Agree to disagree.’

“Then why have you been looking at me that way?” she asked, frustrated.

Hwang shifted on his feet. “The last time I tried to speak about it, you choked me with my tie.”

SH took a step back, out of reach. “Why?”

“You’ve been acting… uncharacteristically uncharitable lately,” he said delicately.

SH bristled at that. “I haven’t.”

She’d been nothing *but* charitable, though Korea didn’t like them calling it that. She had been giving half her rations away even before the joint decision, and now with Hae in the hospital, she was collaborating with Hwang to make sure the old woman she’d been helping look after was taken care of. And unlike her *actually* uncharitable brother, *she* hadn’t been lying about it.

“What would you call your initial decision about Grace Hartman?” he challenged. “You should have been leaping at the chance to get her out of America's grasp, even if it was almost certainly a trap. I've never known you to look the other way from a woman in peril.”

“I would if it would jeopardize an operation,” SH said defensively.

She would hate it, but she would.

"But this case involved the possibility of the operation *succeeding,"* her cousin pointed out. "We approved Ch- him talking to her to retrieve information that she possibly had. That, combined with freeing her, should have been enough to prevent any major hesitation from you."

SH crossed her arms. "If she was one of ours, or some other woman, I *wouldn't* have hesitated. But she's a Yankee."

"Precisely." Hwang gestured at her. "I've never known you to show prejudice against even Japanese women, yet you're showing it against an American one."

SH had never been able to look at Japanese women the same way she did their men because she knew their situation wasn't any different from Korean women's. Tens of thousands of them had been forced into sexual slavery alongside theirs, kidnapped from lower class neighbourhoods, sold by parents to pay a debt, or willingly volunteered because they'd been told that giving their bodies to their soldiers was patriotic and served their country, and they had no other way to do that as a woman. The Japanese comfort women had been victims just as much as the Korean comfort women, and the Japanese women forced to sell themselves even before that had been forced to do it for the same reasons as Korean women- because they lived in a society that didn't see them as people, that *hated* them.

Yes, some Japanese women had looked away or been complicit. But so had some Korean women. The rich ones, the bourgeois, the ones that had never had to worry about missing their next meal or calculating how much their flesh was worth. They were victims of the patriarchy, too, but they didn't even realize it, and they lauded it for the 'protections' they had, disdaining the women that didn't share them.

'I would never do that, that could never be me.' But it *could.* If their husband died, or lost interest and cut his oldest concubine loose for a new one with fewer wrinkles, they could easily end up like the women on the streets, or following soldiers to their camps.

Or like SH.

Yankee women were different. No matter how chained they were, they all saw themselves as *free,* like Grace thoughtlessly recounting how her parents had to take out loans to send her to nursing school, or how most of her friends had to drop out to get married, giving up their hopes and dreams for a man that would treat them like a slave, not ever seeing anything wrong with it.

They did exactly what America wanted them to- ignored their chains and the way they were seen as just another household object, ignored that the small freedoms they did have came at the expense of women in other countries that had to die to give them their rich husbands and the status they only gained in wartime and that *still* wasn't anywhere near that of a man's.

Most of the Japanese women SH had ever met or heard of were poor, prostitutes, or dishonoured, like Choi Jung-nam's wife. And almost all of them had sympathized with Korea's plight, with Korean *women's* plight, because it was theirs, too. In a way, they were colonized, just like them.

They didn't all feel that way, of course. Plenty of them, no matter how low they were, would always see a Korean as lower. But SH would say with confidence that they were the exception.

It was the other way around with the Yankees. Some would care, some would see a Korean woman as a sister. But *they* were the exception. The majority of them were like Grace. No matter how nice or friendly they were, the women that had to suffer overseas for their country's conquest were too foreign, too 'exotic' to truly see as people.

Like all Yankees, so long as one could pretend *she* was free, it didn't matter if others weren't.

But despite the thoughts stabbing at the dark thing like branding irons, SH said stiffly, "I changed my mind, didn't I? I do want her to be free from America. That's *why* I changed it."

"You usually wouldn't have *had* to change it," Hwang stressed.

“I’m worried you’re letting your resentment of the Americans colour your perspective.”

“They *deserve* to be resented,” she replied acidicly, seeing the shattered remains of their chosonjip, and Hae’s strained face as she climbed into the Jeep.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Yet you and I are members of the Worker’s Party. We need to be more enlightened than the average layperson, and attempt to approach decisions with as few biases as humanly possible. At least negative ones.”

SH crossed her arms tighter, fingers digging into the bandages under her uniform.

It was hard to argue when she knew he was right. She knew from the shame that had filled her that her initial response had been wrong. She had felt knee-jerk suspicion and hadn’t considered why or done any self-criticism over it. But she wasn’t a reactionary, she wasn’t a Yankee, and she couldn’t let her personal feelings interfere with government matters. And she wouldn’t be the same as those foreign women.

“And…” Hwang wrapped his fingers protectively around his tie. “More than that, I’m truly concerned over your relationship with North Hamgyong.”

“Don’t be,” SH said tightly, both relieved and dismayed at the change of topic. “It’s the same as it’s always been.”

“I think that is simultaneously half true and half not, which is what worries me.” Her cousin adjusted his glasses, noticeably not releasing his tie. “Your bickering has always been… more hostile than most, but I find your recent complete refusal to acknowledge each other makes me even more uneasy.”

After that day on the road, SH had made sure to ignore her brother at breakfast and dinner, the two times they were forced to see each other, even biting her tongue when he made one of his doom and gloom predictions about Hae and everyone they knew dying of cholera. And after tomorrow, when they went to their

provinces, they would take separate vehicles.

Kangwon had enough to worry about. He didn't need to add stitching North Hamgyong back together after she was done with him.

No, she didn't want to hurt her brother. *He* wanted to hurt *her.* She just wasn't going to let him have the satisfaction anymore. She could see the little glances he gave her after making a pessimistic comment, trying to rile her up again, even after what he'd almost said last time.

He wanted an excuse to say it, she knew. Even with what the consequences would be.

So she simply wasn't going to give him one.

"Yes, that expression right there makes me uneasy," Hwang said, angling his tie away from her, then realizing what he was doing and facing her again.

"Why don't you talk to North Hamgyong?" SH retorted. "He's the one that always starts things."

"I've attempted to," Hwang sighed. "But some of us still share the view that men shouldn't speak about emotional matters."

"Let me guess," SH said scathingly. "He said 'Men don't talk about that shit,' right?"

Her cousin inclined his head. "A direct quote. And some of us aren't good at discussing emotional matters in general, and also lack the fortitude to press the matter."

"There's no matter to press," SH told him. "We're fine. Speaking of not letting personal feelings jeopardize operations, that's what we're doing."

"Letting things simmer doesn't solve anything," Hwang said. "The pot will only boil."

"I'm not taking advice from someone that just said he wasn't good

with emotional matters," SH sniped, then sighed. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for."

"It's fine." Hwang straightened his tie, only making it more crooked. "I'm just worried for you. The both of you. I care for the two of you greatly." He cleared his throat in embarrassment. "And I don't like to see the rift between you widening even further."

Did he think she did? It was North Hamgyong's fault. Every time she'd tried to close the distance, he just pounded the ground until it cracked more.

"We've never had a good relationship," SH hedged.

Hwang hesitated. "What about in… your early years?"

SH tried to make a sarcastic quip. *'You can say before I started to-'* But it wouldn't leave her mouth.

"It doesn't matter," she clipped. "I don't remember."

The way things had been didn't matter. Who cared if they'd been happy or not? All that mattered was what came after.

Hwang's lips flattened in disappointment. "I see."

SH let out a heavy exhale. "Look, Hwang. You're right- I've been off lately. It's the war. The constant pain, hunger, our people dying, these stupid talks, and now this germ warfare again."

And all of that just fed into the dark thing, making it pace faster, giving it sharper teeth, longer claws, thinning her wall and making it that no matter how many layers of paint she applied to it or a real canvas it was never *enough.*

But she couldn't tell him that. Then he'd *really* look at her like she was going to bite him.

"I'll try to stop letting it affect me. My decisions," she corrected when it looked like he was probably about to say something about boiling pots again.

He kissed his teeth. “That brings me some comfort at least. And I’ll try to stop casting you worried looks. But if I can’t, just know my worries aren’t about you snapping.”

SH wished he wouldn’t worry at all, that he’d just wipe that outburst from his memory like Hae could. But this was the next best thing.

She bit her lip, then said, “But there’s nothing I can do about North Hamgyong. We can’t all have Hae as our sibling.”

“I know.” He wrung his thin-fingered hands. “Though I still find it unfortunate.”

“We’re both going to be unfortunate if Korea finds out we’re loitering around,” SH said in a brighter voice, pasting a smile back on her face.

“Quite right. And I have speech to finish revising for the fourth time.”

Reluctantly, Hwang started for the door. SH tugged at the hem of her tunic.

Just as he reached for the handle, she said, “Wait. Have you… heard anything from that prisoner?”

“Why?” Hwang asked, almost warily.

“I just want to know if he told anyone about… all that.”

Looking relieved, he said, “If he’s told other prisoners, no one has mentioned it. He is in the camps, but I, ah, purposefully make sure he’s never chosen to speak with me.” He coughed lightly. “He could speak about the incident once he’s freed, but it shouldn’t be too much of an issue. It would look bad, yes, but it would also look good that another Provincehuman stepped in to stop you, and that you yielded. If we were forced to confront it, we could just made a statement saying you were under a huge amount of duress. Or-“

“No,” SH cut in sharply. “Don’t tell anyone that.”

"But-"

"Hwang." SH grabbed his shoulders, and his lightness let her accidentally push him up against the door. "Don't tell anyone about how I was acting. Please."

Hwang winced as his back hit the hard wood behind him, blinking in surprise. "It wouldn't be too detrimental to us. Generally it would only be foreigners that cared. And even they would have to admit that an emotional reaction is to be expected."

It *was* to be expected, because hysterics were expected from women. If SH had been a man, her outburst could have been ignored, or at least written away as protective fury. She would be a man seeking righteous vengeance against another man, even if they didn't think that man had deserved it.

But she was a woman. And the enemy would use her rage to paint her as weak and unstable. Women were too soft to lead, too irrational to make political decisions, too driven by emotion to be trusted to govern. Those were all things she'd heard as the Worker's Party rallied to free women from their chains and get more of them into the halls of power, sometimes from other comrades, sometimes from other *women.*

Emotion in men was lauded. When the General raised his voice, it was because he had something worth saying. Even when he showed softer emotions, his eyes tearing up on their Foundation Day or when he'd first returned to Korea, it was praised. He felt so deeply for their country that it didn't matter that men had been told for so long that tears were weakness. And when Korea gave himself over on stage like on their Foundation Day, screaming with righteous fury and passion, it only drew people towards him more.

Even stupid North Hamgyong's pissiness was admired. He was unpleasant and rude, but their civilians didn't complain as much as they should because it was *expected* from a tough man. He was strong and seemingly stoic, and that was all that mattered.

China had said *'Passion is rarely something to be apologized for.'* And that should be true. But it wasn't for women. Tears were weakness,

anger was instability, and passion was hysterics. It was unfair, and she wanted to work to change that, but it wasn't changed yet.

SH wasn't ashamed of her anger, not anymore. It was no less justified than Korea and the General's, and it was *far* more justified than North Hamgyong's. She wasn't the unstable one for wanting revenge on one of the monsters that had murdered her people. That man was, coming here to kill, trying to say he had nothing to do with it because he hadn't been flying a plane, like it wasn't a thousand times more unstable to calmly look men and women in the eyes on the ground of the country you were invading and pull the trigger yourself.

But their enemies wouldn't see it that way. If they used the excuse that she'd been overwhelmed with emotion when she had almost killed that Yankee prisoner, it would just give the people that thought women didn't deserve a place in politics or the army more ammunition. If not even a Provincehuman was above a 'woman's weakness,' then how could normal women be trusted?

SH knew Hwang couldn't understand that, and… She didn't want to express it to him. So she moved for the propaganda angle instead, still pinning him to the door.

"You've said before that we're an exemplar. Korea is one of the first countries in Asia to give female Provincehumans equal decision-making power with males, and if you don't count CCCP's eastern republics, we *are* the first to have the sort of change for human women that the Law on Sex Equality brought."

"Yes," Hwang agreed, wiggling under her grip. "China has now joined us, but for a time, our northern half was the only strictly Asian country to have the extent of progressive laws for women that we do. I'd make the argument that we have some of the most genuinely progressive laws in the world even now."

"Exactly." SH's fingers dug into his bony shoulders. "And a lot of those other countries don't want their women to have the same laws as we do. They'll look for any excuse to keep them in chains. Having a female province..." Her jaw worked, and she reluctantly admitted, "Almost commit a war crime, would be exactly what they

wanted."

They could counter reactionaries and their complaints here, but they couldn't stop foreign countries from using her to justify holding their own women back.

"Please, Hwang," she begged, heart squeezing. "I don't want to be used to hurt other women."

Her cousin searched her face, then dipped his head.

"A reasonable concern," he said. One I didn't think of originally, but do share. My preferred method if that prisoner does goes public once the war is over would be to completely ignore any accusations anyways, with giving an excuse only being a secondary option. But with this new consideration, if we *are* forced to acknowledge it, we'll just make a statement that obviously a crime didn't happen if he's still living and breathing, and was treated well in our camps, and that with no proof they have no right to lodge an official accusation against us."

Hwang tapped his chin, considering. "And then we'll redirect by reminding them about all of the proof we *do* have for *their* crimes, such as those biological warfare plans found in Seoul last year, and the insects we're in the process of testing. I'm sure they'll be eager to drop the matter after that. In fact-" He cleared his throat. "Ah, anyhow, I'll see that we don't bring up your emotional state at all."

SH sighed in relief, hanging her head. "Thank you."

"It's no problem, really." Her cousin tentatively reached up to pat one of the hands gripping his shoulder. "Now could you please release me? You're pressure-pointing my collarbone."

SH hurriedly let him go. "Sorry."

"Another thing I admire." Hwang rubbed his shoulder. "Your grip strength. Now if that's all sorted, let's get back to work."

SH followed him from the building, blinking in the harsh white light piercing through the grey skies. It wasn't snowing, but the wind was whipping fiercely, stirring the powder already coating the

ground into a frenzy, filling the air with white, and obscuring the offices across the street. She was warm in her general's uniform, but Hwang shivered in his suit jacket as they returned to the underground office.

"May I ask you a question?" Hwang asked as they entered the governmental district. He looked around, then whispered, "Do you think it was… clinical of me to have agreed to risking our comrade so swiftly?"

SH made sure there were only Public Security officers smoking on the street corner before murmuring, "No. We really do need to find out who that leak is."

It was awful that they had to risk a friend to do it, not to mention the countless other operatives they had to have. But it was necessary. America wouldn't settle at failing to steal North Pyongan and getting Hae sick. If he couldn't kidnap one of them to stretch the talks out even more, then he'd try and make them *all* sick. He'd try again and again, until he got what he wanted, the way men like him were so used to doing.

"But I feel as if I should have hesitated at least slightly." Hwang worried at the bandages on his hands. "I didn't stop to think about the complications in bringing his family from Japan if he were to be captured."

"Hwang." SH put a hand on his pointy elbow as they walked. "It's fine. I did. United front, remember? And the fact that you're worrying at all shows you're not clinical."

Hwang didn't look satisfied, but then his face lit up as he smacked his fist into his palm.

"Shows!" he cried with sudden enthusiasm. "Or demonstrates! SH, you're a genius."

He broke into a sudden hustle towards the the single-story building sheltering the entrance to the offices, his bodyguards jogging past SH a second later to catch up, all of them disappearing inside.

SH stopped to watch him go, bemused. *'Ooookay?'*

She lingered in the street, letting the cold wash over her, the whirling snow icing her cheeks, trying to let it be a replacement for ice water. She would have a bath tonight, even if it snowed again.

She wasn't really satisfied either. Her emotions were swirling uneasily in her chest. Shame over her feelings around Grace, worry for Hae and Choi Jung-nam and Hwang and Kangwon and Korea and their people, hunger, that feeling towards her brother. Anger.

She was glad Hwang had stopped her from killing that prisoner. Korea and the General would have been displeased. But she couldn't help but wish she had succeeded. It rankled, knowing he was out there in one of their camps, that when he went home he could fill Yankee newspapers with words like 'unstable, hysterical, crazy bitch.'

That America could do worse.

And no matter what Hwang said, his concern still itched. He didn't get worried in the same way over Korea's outbursts. He was concerned for him, yes, but he didn't *watch* him like that.

SH's sigh came out as a cloud of mist.

That was the price she had to pay for getting angry as a woman. South Chungcheong had warned her.

Actually, that would be the worst part of the Yankee POW making a public accusation. Her cousin would find out. And unlike foreign newspapers, she couldn't avoid her.

At least she didn't have to worry about how Korea would react.

*'Do you think we would be here right now if we hadn't been **angry?** Anger is the only **correct** way to feel.'*

SH clung to that as she held out her hand, watching snowflakes catch against the blue fabric, seeing snow-white skin as limpid eyes gazed down at her own portrait, the face of someone experiencing her first genuine kindness in a long while.

Despite her conflicted feelings whirling like the scattered snow...

She really did hope Grace would be okay.

‘I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.’
-Audre Lorde

A concept: SH drawing Y/N's portrait and having flashbacks of Grace. Then seeing it on her wall post-reveal of who her abuser was and hugging her very tightly.

This is weird, but I feel like part of SH’s anxiety around other countries is because she’s worried they’re going to assault Korea. But it’s a subconscious fear. If you confronted her about it she’d be aghast and ask why you’d even think that. The majority of her anxiety is Imperialism and the fact that every country that has interacted with Korea has wanted to exploit it, but when it comes to North personally, she harbours a secret fear he’s going to be sexually assaulted, which is not a fear she typically carries for men, though unlike certain people (South Chungcheong) she is fully empathetic to men that it does happen to. It’s just not her first thought. It’s because she subconsciously views North as a woman (or at least similar to her) because of that need for control that stems from lost autonomy she feels echoed from him. And if she’s alone in a room with a man, she’s on edge. So if North is alone with China, CCCP, Albania, or other male countries in the future, she is also on edge (though China is eventually taken off this list). ‘Something about him just rubs me the wrong way, but I don’t know what.’ *subconscious desire to take North by the shoulders and ask him if someone tried to touch him inappropriately* (he would beat her with his shoe if she asked him this)
I love SH because if you just read Safeway and Warring Pyongyang, you think she’s the most normal province. And then you read this and you realize she’s far more messed up inside than most of them …Maybe all of them. Her and North Hamgyong are top contenders for sure. (South Chungcheong isn’t messed up inside she’s my perfect princess. Ignore the racism and misogyny and misandry and-)

Ruminating On Corruption

"Fuck off."

Hwang raised his thin ass eyebrows. "I haven't even said anything yet."

Curling his lip at him, North Hamgyong said, "No, but I know what you're going to. I told you I'm not talking about emotional shit."

The bastard had been trying to pester him since the damn ration mess last month.

"You know nothing of the sort," his cousin said with the kind of snooty arrogance that had made North Hamgyong want to punch his glasses into his face back when it'd been real. And still kind of did. "Perhaps I simply came for a smoke, and to discuss today's meeting."

North Hamgyong rummaged in his pocket, pulling a hand-rolled cigarette from his case and slapping it into his hand. "This is the last one you're bumming off me. If you're going to keep smoking, commit and buy your own."

"I save money this way."

The stingy bastard had his own matches at least. He fumbled with the box, managing to get one into his gloved hand.

North Hamgyong snatched it, touching it to the back of his two front teeth, and striking the match head on the edge, staining his tongue with the taste of sulfur.

Smugly, he held the flickering flame out.

Hwang clicked his tongue as he cupped it with a hand, using it to light his smoke. "Bad for your enamel, if Kangwon is to be believed."

He wasn't.

North Hamgyong shoved the thought away. There wasn't crap he could do about it anyways.

He snorted. "I didn't brush them for six years. You think I have enamel *left?"*

South Hamgyong was an annoying nag that'd used to make him scrub his teeth with a pine twig every night. He'd tried to keep it up after she decided to be a fucking idiot, but after a few months it hadn't seemed worth it, and he'd switched to gargling ocean water. If she gave so little of a damn about her own body that she'd put it up for sale, then why should he give a damn about his either?

He scowled out at the dark forest beyond the bunker, taking a drag off his own cigarette.

The snow spiralled down in loose flakes, not enough to deter the damn planes. He could hear them buzzing off to southeast.

'Probably dropping more damn germ bombs.'

"You want to talk shop?" he grunted. "Go ahead."

He shouldn't have challenged him. He knew damn well why he was really here, but the four-eyes never missed the chance to talk about work.

"I think we had a productive meeting, don't you?" Hwang asked, closing the gap between his heavy coat and the flaps of his ushanka, and looking more like a damn Ruskie fop than ever. "I believe our comrades have taken their criticism and will be the better for it."

North Hamgyong snorted, steam blasting from his nostrils like smog from a train's smokestack. The trains that were still getting blown up every day.

"They won't get better," he said scathingly. "They're corrupt. We should get rid of them."

"Most of them aren't truly corrupt," Hwang said, his voice only a

little strained from the smoke. “They were only making mistakes. Simply expelling them from their local organs would be purity-testing. The people they served are now aware of their missteps, and it’s up to them whether they’re recalled.”

“Because people are *famously* known for making good decisions.”

“I would argue that yes, they are.” Hwang blew smoke out at the clearing. “They will decide if their ri chairmen will still be allowed to serve them after holding banquets with their own money, while the ones who committed actual crimes by requesting more taxes or squandering state property will be charged.” He eyed him from behind his foggy glasses.

“*Tch*. It’s not my damn fault he was doing that shit.”

His People’s Committee Provincial chairman had been caught wasting resources. Not just allocating funds to the wrong places, but embezzlement, too. But they’d got his ass. Him being an oldhead from the fight against Japan hadn’t saved him like he’d probably thought it would.

“I didn’t name names,” Hwang said innocently. “Though while we’re on the subject, it *is* slightly your fault. If you were more versed in politics, or perhaps in gauging people, you likely would have caught him out sooner.”

“I’m just as ‘versed in politics’ as the others.” Not as versed as Hwang, since he was a damn egghead. Literally. But he’d been forced by Korea to read all the same theory and history as the rest of them. “You mean if I joined the fucking Worker’s Party.”

“It would give you more sway when you spoke of adhering to the Party line and fighting corruption,” his cousin said, tucking the hand not holding his smoke into his coat pocket. “And if you at least familiarized yourself with the halls of power more, you would be able to see the signs of it better.”

“Don’t act like you don’t have corruption in your province, too,” North Hamgyong growled, irritated. “That county chairman of yours had people in his district pay for a damn cow for his party.”

"And Hae expertly sleuthed out the matter and brought him to justice," Four-Eyes said smoothly.

North Hamgyong couldn't see his eyes behind the foggy glasses, but he saw the way he worried his lip as he thought about his sister.

It made his shoulders hunch.

"There's no point in fighting corruption," he said around his cigarette, leaning back against the mountain. The cold stone leaked through his tunic, freezing him, but he didn't give a damn. "People are corrupt. They always will be."

"And yet out of our hundreds of ri, county, town, city, and provincial People's Committee chairmen and Party officials, only around twenty have been caught engaging in any sort of misdeed."

"Key word- *caught."*

Hwang pursed his lips, tapping ashes on the ground. "Well, if you think there's more to be discovered, perhaps you should join the Worker's Party to ferret the rest out."

"Fuck you."

He wasn't going to do it. The more Four-Eyes and Korea pressed, the more it made him not want to. He wasn't losing against South Pyongan, or more importantly, South Hamgyong.

He didn't want to talk about this shit, but he still said, "More *will* get caught. Now that Korea's put out that 'voluntary surrender' bullshit, people are going to think it's okay to break the law."

Hwang gave one of his annoying sighs, like he was the one being harassed. "You know, from the amount of things you pretend not to understand, sometimes I think you really *are* a musclebound idiot."

North Hamgyong punched him hard enough to knock him on his ass, watching unempathetically as he climbed back to his feet, dusting himself off with dignity.

You think it would make him consider shutting up, but he just

continued, “The voluntary surrender principle is that those who worked or are working with reactionary organizations will be given leniency if they turn themselves over willingly. And while we may have varying opinions on whether or not that leniency is deserved, you cannot deny that it’s sent us an influx of those who aided the enemy during the tactical retreat that we weren’t able to root out, and deserters from Rhee’s active guerrilla units. It's also netted us the location of one of their home bases. By tomorrow it should be gone.”

North Hamgyong eyed him. “You supposed to know that?”

Hwang pretended to have a sudden coughing fit, so he took the opportunity to thump him on the back harder than he needed to.

“Anyway,” he said, wheezing for real when he came back up. “It’s for clearing infiltrators from our ranks. Those who are actively causing harm, or whose fear of retribution might have driven them to work for the enemy again.”

“Cowards like that should be shot and buried.” He knew Korea felt the same damn way. But he was too damn soft-hearted to smash through the ‘Party Line.’

North Hamgyong grit his teeth, tasting rich soup on his tongue.

Scratch that. He *pretended* to be a soft heart. The bastard was ruthless except when North Hamgyong wanted him to be. Far more ruthless than South Hamgyong would ever admit, or Hae would ever know.

“As I said, varying opinions.” Hwang puffed smoke from his chapped lips. “But that law has no bearing on those caught out for corruption. They’re still being punished harshly.” He coughed into his fist. “Aswithyourchairman.”

“It won’t work.” North Hamgyong crossed his arms, the butt of his smoke wedged between his lips. “Humans are naturally corrupt.”

“You don’t truly believe that,” Hwang scolded.

Maybe, maybe not. But he knew he preferred talking about this

than to what his cousin had primed in the chamber.

"Don't tell me what I believe."

"Our State is still developing," Hwang said, looking up at the black sky, his stupid glasses protecting his eyes from the snowflakes that slapped against them. "We're faced with a multitude of reasons for corruption. We're still eliminating the vestiges of Japanese practices, for one."

"It'll be seven fucking years of Korea and the Party forcing anti-bureaucracy down our throats this October," he grunted back. "If they haven't learned by now, they won't."

Seven. Seven damn years since they should've been free.

"Those views weren't formulated overnight, and they won't be destroyed overnight," Hwang said, unbothered. "First the system changes, then the people in it, then those born into it are raised with new beliefs, and those beliefs change the culture. We're also compounded right now by the fact that the people in power now weren't born into rich families or with silver chopsticks in hand. They aren't used to having money or nice clothes or enough food. Now that they can, it's natural that they want to indulge."

"And then they'll turn into the same bastards that ruled before."

"If the indulgence wasn't cracked down on, yes," Hwang agreed, pissing him off by refusing to get defensive. "But we are. You also need to understand that most of those in power before, and our good firm cadres, were purged by the enemy, alongside their most suitable replacements. Most of our ri chairmen don't have proper ideological training. You'll remember that's what our joint meeting was addressing. I found your speech lacklustre, by the way."

"Go to hell."

The General had said it was full of too much criticism and not enough praise, too. Which was rich coming from Mister 'We're all doing great, BUT-' The man had just given him one of those damn enigmatic smirks when he'd said that to him.

“Yours was too damn long,” he retorted.

“Hm, yes. I expect it might have been beyond your attention span.” Hwang blew smoke out the side of his mouth, at his face. “My point is that we’re facing a host of exacerbating issues due to our current material conditions. In the future, those practices won’t be baked into our society.”

“But they’ll still be there.”

“There will always be corrupt people,” Hwang admitted. “Those seeking power only for the gains it brings, and those looking to exploit the system. But so long as we remain vigilant and punish them harshly- real punishments that don’t need to be coerced from us, as they are from the Rhee clique- then one day corruption won’t exist.”

“Not possible.”

“In a world where everyone is supplied with what they need, what would be the point of hoarding?” Hwang asked, raising a brow. “In a world with no money, how would one embezzle?”

“That’s assuming a world like that is possible.”

His cousin sighed, exhaling smoke. “Have you considered that the reason you refuse to consider yourself a Communist is because then you’d have to have hope for the future? And you’re just too utterly committed to being grim?”

North Hamgyong wasn’t a Communist, but he *wanted* that crap for Korea, he really did. Their people deserved it. But it seemed more out of reach every damn day.

With this fucking war, *everything* seemed more out of reach, and all of his cousins and Korea and that damned idiot South Hamgyong just closed their eyes and pretended it wasn’t. Like this could still end well.

“If I wanted to be psychoanalyzed or some shit, I’d go to Kangwon.”

His fists clenched as he saw the man's calm expression.

'Hae's recovering well. She told me to say 'Howdy.''

'Another fucking liar.'

The ember of the cigarette touched his lips, and he let it burn there for a second before tossing the stub to the ground, letting it drown in the snow.

Maybe they could get rid of corruption in the future. But not if Korea got Reunified with the Southern bastard. South Hamgyong had talked about the food and nice clothes she'd been given in captivity while people starved and the traitor didn't give a damn, and Kangwon had talked about all the frivolous shit he'd said he'd done before the war. Clubbing, singing, dancing while tens of thousands of people were cut down in the streets and buried in mass graves. He was barely a man, let alone a politician, let alone one that would punish decadence the way it needed to be punished to make sure it didn't spread.

Korea had been as loud-mouthed as usual at the joint meeting, enough so that North Hamgyong had gotten genuinely caught up in his speech as he railed against corruption and called for them to keep watering the flower of the Revolution, as that was the only way the people would keep tending to it.

Until he remembered that Korea had completely glossed over the way South had acted at their criticism session. He'd targeted officials directly in the crowd with his eye as he called them out for wearing fancy shit and holding parties during wartime, but North Hamgyong *knew* if the Southern bastard had been in there, it would have skirted over him, making excuses the way Hwang had. So what if the people spending too much had never had anything before this? Neither had North Hamgyong, but you didn't see him going around wearing a double-breasted suit and hosting banquets.

What would happen if that excusing carried over into Korea? He already had to grind his teeth whenever they criticized him. The last thing they needed was a weak-willed puppet that excused his own bad behaviour. They might as well let Rhee and his corrupt

court win in that case, since they'd be going the same way as soon as the General was gone.

And still his idiot cousins wouldn't kill South even if he had a gun to their heads. They could pretend it was for their country all they wanted. It wasn't. Korea would be fine, *better* than fine, if they Reunified with the Southern bastard dead. It was *Korea* that wouldn't be.

But it would be better for him, too, in the end. It would be better for *all* of them.

North Hamgyong wouldn't take that shit into his own hands. If it was good for Korea, he wouldn't give a damn that it made him hate him. But it wasn't his job to deal with his burden.

And he wouldn't have to do it anyways. Pretending it'd be good for Korea wasn't the only thing the others were pretending about the Reunification.

He hunched his shoulders against the cold, gritting his teeth.

Seven years.

'Going on seventy more.'

Hwang stayed quiet, blowing smoke rings as thin as him, his gloved hands shoved in his pockets. North Hamgyong wished his skinny ass would freeze over so he'd keep his damn trap shut.

He didn't obviously. It was impossible for him.

"I spoke with SH a couple days ago."

North Hamgyong bared his teeth. "I told you not to."

"I didn't say anything about you," his traitor cousin assured him. "There's nothing to say, since you remain as open as a padlocked book."

"There *is* nothing to say," he grumbled.

The glasses-bastard had been nagging him about the way the Hamgyongs had been avoiding each other. North Hamgyong had decided he was worse than Kangwon. At least his other cousin tried to offer solutions instead of just whining. Even if they were stupid fucking solutions that were impossible. And he knew when to back off.

North Hamgyong wasn't the problem. His sister was the one icing him out, not even trying to drown out his realism with her grating optimism like she usually did. He could see her watching him at breakfast and dinner, the two times they were forced to be together, daring him with her eyes to say something that went too far, to tell the others what he really thought about this war so she could go for his throat and make him hit back by saying those words, even though she knew what would happen once he did.

He wasn't going to give her the damn satisfaction.

"I wish you'd say *something,"* Hwang said, his ushanka dipping as his brow furrowed. "To her at least."

Wasn't that the fucking problem? His damn sister was *always* saying shit, that she was happy, that she wasn't angry, that she loved him, that she knew they'd win. Anything but what she *really* thought, the way she always had, giving him the same fake smile she'd given him across that table as she said everything was just fucking peachy. He couldn't take it anymore.

"She says enough for both of us," he grunted.

Hwang tapped his fingers inside his pocket. "You remember when we first met, I asked you what you did for your first years of existence?"

North Hamgyong remembered. "I told you to fuck off."

"You told me to fuck off," the other man agreed. "Which I don't hold against you, as SH supplied me with the answer afterwards. But it occurs to me I never asked you how your relationship with your sister was before…"

He trailed off, making North Hamgyong curl his lip.

“She’s inside. You don’t have to pussyfoot around it.”

His sister was the only one that cared about that shit. She was the one that couldn’t accept it. He had. He’d been an idiot, and she’d been even worse.

Hwang cleared his throat. “Well, you clearly know what I’m referring to. So what was it like? Your relationship?”

His sense of smell was deadened by the cold, but for a flash, North Hamgyong could smell mildew, sea spray, and roasting fish, and see the curve of lips. A carefree laugh rang in an enclosed space.

He shook his head, snorting out the memories until all he could smell was bitter smoke and the tang of blood.

“It doesn’t matter.”

It was all fucked now anyway.

Hwang wiped the film of snow from his glasses with a hand, his slender eyes flicking over his face until they were obscured by flakes again.

“Has it occurred to you that perhaps the reason the two of you fail to get along is because you’re too much alike?”

North Hamgyong couldn’t help the harsh bark that left his mouth. “We are *nothing* alike.”

She cared what people thought about her. He didn’t. He could admit crap to himself. She couldn’t. Even now that she’d actually been able to tell the damn truth, that she was angry at him, *furious,* she still kept the rest of that shit inside and put that ugly smile back on her face.

He wasn't afraid of the truth, and she was. That’s what it boiled down to.

“My observations beg to differ.”

The words sparked anger in North Hamgyong’s stomach, like a faulty spark plug. It was easy for this bastard to judge when he only had Hae to put up with. She might be a manipulative little creature, but she was an open book that didn’t have a spiteful bone in her damn body. He knew even if he told her about that sickening fucking thing Korea had done, she’d find some way to justify it and forgive him.

South Hamgyong would, too. But she wouldn’t forgive *him* even if he got down on his knees and grovelled, even if he slammed his forehead into the ground until his skull cracked.

He wouldn't deserve it anyway. But he was her brother. By her own fucking logic with Korea and his brother, she *should.*

“You want to talk about observations?” he demanded, turning to him as the words boiled over. “Hae’s fucking dead.”

The blue drained from Hwang’s flower like gas from a punctured tank. “She isn’t. Kangwon says she’s recovering.”

“Because Kangwon’s a fucking *liar,”* he growled. “You say *I* can’t gauge people, but somehow you don’t recognize his ‘everything’s fine and the soldier isn’t missing his entire lower half’ act?”

He’d always been like that, even back when he’d been a nervous little kid. He’d look you in the eyes with red up to his elbows and say the civilian whose stomach had been sliced open by a sword had only lost a little blood with a smile. Half the time he didn’t even lie, but with the way he said things you just knew he was leaving out half the damn story. ‘The wound should heal well’ meant the infection probably wouldn’t. ‘Hae’s recovering’ could have meant anything. And he *knew* what it meant.

“She *died,”* he repeated, looming over Hwang. “The Yanks fucking killed her with those clams. She shit her guts out and now she’s lying up there on a hospital bed *dead.* And Kangwon’s not saying shit because he knows Korea will lose his fucking mind. If you want to worry about sisters, why don’t you worry about *yours* and I’ll

deal with mine?”

Hwang looked away, pushing his glasses up with a shaky hand as he took a breath that made his shoulders shudder. North Hamgyong crossed his arms over his chest.

After a moment, his cousin said quietly, “I would appreciate you not using Hae’s condition against me when I'm only trying to help.”

His tendons strained. “Then stop pestering me about stupid shit.”

“You have to give SH one point at least,” Hwang said, still subdued. “You really can be an unpleasant person sometimes.”

North Hamgyong looked out at the forest, his jaw aching.

Hwang finished his cigarette in silence, then turned and went inside, leaving the Hamgyong to wipe the blood his knuckles left on the door off the thick steel.

Hwang, through tears: Ad hominem.

***With great sheepishness* Comrades… I fear we’re going to have a trilogy. It’s not confirmed yet, I just fear it. A reminder that my original outline had around ninety chapters. I’m not sorry. Why don’t we instead blame the US for their illegal invasion and destruction of Korea, as well as stretching the war out through various sabotaging actions that have been previously discussed. If they hadn’t invaded we could have got a happy ending around chapter thirty-five. And also Korea wouldn’t be deeply divided today and millions of Koreans wouldn’t have died back then. I would also be willing to bet that the death toll of the Arduous March would be lessened, and that of homeless people in the South . Instead of blaming me for being unable to keep one chapter as one chapter, let’s focus our ire on America for being the most bloodthirsty, destructive empire in the history of existence.**

There is no enmity in the world like that between me and the yellow lóng from Black Myth Wukong. Count your fucking days and you will find them LACKING. You scaly FREAK.

Rising Fever

North could feel the fever creeping in.

There had been more reports of suspicious insects and air drops in the last week, and more illnesses cropping up. Dysentery, smallpox, typhoid. Not a pandemic, yet. But they were spreading. More people were getting sick, and he could feel hot tendrils worming their way though his body, *invading* it, invading his country.

“Comrade Korea?”

North realized Pak Sun-do was waiting for a response, and unlocked his jaw to answer. It was an effort. The muscles felt sore all the way down into his shoulders.

“I understand our civilians wish to celebrate our People’s Army’s foundation by observing the salute,” he said, spine aching as he held it straight. "But remind them not to gather in crowds. I expect the Yankees will be out in force this year.”

Some of the MiGs flown by their own pilots had been moved from beyond the Chongchon to protect the skies above the cities where the gun salutes would be taking place. But North wouldn’t take any chances.

“And remind them about the anti-epidemic measures.”

They were finally able to use the words ‘biological warfare’ outside of labs and closed-door meetings (not that he hadn’t already been using them). Their official protest wouldn’t be launched until they had more physical proof and lab results back, but the Ministry of Public Health was distributing leaflets and formulating a plan for dealing with the attacks, and by the end of the month, they would have a meeting to implement the measures in full.

It made North's teeth itch to wait that long, but he knew their treasurers needed time to arrange a planned budget, and their anti-

epidemic workers needed it to mobilize in full force. Aside from that, they were already as prepared as they could be- civilians had been coached since last year in how to deal with suspicious illness, or any illness, their health workers had been reminded at the beginning of winter to raise their work level and fight outbreaks with every available resource, and after the mass vaccination campaigns, almost everyone in the northern half of Korea should be vaccinated.

But it wasn't enough. The ranks of their healthcare workers were thin, the influx of southern refugees and mass displacement brought in unvaccinated people and made it difficult to confirm who had already received shots and who hadn't, and vaccines weren't always reliable anyways. Like with Hae. And the supplies dropped by the Yankees were too valuable to destroy for some. It was hard for a starving man to willingly turn away food.

'Ah was just hungry.'

He still hadn't been allowed in to see Hae.

"I will, Comrade Korea." Pak Sun-do confirmed his orders with a salute before hurrying off.

North had almost expected him to have disappeared after that first fake atom bomb, to have broken and ran away to the south with his family, as far from the threat of nuclear annihilation as possible. But he shouldn't have worried- the man's commitment to their cause had only deepened.

It was a good thing he had been there that day with the ruined bridge and the old woman.

Pyongyang was busier than most days since the war had began, donkey-pulled carts heading into the city with artillery guns strapped to the back, being hauled down to the Taedong. Soldiers carried crates of ammunition out of hidden warehouses and truck beds, stashing them near the river for the salute in a few hours.

Two hundred and forty guns, eighty in Pyongyang, Hamhung, and Wonsan respectively, even more than last year, each firing twenty

shells.

The waste made North prickle, even though he knew it was necessary. Despite their limited funds, resources, and factories, they had to show that they weren't cowed. And their soldiers needed to know they were appreciated.

He marched around the firing area, barking orders and hauling ammunition and arranging guns and trying not to think about how just a year ago he had been doing this exact same thing in Seoul.

His arms ached in a way they shouldn't as he carried the next crate of shells to the house across the road from the river. Even when he wasn't in combat, he did his exercises every day, yet they screamed in protest as he set the box down.

Despite the frigid cold, and the steam bursting from the mouths around him, sweat ran in rivulets down his forehead, stinging as they soaked into the bandages hidden under his collar, making them *cling.* As North left the building, his lungs suddenly constricted, refusing to let oxygen in, and his 'ears' hurt at the sharp laughter coming from the Song and Dance Ensemble down the shoreline. His throat was swelling shut and he could *feel* the fever building in his skull.

All of a sudden his clothes were too tight.

He turned on a heel, leaving the river, vanishing into the maze of rubble and ruined homes his capital *(Not his capital,* ***Seoul*** *was his capital)* had become, trying to find somewhere still standing, somewhere he could get away from the heat squeezing his body.

He found a tea house with its bottom floor still mostly intact, ducking beneath the broken arch of the door, catching glimpses of shattered porcelain, wood, rotting fabric (Who had been drinking here when it was destroyed?), and tearing blindly at his coat until it joined the scraps on the floor.

The sudden blast of cold cleared his head slightly, letting him unbutton the top of his tunic more calmly, along with his undershirt, exposing the bandages that carpeted his upper chest.

And throat.

He pulled at the latter, tugging them away from his skin, trying to relieve the sticky, cloying warmth, finally able to think properly again as the pressure went away.

Immediately disgust flooded through him.

Ssi-bal, he should be able to handle a few bandages. He'd been wearing them for almost two years now.

But he'd been trying to avoid wearing them on his neck, using patches instead. And now the burns had covered almost his entire throat in mottled red and black, ending just below his jaw, like some invisible barrier was holding them back from his face, forcing them to pile up. He had no choice but to wrap the bandages completely around it.

It was better than if they spread higher, he told himself, one finger hooked into the fluid-soaked fabric, trying not to think about the way the fibers pressed against the back of his neck. So long as they weren't on his face, he could hide them.

North closed his eye, taking a deep breath, trying to make his lungs expand again.

He wasn't actually sick. It was the sympathetic fever, and it meant his people were. He had no right to be acting like this when *they* were the ones that were suffering.

Carefully, he let go of the bandage, finding the clip, gritting his teeth as he pulled it tight again, and the warm smell of cooking (rotting) meat was muted as the pressure against his windpipe resumed.

He buttoned both his shirts up again, grinding his jaw as he glared at the coat draped over a broken chair. Reluctantly he picked it up, dusting off wood splinters as he shrugged it back on, intensely aware of the extra weight it put on the burns on his arms, thighs, and neck especially.

North inhaled deeply, exhaling a cloud of mist.

He was fine. His body felt heavy and warm, and his head was still spinning, but he was fine.

With light seeping in the holes in the roof and shattered windows, the tea house hadn't been dark. But the pale pink sky outside was still too bright, piercing his temples.

"There you are."

North almost jumped at the voice from behind, but controlled himself, turning around. His vision swayed, and when it cleared what he saw made his breath grow tight again.

China was standing in the street with a girl on his shoulders, only around ten or eleven. She had wide-set black eyes and a mushroom cut, and was bundled in a patchwork coat. On the hands lightly patting the top of China's head were oversized olive mittens.

"No," North said before he could say anything.

China raised an eyebrow. "No?"

"No," North repeated, his throat swelling shut again as he tried not to look at the child, still seeing big brown eyes and a cheery smile and blood pouring out of a little body. "Get her away from me."

"She says she snuck into the city to watch the guns," China said, and his unbothered voice made North want to smash his head off the rubble behind him. "I'm watching her until my comrade finds her mother."

"Watch her somewhere else."

North's voice was tight, and he knew he shouldn't be saying that in front of the girl, in front of one of his people, but it had only been a year since they'd stood together in Seoul as the guns blasted at the sky and O-geun sat on China's shoulders and cheered, and North promised him he would free their country and silently promised himself that in a year the boy would never hear guns again unless it was at a celebration like that, and his hand was on fire, *burning,* as he felt tiny fingers crush under his grip.

“I can’t do this, Ch-“ He just barely stopped himself from saying the other country’s name. “Get her *away.”*

The girl looked uncertain, asking in a small voice that made North guilty and increased his need to be far away from her, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, meimei,” China soothed. “Gege is just under a lot of pressure right now. It’s hard planning a celebration, you know.”

“Don’t *call* me that.” He wasn’t the girl’s big brother, and he hadn’t been O-geun’s. He was only one person’s brother.

China gave North a look that was too knowing, even with how clear it was what his problem was.

“I suppose we’ll go look for your mother, too, then, Little Sister,” he said, tilting his head up. “Maybe I’ll even convince her to let you stay and watch.”

Her eyes widened, and North refused to look. “Really?”

“En. But only if you stop playing janggu on my head.”

The girl giggled, and China started to carry her away. But she twisted to look back over her shoulder at North, her small brows furrowed in concern.

Her Countryhuman didn’t meet her eye, fleeing towards the river to throw himself back into preparations.

By the time the sun had set, and the only thing left was to wait until closer to twenty hundred to bring everything out of hiding, the work had steadied him enough to make him burn with shame.

He shouldn't have reacted like that. He needed to get it together for his announcement later. He wanted to find the girl and apologize, but… He couldn’t. There wasn’t any explanation he could give her.

North hid himself in the shadows of the houses, watching from the side as the Song and Dance Ensemble put on a show for the soldiers

responsible for the ceremony from the back of a long-bedded truck across the road, men and women swirling around in colourful choson-ot by portable spotlight. He should go congratulate his comrades on the fourth anniversary of the KPA's founding, but he didn't want to detract from the performance.

And his bandages were still too tight.

The upbeat strains of *'On the Road To A Decisive Battle'* echoed along the shore, almost managing to soothe the pricking in his skin, if he didn't think too deeply about the lyrics.

But as a drone sounded overhead, the singers and musicians faltered, and all eyes went skyward. It was only a second, just long enough to confirm that the shape silhouetted against the near-full moon was the lithe form of a MiG and not a bulky foreign bomber, but it was enough to make the blood in North's veins run hotter.

As his comrades launched back into the song with renewed vigour to defy their pause, his eye strayed to the artillery guns, then across the shore, finally losing the battle he'd been fighting since he got here.

The far bank was dark and empty, the main bridge across the Taedong still destroyed, twisted steel looming above pontoon crossings. North imagined gunshots echoing back across at him.

If he'd heard them, especially with combat over, he would have gone running, needing to know what was happening. If his soldiers had been executing civilians, he would have stopped it.

So why hadn't South?

He grit his teeth as the thought returned, like it always did when he was at the river's edge.

South *couldn't* have gone running off. Kim Hye-suk herself had said America was there, and her injured comrade had confirmed it after she recovered. Even if he had managed to find out for certain what was happening, he couldn't have stopped it. He couldn't have done anything but what America wanted. That was why he'd

disarmed Kim Song-hui. Why he'd gotten her and her comrades killed.

It didn't matter that North would have tried anyway. His brother wasn't him.

'잘못했어.' He had to remember that.

"So do you intend to never speak to a child again?"

North had been trying to avoid watching China as he flitted amongst his people, before finally walking towards him. He kept doing it as he settled under the shadows with him.

"You're the one who said I wasn't good with children."

"It might be difficult." His comrade tucked his gloved hands into his long sleeves. "Patriotism should be instilled at a young age. Waiting until they're seventeen to meet them stymies that a bit."

North wanted to bite down on the question, but it finally burst out.

"How do you do it?" he demanded. "How do you-"

He could still see the way China had looked at him over O-geun's body as he asked him what he wanted to do, and how he had kissed Zhang Guangqiang's bloodied brow, and it made him grit his teeth. He hadn't been able to accuse the other man of that for awhile now, for either of their people.

'They're all very precious to me.'

"How do you pretend to not care?"

China smiled at him from under his mask. "Maybe I don't. I could have been lying to you before."

North knew the man couldn't have tricked himself into thinking that. "South Hamgyong told me about that concert you put on."

He didn't appear bothered at that. "In as little detail as possible,

I'm sure. But I suppose you've got me."

"How can you be so unaffected when you *do* care?"

North didn't *want* to be unaffected by the loss of any of his people. He didn't want to pretend he was either. He just wanted to stop letting it make him lash out like he had earlier.

"You mourn your people, but every time I see you with them, you're asking about their families and hometowns and what they want to do after the war," he said, trying to keep his voice low so it wouldn't echo, but unable to hide the frustration in it. "And you mourned… O-geun, but now you're out here trying to make friends with another child who-"

He cut himself off, fighting the urge to wrap his arms over his chest.

"I like to know people," China said simply. "Even if it means I'll have to mourn them at some point. Grief isn't exactly a negative emotion. If anything, it's positive. It just means you knew someone well enough to miss them."

North would grieve anyway. They were his people. And the Chinese were fighting for them. He didn't have to know anything but that.

'Think when I go home, I'll help him make salted carp again.' 'I have a daughter I've never met.' 'I don't like being alone either, Comrade Korea.' 'If I die, you better make sure I'm buried in my home village.'

'Her favorite colour is blue. It used to be sky blue until our flag changed.'

He didn't want any of those voices in his head. The grief was enough.

"And it means you *lost* them," North said to China.

It meant he hadn't been strong enough to save them.

"If all goes well, you and I should live for a very long time," China

replied, and his voice softened slightly. “We’re both going to lose a lot more people who mean something to us.”

Kim Jong-suk’s face flickered in his memories, his General’s next to it, and North gave in, crossing his arms tight, the crushing against his chest nothing compared to the crushing feeling inside it.

“Would you have rather not known O-geun at all?” China asked, tilting his head.

North didn’t answer.

His comrade watched him for a long moment while he watched his people.

“My answer to how I pretend I don’t care is that I have lots of practice,” China said eventually. “My answer to what you’re really asking is that I purposefully put myself through pain because I find the benefits of knowing people outweigh the hurt of losing them. And because I’m a masochist,” he added after a moment’s thought.

North had plenty of practice, too. It would never be enough.

“Her and her mother are down the river, by the way,” China said after another long moment of watching the performers. “Close enough to hear the show, but outside of the drop zone.”

The Korean relaxed slightly.

He couldn't understand the other country's point of view. Feeling grateful for the time he'd spent with someone could never make up for the hurt of losing them when that hurt was the end of that time. Any happy memories, any wishes they'd voiced, any dreams they'd shared, all turned sour in their absence, and drowned in the sea of grief. He couldn’t think of Kim Jong-suk’s kind smile as she handed him that dosirak without remembering that he would never see it again.

He didn't want it not to hurt. He was their Countryhuman, and it *should* hurt. The loss of any of his people should pierce him like a blade, and the day it stopped would be the day he deserved to be taken apart by their hands.

But he wanted it to hurt less.

China didn't leave, watching the dancing with interest from beside him. North's gaze wandered reflexively over the small crowd, finding North and South Pyongan on the edges, the woman playing cards with a few men on the river embankment in the glow of a lamp. Her brother scanned the people, hustling over to North Hamgyong as he arrived, asking him something. The man shook his head irritably, and they both looked around.

They were looking for him. North didn't move, picking out the others. Hwang hunched over a script with a writer from the Song and Dance Ensemble, gesturing enthusiastically at something.

His jaw clenched as he searched for a few seconds more before realizing there *were* no others. Just him. SH was only in Hamhung to oversee the salute there, and Chagang had been sent to Wonsan in Kangwon's place. But Gangwon couldn't leave the Quarantine Hospital for fear of being Commanded, Kangwon was too involved in the anti-epidemic work to leave the labs, and Hae was sick.

And the other eight were still trapped down south with the rest of his people. And his brother.

North watched a few Chinese soldiers approach South Pyongan, and she and her group gestured them in, dealing more cards. Beyond them, ice glistened on the Taedong, and he couldn't help but remember the report he'd received in the middle of he and Kangwon's investigation.

A Korean child, a frozen river, and a PVA soldier. He had saved the boy, but at the cost of his own life.

North knew he should say something to China about it. But he hadn't been able to find the words.

"Liu Qingshan and Zhang Zishan's trial is in two days," he said abruptly.

"Aiya, you're paying attention to my affairs?" China sounded pleased. "You really do care about me."

"You should be there for it."

The two officials had been caught embezzling vast sums of money for post-war relief and construction. It was China's first huge corruption scandal, and it was being loudly broadcast because of that. Whether or not North cared, he would have heard about it anyway.

"As far as anyone knows, I will be."

North still didn't know who China's doppelganger was, and it didn't matter.

"*You* should be."

It was a monumentous moment, as his country demonstrated it would no longer tolerate corruption like it had used to. Like North's public trials for officials, it would prove that Communist China wouldn't accept those that hurt the masses. He knew how important that was. He had attended public executions and seen people weep not because they were mourning the loss of life, but because they were celebrating justice they'd never received before.

"My influence isn't needed," China said easily. "I know what my people will choose."

"Will they be executed?"

"En." China smiled at him, his eyes narrowed. "The Three and Five Evils won't be tolerated in New China. They hurt the people they were meant to serve, and tarnished the Party's image. The only way to remove corruption is to burn it out. Or blow its brains out among a crowd of onlookers."

North's fists clenched. "And you should *be* there."

"But I'm here." China looked out at his soldiers, some of them talking casually with the Korean soldiers, some watching the show, and a few cursing as South Pyongan trounced them at cards. "And I think you've steeped yourself in quite enough guilt for tonight, don't you?"

North grit his teeth, listening as the vibrant voices of the singers carried over to them, now singing *'Bowie March.'*

"The People's Army advances,

Move forward on the path to victory!"

Not enough.

He should go talk to his soldiers. But he would do it after the salute. His clothes felt tight again.

Beside him, China shifted in the way that meant he was hiding his shivering, even though North suspected he was wearing his summer uniform under the padded yellow-green winter one, and had his old grey and white scarf wound around his neck.

His fingers hesitated on the buttons, but then he removed his long coat, feeling slightly less like he was choking as the night air washed over him.

He held it out to China wordlessly, hoping he wouldn't think about that day, and knowing he had to be.

"It's a bit cold tonight to just be in your uniform, don't you think?" the other man asked, his tone just a little too smooth, his teeth clicking together at the end.

"I'm not going to wear it," North relied blankly. "If you don't, it will just stay on my arm."

"I guess I'll take it then." His comrade plucked the coat, shrugging it on and buttoning it up to his chin, clearly eagerly. He rearranged the scarf before nestling his chin into the fabric, humming in contentment.

It was cold, but North felt a bit less prickly with it numbing his skin. And he was used to it.

He didn't care for the idea of the people around him seeing that he'd given his officer's coat to a Chinese soldier, but he supposed it did look good. Though if they'd known it was China, there was no

way he would have.

North stood still, trying not to think about all the things he could be doing right now. Investigating more germ warfare reports, interrogating the Yankee pilots (though he knew he couldn't allow himself to), giving blood, fighting at the front, visiting Hae. He had to be here. His soldiers needed to know it wasn't them he blamed.

As the performance ended, and the Song and Dance Ensemble started to pack up, a few of the women singers he'd seen China speaking with earlier clustered together at the front of the truck, whispering and looking his way. Evidently they'd been keeping a close enough eye on him to know he'd retreated to the shadows.

China had spotted them, too, and to North's alarm, he raised a hand to beckon them over. There was a brief flurry from the group, and the Korean tensed as one split off, walking towards them. She was swaying her hips in an exaggerated way so the thick skirts under her army jacket swished side to side, clearly trying to appear unhurried, though she was almost bouncing.

"Comrade Korea," she greeted when she reached them, dipping her head, then thankfully turned to China, her tone changing to something more playful that put North's hackles right back up. "Comrade Mao Zhilong."

"Comrade Yong-sung," he replied in Korean, just as playful.

The woman should have bristled at a near-stranger using her first name so casually, but she giggled instead, twisting a loose strand of her bound hair around her finger.

"Me and my comrades were wondering if you wanted to come talk about the show with us after the salute."

China seemed to perk up at that. "I'd love to. I found your singing in particular enchanting. You must enjoy it."

Sounding a little less playful and a little more passionate, she bobbed her head. "I've always wanted to sing since I was a girl. I'm really lucky to be able to fight for my country, *and* provide a bright

moment to my comrades who fight with me. And to Comrade Korea for giving me the chance to."

She hurriedly dipped her head to him like she'd remembered he was there.

"It wasn't just me," he said, gritting his teeth as he remembered the speech he'd given on Liberation Day at the Raktong. "All of our comrades fought for the right of our artists to blossom."

"And we're all very thankful." She bowed, then hurriedly turned her attention back to China. "I'm looking forward to speaking with Comrade Zhilong about my singing in more… detail."

North couldn't hide his grimace as she used China's 'given name,' but neither of them were looking at him anyways.

"As am I," China said smoothly. "Maybe if the conversation is interesting enough, we can talk more privately in the future."

The woman's cheeks were already red from the cold, but they went even redder, the hair winding faster around her finger.

"I'd like that," she said coyly. "I'll see you later, then. And, um, Comrade Korea. HappyArmyFoundationDay."

She bowed quickly, looking suddenly embarrassed, and scurried back to her comrades, where they all started whispering and giggling furiously. China's eyes squinched up above his mask.

North glared at him coldly. "Stay away from my women."

He didn't want China to think he was accusing him of anything again, but he didn't seem to.

The other country cut him a mischievous glance. "Oh? But she seemed rather eager to be near me."

"I don't care if she's eager or not," he said flatly. "Stay away."

"You'd tell your people who they can and can't have relations with?"

"No," North said. "That's why I'm telling *you.*"

He knew it wasn't his business who his people were attracted to (even if he couldn't fathom it), or who they chose to have… *relations* with. But he didn't like the idea of his women having them with a foreign country, no matter if he was a comrade. A Countryhuman had more power than them, and they might feel pressured into it for the sake of their alliance.

None of them actually *knew* China was a Countryhuman. But still. It made him uncomfortable. And if they did something with him, they *would* know.

And he especially didn't like the idea of China being attracted to his women, or using them. The Chinas of old- Ming and Qing especially- had stolen Korean women, or demanded they be handed over in tribute. And Joseon had done it, negotiating with the fathers of wealthy girls and kidnapping the poor, if they were deemed attractive enough, shipping them off to foreign lands to be sold into the harems of the rich and powerful, either dying in sexual slavery or one day returning home to be completely shunned by society for 'their' degeneracy, often killing themselves out of shame.

Korea's women had long been coveted by the countries around them- China, Russia, Mongolia, Japan. By everyone but Korea, who treated them like bargaining chips and prized cattle.

No more. North valued his own women more highly than any other country, as *people.* He had no say in who they chose to… be with, but he *did* have a say in keeping foreign countries away from them.

He lifted his lip at China, showing him his fangs as he repeated, *"Stay away from my women."*

The man examined him for a moment, then sighed. "I really do just want to talk about her singing."

North glared at him.

"I do," he insisted indignantly. "I wouldn't do something like that

with someone I don't know. I'm as virginal as a maiden, if you must know."

North glared at him.

"Aiya," China said with exaggerated dismay, hiding his masked mouth with the sleeve of North's coat. "You don't believe me? But it's true. I'm a romantic. I don't judge others, but I wouldn't do something of that nature with someone I didn't love deeply."

He side-eyed the women, who were still watching him, and tipped his head in a clear wink, making them giggle and blush.

"But looking doesn't hurt anyone."

"It *will* hurt you," North muttered, but decided he was probably telling the truth. At least about not pursuing his women.

He might not be thrilled with North Pyongan and Liaoxi's… dalliance. But at least it seemed to make the Chinese woman slightly more forthcoming. She'd told his province her Countryhuman's flirtations were empty air, and North admittedly hadn't seen or heard anything to contradict that. And he *had* asked around.

And so long as China kept his promise about his province not being an issue in the future, he would tolerate it. As he would tolerate the man's sweet-talking. So long as that was *all* it was.

"What about you?" China looked back at him. "Have you no interest in women?"

North opened his mouth, then stopped, suddenly suspicious.

China's eyes were wide and curious, and his tone was perfectly innocent. But it was a little *too* innocent. He had a feeling if he could see his mouth, the curve of his lips would have that guilelessness that North had come to be able to identify as mischief.

"…I have no time for relationships," he answered warily.

"Mm," China hummed, and he thought he could hear a slight

edge of disappointment to it. “I see.”

North thought of a tiger prowling through the forest, its paw just narrowly missing the steel jaws of a hunter’s trap, and had the feeling he’d just escaped one of his own.

“From what I’ve seen, that’s likely a blessing for the women,” his comrade said, tucking his hands back in his sleeves and snuggling down in the borrowed coat.

North glared at him again.

Soldiers started to hustle around, and he realized China had distracted him long enough for the final preparations to start. He finally stepped out of the shadows, heading to help, ignoring North Pyongan asking where he’d been.

As they carried the final crates of ammunition down to the snowy riverbank, China suddenly froze, his head swivelling around.

North was automatically on edge, dropping the crate and hefting his pistol, following his gaze until it landed on a group of people speaking in Mandarin as they came down the road, escorted by a few KPA soldiers, and dressed in casual clothes with white lab coats over them.

He relaxed, holstering his gun. The Chinese scientists here to help with their lab tests. Ri Pyong-nam had likely sent them here thinking Kangwon would be around.

Handing off his ammunition crate to a comrade, he strode over to greet them, noticing that China hung back.

“Comrade Korea.” One of the men stuck out his hand.

North stared at it for a second, then shook it, gritting his teeth as the burns under his gloves protested. The man was wearing gloves, too, so he couldn’t glean anything from his palm.

“Duan Longping,” he introduced himself. “And part of my team. We’ve been sent personally by Comrade China to investigate these incidents of anomalous biological matter.”

North examined them. There were six men, ranging from late thirties to fifties, he would say. And one woman who could have been in her forties. She was short and slender, with a round face, and long hair in two plaits over her shoulders, a surprisingly young hairstyle he usually saw on the female Chinese soldiers, not older women. Her downturned brown eyes searched the people working behind him.

He made note of her. Like his country, it hadn't exactly been easy for women to become any sort of scientist before Socialism, and he couldn't see someone with less than three years of schooling being assigned to such an important task.

"Korea is glad to have your assistance," North replied formally.

He also begrudged it slightly, even though they weren't here because his own scientists couldn't handle things, but because they had different experiences with outbreaks to bring in. And China wanted his own country to be prepared in case the germ warfare was spread to it.

"Minister Ri said a Comrade Kangwon would be able to familiarize us with the work already done," Duan Longping said, looking around. "We'd like to get straight into things, if that's alright with you."

More than alright.

North nodded to the soldiers that had brought them. "Comrades, escort our Chinese comrades out to the Quarantine Hospital, and have them directed to the labs."

The location of the underground laboratories needed to remain fairly limited knowledge. They were studying the infectious bacteria found in the insects collected from drop points, and the last thing they needed was one of Rhee's saboteurs breaking in and causing a lab leak.

The men snapped salutes. "Of course, Comrade Korea," one said.

The Korean country bid farewell to the science team, telling them

to work hard, too used to bossing around China's soldiers to catch himself. As he did, he noticed the woman's eyes catch on something. Even as they walked away down the road, she twisted to look back.

"Do you see that woman?" China suddenly murmured too close to his 'ear,' making him stiffen. "The stunningly beautiful one?"

North had no way of gauging whether or not a woman was 'stunningly beautiful,' but since there was literally only one in the direction they were looking, it had to be the Chinese woman.

"What about her?" he asked warily.

"You're about to be very mad at me."

He opened his mouth, but was cut off by someone calling, "Gege?"

He looked to see the woman had left her group while they carried on. She was standing rooted on the road, staring at him. Or rather, at China.

"Gege?" she breathed, and there was such a depth of emotion in that one word that it made North blink. "That's you, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about." China's voice sounded suddenly childish and slightly dopey, but the smile in it was still recognizable. "My mother only had one child."

The woman's eyes widened, and she burst into a grin that lit up the night, breaking into a run. "Gege!"

To North's surprise, China stepped forward, smiling under the mask.

"Hello meimei."

He didn't run, but he walked with more haste than North had ever seen outside of combat, like an invisible string was tugging him towards her.

They met halfway on the dark street, the woman colliding into

him like a bullet, so hard that she knocked him back, and as she wrapped her arms around him, China did the same, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around, both of them laughing.

It wasn't like the laughter he'd heard from him on the battlefield. This was just as joyful, but also soaked in a relief so deep it felt palpable. It almost sounded… familiar.

His comrade set the woman back on her feet, embracing her tightly, and her arms snaked around his back, digging into his shoulders as he held onto her just as tightly.

Her face was towards North, and in the bright glow of the moon, he could see tears shining on her face as her eyes screwed shut.

"You knocked it down," she choked out to China, and he murmured something too quietly for North to hear. But he could hear the woman's reply as she said, "You did it. That's what matters," and then, "It's alright. I know you had more important things to do. And I knew it was you."

China said something else, and she laughed again, the sound shaky and drowning in joy, so bright it could have been a child's.

They weren't stepping away from each other, only pressing closer, the woman's face smushed into his shoulder, and the man half bent over her, crushing her to his chest like he could absorb her. It was the embrace of two people that hadn't seen each other in a very long time, and hadn't thought they ever would again.

North watched her fingers clutch at the back of the coat he'd given to China, desperately trying not to lose him again, and felt phantom digits digging into his own.

As North Pyongan called for him to start the salute, he walked away, back into the bright white light of the spotlights.

Even as North gave his short foreword for the salute, praising his soldiers for all their efforts and congratulating them on the foundation of their People's Army, he had to fight to keep his gaze from being drawn back to China and the woman.

They weren't hugging anymore, but they were still holding each other, her arm around her Countryhuman's waist, and his around her shoulders, pressing her into his side, like now that they'd been reunited, they couldn't bear to be parted again. China's eyes kept straying back to her upturned face as North spoke.

"We have a righteous army." His voice echoed over the riverbank, their planes droning overhead as more chased the enemy in the distance. "A truly genuine People's Army filled with men and women that know there is no greater honour than to fight and give their lives in defense of their country. If we didn't, we would not have been able to withstand the Imperialist aggressors' aggression for as long as we have. We would not be able to Reunify our country."

He strayed back to China, seeing the woman trailing her hand up and down his side, seeming to barely notice she was doing it.

"But we do," he said, projecting his voice harder. "And we *will* be Reunified under your efforts."

Thrusting his fist in the air, he called, "Long live the Korean People's Army! Long live the Worker's Party of Korea! Long live the Chinese People's Volunteer Army and their loyal sons and daughters!"

He saw China smile at him from the corner of his eye, and he took a subtle breath.

"Long live the brave volunteers and Korea's own sons and daughters who have fallen in defense of our homeland!"

His voice had almost caught as he saw big brown eyes again. Almost.

"Long live the Democratic People's Republic of Korea! And *long live the Korean people!"*

The applause was thunderous, loud enough to cover up the bombs falling on the edge of the city, his soldiers' eyes alight with hope and joy and the absence of the fear he'd managed to drive away

again.

Despite his wounds and the creeping fever and how he still felt like he was being strangled, North found himself wishing today was an occasion like Liberation Day or Foundation Day, that he could step into them and immerse himself in the crowd.

He watched the way China ran his hand back and forth on the woman's arm, like he was reminding himself she was real, and turned his back, facing the guns as he signalled the men to begin the salute.

Eighty soldiers jumped into action, loading shells into the artillery guns and firing with single-minded unity. Eighty guns fired out at the river in unison, then again, and again, the roar loud enough to drown out the enemy planes and the bombs, but not North's thoughts.

A year ago he had stood in Seoul and watched this same sight, sixty guns blasting out at the Han like a promise to the enemy across it that they were coming. A year ago O-geun had almost fallen asleep on China's shoulders by the time his mother came to get him, and had leaned his head against North as he helped him down, nuzzling into him and groggily calling him 'hyung.' A year ago he had sat on top of Bukhan Mountain and stared out at his capital and the darkness beyond it, fantasizing about the fruit trees they would plant this spring, convinced he would be in Busan by the year's end.

A year ago he had thought he would have finally been able to embrace his brother again by now.

North remained stone-faced, his spine straight, as round after round blasted from the artillery, an endless roar of percussion that was loud enough that his final declaration went unheard.

"Long live Reunification."

China's ideal outcome for 'Have you no interest in women?' was North saying 'No' (as he was going to), so he could make gay jokes that went over his head for the rest of the night. North is

also a forty-two-year old man that calls sex *'...That.'*

Yes, modern day it does piss North off IMMENSELY that China has sexual relations with his people. He can't exactly stop him because if the women are willing and there's no laws being broken, he can't just insert himself into their lives like 'No.' (he actually could, but since autonomy is important to him (and so is not having awkward conversations) he doesn't). And China will no longer heed his desires. In SP and WP, North sort of just seems passive-aggressive over it, but this is genuinely a point of friction in their friendship. He's just given up confronting him because he doesn't want to give China the satisfaction of disobeying him again, but he has not given up feeling violated and hurt over it (not that he would use those words). This is why China does it. If you're interested in what changed between China's 'I'm a romantic' mindset between now and present day, the answer is nothing.

The people fantasizing about blowing up the Three Gorges Dam if China continues to 'provoke' us over Taiwan are unhinged lunatics and deserve to be taken out back and disposed of. First of all TAIWAN IS THEIR TERRITORY. Dislike it if you want (but please remain consistent- Americans must want to divest from Puerto Rico and Hawaii, and British must want to divest from all their current overseas holdings (these things aren't similar, they are actually worse) but it is legally not a distinct country. They can't provoke *us* over *their* territory. We are sticking our mouths out in someone else's business over a place we colonized. Second of all SIXTY-SIX MILLION PEOPLE WOULD DIE. Right-wingers will say something like 'Nanjing didn't happen because there's no way that many people would be killed,' then actively get turned on at the idea of killing SIXTY-SIX MILLION PEOPLE for the sole crime of existing in a country WE keep antagonizing. It's like if a kid shoved another kid on the playground, so he shoved him back, and the first kid started frothing at the mouth at the idea of bashing his and his family's heads in with a rock. But far worse because it involves SIXTY-SIX. MILLION. PEOPLE. Also I want to say that half the people saying 'Oho, they wouldn't be so smug if Japan blew up the Three Gorges Dam' aren't even Japanese. So for your proxy

war you'd like us to kill sixty-six million people, then have our entire country wiped off the face of the map in retaliation while you shove fast food in your face and do nothing? Okay, great, just confirming. I'm not moving, I have chosen to die here.

Last Little Sister

North wanted to escape as soon as the salute was over, and bury himself in preparations for the Anti-Epidemic Corps until he forgot about the bandages suffocating him. But once the artillery guns and spotlights were being hauled away by bleary-eyed donkeys, and the soldiers had started to disperse back to their barracks, China made a beeline for him, dragging his mystery woman by her hand.

"Comrade," he called excitedly, making North's shoulders hunch. "I'd like to introduce you to someone."

"I have things to do," North clipped, his eye finding his four provinces down by the river with their bodyguards.

"It will only take a moment." The other country stopped in front of him on a patch of scuffed snow where one of the artillery guns had stood. "This is Zhao Jingjing." He gestured at the short woman. "Jingjing, the striped face should make it clear who this is. He's gege's new best friend."

"We are *comrades,"* North stiffly corrected.

Ssi-bal, he had better not be referring to him that way to anyone else.

"I'm sorry, he's so informal," Zhao Jingjing said apologetically. Her voice was throaty and rich, with the slightest hint of a lisp, and something about the reserved way she spoke sounded familiar. "It's an honour to meet you, Comrade Korea."

To North's relief, she didn't bow or try to shake his hand. She only inclined her head, her twin braids sliding across her white lab coat.

"You're with the science team?" he asked, getting his chance to question her at least.

“I am. But I’m not a scientist,” she said. “I’m in medical school, but I’ve only been taking classes for around two years.”

North narrowed his eye. “Those aren’t very impressive credentials to be part of a team sent to study biological warfare.”

His questioning didn’t seem to make the woman nervous. “They aren’t. But my professor said I could earn valuable experience as a lab assistant.”

“This isn’t an ‘experience’ job.” This was the lives of his people and the fate of his country.

“We can trust her,” China cut in. His hands had returned to his sleeves, but now they emerged again so one could rest on her shoulder.

“I don’t blame Comrade Korea for the questions,” Zhao Jingjing assured. “He’s right that it *is* suspicious someone who’s only a student would be sent to help with something so important.”

She raised her face to China, arching a dark, angled brow.

“It doesn’t surprise me,” he said easily. “You’ve always been my smart meimei.”

The word seemed to fall from his lips with less of a lilt than usual, confirming North’s feeling that his female soldiers had nothing to pout over at being blown off for the woman.

The other country slid his arm around Zhao Jingjing’s neck. “Of course they sent China’s future most valuable doctor.”

“I need to talk to you.” Without waiting for a response, North grabbed China by the sleeve of his coat, dragging him a few paces away into the darkness.

The country clicked his tongue. “I told you you were going to be mad.”

“What is *wrong* with you?” North hissed back. “Don’t ask me if I want a list or I *will* throw you in the river.”

China's black face mask pushed out as he pursed his lips.

"You invited someone here who knows who you are?" the Korean demanded, barely caring that that someone could probably hear him. "Do you *want* to go to trial again?"

"In my defense, I was planning on her never seeing me."

"But she *did."* He could have slipped away the moment he heard her voice, and hid until she was gone, but he hadn't, and he also hadn't even *tried* to play dumb when she called out to him. "And now she could turn you over, or tell the other scientists so *they* can turn you over."

The man was nonplussed. "Jingjing wouldn't do that."

North's fists balled. "You're willing to bet your country on that?"

"Yes," China said, suddenly serious as he looked him in the eye. "As paranoid as you are, even you have people you would trust not to betray you, no matter what they were offered."

Kim Il-sung flashed in his mind. Another face tried to, but flickered and faded.

"Jingjing is one of mine." China looked back over his shoulder at her like he couldn't help it, his eyes softening almost imperceptibly.

North grit his teeth, the scar over his empty eye itching. *"Anyone* can betray you."

"Jingjing won't."

"Zhilong-gege's identity is safe with me," Zhao Jingjing's throaty voice suddenly assured, making North spin back to her. "I've kept it safe for-"

Her brown eyes flicked to China. "Awhile."

Her gaze was the same as her country's, only less well hidden.

"I love my nation," the woman said, her voice firm as she looked

back to North. “And I share Zhilong-gege’s dream for it. I would *never* do anything to jeopardize that.”

In North’s anger, the reason her speech sounded familiar clicked. Her words were measured and restrained, but flowed in a way that was almost musical. It was similar to the way SH spoke, and the Jeollas.

His eye flicked to the hands clasped at her waist, and the calluses that thickened them.

“Fine,” he said coldly, making no effort to lower his voice now as he looked at China. “It’s your head.”

“It is,” China agreed. “And I know my little sister will make sure it rests easy.”

North knew he had to be imagining the slight emphasis he’d heard on the one word, but it still made him bristle. He turned away without another sound.

“Do you want your coat back, comrade?” China called.

“Keep it.” North needed the frost stabbing into him to keep the fever at bay, and the prickling fury.

Whatever Zhao Jingjing was to China, it was clear he hadn’t seen her in awhile. He didn’t know what she could have done in that time, who she could have spoken to, what she could have come to believe. Whether North was right about what she’d been or not, *anyone* could be convinced to turn. She could have been lied to like his soldiers in the camps, bribed, or threatened.

He would have thought China was smart enough to see that, but from what he’d seen- the way he’d went to her so eagerly, the way it looked like he kept trying to distance himself from her, but kept being drawn back, how he hadn’t hidden in the first place, and how he had embraced her so tightly when she could have had a knife hidden anywhere in the long sleeves and deep pockets of her lab coat that she could have used on him- North now doubted it.

Whatever. It wasn’t his problem.

Except it *was,* and not just because if China's soldiers left, North's would be facing America and his puppets alone. Even if the Yankee picked up his stakes and went after the Chinese mainland, allowing the KPA to Liberate the entire Peninsula, it would *still* be his problem. China had *made* it his problem at Chorweon. He'd made it his problem by answering Korea's call for aid at all.

"I'm driving you all back to the bunker," North said flatly as he walked past his provinces, now waiting for him at the side of the road. "Come."

He didn't know if China would take the Jeep back or follow Zhao Jingjing to the labs. He didn't care.

"Is that a good idea?" North Pyongan worried. "You'll have to walk back."

"It's necessary," the Countryhuman clipped, and because their eight bodyguards (Kim Don-om now recovered from the highway ambush and back at his post) were there, none of his provinces could protest more.

North needed to walk. He needed to freeze this heat out and make up for his loss of composure earlier. He would make the almost hour-long march without flinching at the chafe and choke of the bandages.

He led them away to where the GAZ was hidden, not looking back at China as he left. Part of him wanted to go back and seize the keys to the Jeep from him, but Liaoxi and Liaotung were still in the city, and in case he did return to the bunker, he didn't want- he couldn't let him walk.

They had been gathered together here openly. It would be easy for someone to have put eyes on them.

North scanned the dark streets, the looming piles of debris and hollowed-out shells of buildings, empty windows gaping like dead mouths, moaning as the frigid night wind blew through them. Someone could be watching from any darkened doorway, any gap in the rubble, waiting to try and spirit away his provinces or expose

his comrade.

He hated knowing that they had a traitor, lurking somewhere in their ranks like a worm in an apple.

As if reading his mind, Hwang lengthened his stride, pulling up beside him. “Korea, any word on that venture of ours?”

He spoke low, but they were all so close together it didn’t matter. North Pyongan politely kept his eyes forward, and the guards kept theirs on their darkened surroundings, hands on their pistols. South Pyongan quickly looked away as North shot her a glare.

“No,” he said.

Nothing positive *or* negative.

“I see.” Hwang dropped back in disappointment.

“It will come.”

It had only been a week. It would have taken a few days to get the orders to the agent that would bring them to Choi Jung-nam, and for him to get them to the man himself. And the transport plan would need to be arranged between them, hopefully in a way that wouldn’t compromise any other operatives.

The Yankee woman complicated things, too. They couldn’t go until she was able to get away from America, which would hard to pre-plan.

North didn’t exactly relish the idea of letting someone so close to the foreign Countryhuman near them, even for a few days. But he knew she couldn’t be left with her country. He’d already sent the message to CCCP, asking if he could shelter eight non-combatants, enough for Grace Hartman, Suzuki Yoshi, and her and Choi Jung-nam’s children and their families, once North figured out how to get them over from Japan.

He hadn't been able to risk swaying the Soviet by saying one knew America personally, but the man had sent back a simple *‘Yes,’* without it. It made the Korean’s jaw ache.

But between those factors, and depending on whether or not they could risk sending a communication, North might not even know Choi Jung-nam and the Yankee were coming until they showed up north of the 38th Parallel.

They would. Hwang's former student couldn't fail.

'We love each other.'

He didn't want another voice. Even though he knew one day the man would be one anyways. And Suzuki Yoshi and every single other that had helped them achieve Liberation from Japan, like Son Du-soon and Dan Hoon and Bong-nam-

North shook his head jerkily, prompting a raised brow from Hwang.

That was why he needed to end the war. So that the comrades that had survived this long would survive even longer. So he could win Reunification and ensure they lived the long happy lives they had fought so hard for, that they *deserved.*

He couldn't let America stretch this out any longer than he already had with his puppeteered attacks and targeted bombings and refusing to return their POWs while demanding Gangwon be returned, and *still* not handing over that list of forty-four thousand missing soldiers, even now that he'd finally given the others in proper Korean and Chinese. North couldn't let him succeed at stealing another one of his provinces.

They *needed* to eliminate that leak. Choi Jung-nam had to get the information they needed, and get home safe. He knew he could.

North finally looked over his shoulder, subtly, like he was checking for threats.

Past South Pyongan's bodyguards, Stalin Street was dark and empty.

And he hoped China was smarter than him.

—

Ice crackled as it slowly spread over the Taedong in a thin skin, the snow at their feet shifting with an almost imperceptible sound as the frost-withered grass under it recovered from the hours of being tramped upon, once more slowly reaching for the inky sky above. Under the obnoxious drone of the planes that buzzed in his skull like angry hornets, China could hear the softer beat of wings from overhead, and the hum of voices, all too far away for even him to make out what they were saying. North had disappeared into the dark ruins, leaving only the faint footsteps of his entourage behind, quickly fading.

"He seems nice."

The honeyed milk of Jingjing's rich voice had grown the creak of seasoned timbers in it since he'd seen her last. China would forgive the reflexive lie. In the years of his absence, her old occupation had demanded it.

"He's tolerable," he said, turning back to the woman, having to stifle his heart's desire to leap as it had when he'd heard that voice, still so familiar after so long, and seen her face, not buried under cold dirt like the Kuomintang's victims, or maimed into an unrecognizable smear of scarlet, black, and white like the corpses in that blood-soaked city, but whole, beautiful.

She was a good few years older than the last time he'd lain eyes on her, those few stolen minutes of not much more than tears and renewed promises. But his little sister's eyes were still warm and alive, that spark dwelling in their red bean-coloured depths unquenched by her years of hardship.

This time he couldn't stop his heart from squeezing in relief. Even after he'd taken so long to free her from her tower, she had kept her promise.

"Mmm." Jingjing hummed at his words, eyeing the KPA epaulets on the coat he was wearing.

China laughed quietly as he pulled North's olive long coat tighter around him. Unlike the scarf, it still smelled like gunpowder and snow-dusted pines, with traces of overcooked meat clinging to it.

Putting aside what it represented, he found even that smelled pleasant.

He listened again, hearing only the crackle of the ice as it spread, and the squeak of some furry thing in the snow.

Still he suggested, “Why don’t we find somewhere more private, meimei?”

His identity might be concealed, but he was still a Chinese soldier that spent an unusual amount of time with the Korean Countryhuman. He was a target, along with anyone seen associating with him. Until his friend took care of that rat, the quiet Pyongyang night wasn’t safe.

China had been making his own efforts, but was limited by not having access to more confidential Korean information, access he knew his paranoid friend wouldn't be giving him.

Of course, that had never stopped him before. But he didn’t want to do anything to shatter the fragile web of trust he was weaving between himself and North. So for now he would trust the efforts of his friend’s comrade, even if China could have told him that trusting a Westerner was tantamount to turning yourself over directly. Whether by malice or incompetence, he doubted their get-away plan would go the way they wished it to. But his friend wouldn’t appreciate being told something he already knew.

China led his Jingjing to the wreckage of the tea room North had been having his little episode in earlier. Part of the roof had fallen in, bringing with it the owner’s private residence on the second floor, a chest of drawers included. The clothes were gone, either taken during evacuation or looted, but the cracked wood remained. His 'little sisters' were out in the hills right now, but tomorrow he would send them to chop it up for the refugees. For now the Countryhuman brushed at it with a sleeve, before gesturing grandiosely for his little sister to sit.

She did, giving a slight curtsy, and he joined her. No longer in the open, he was free to remove his mask, his face cooling while his right side warmed as he pressed it to hers without restraint,

Jingling eagerly mirroring him.

She was both softer and harder than she'd used to be. Her slender form had started to plumpen with age, though she remained quite youthful-looking for her fifty-six years. Conversely, her hands were no longer the soft pads and delicate fingers that had once held a brush. He'd had her remove her gloves to greet his friend, and he could see they were weathered with work.

Her former career wasn't one you grew old in, yet she had still been there to be freed. He would guess she'd been one of the lucky ones that had served her youth and been able to retire to the role of teacher and housekeeping.

Or unlucky, depending on how you saw it. Dying in the street was better to some.

China felt no guilt over how long it had taken to fulfill his promise. It had been fulfilled as it fast as it could be. He only regretted that revolution was such long work.

But now that they had it, change had been fast.

"Enjoying your schooling, meimei?" he asked, and her eyes lit up even brighter.

"More than anything." She curled a fist to her chest. "All the classes, studying, the tests. It's what I always dreamed of. I can't wait until I'm a real doctor."

"Good." He nodded in satisfaction. "I'm sure you'll put it to good use."

"I'll save lives," she vowed. "No one else will end up like my mother."

A modern healthcare system with trained doctors, many of them women and men that had never had the chance to learn before, putting the health of the country before profit. China could empathize with North's provinces' bounciness at the idea.

"And do you have any complaints about the program that put you

in it?”

Jingjing’s braids swayed as she shook her head. “No. Even the men were polite. And they were-“ Her throat bobbed. “It meant a lot. Especially for the younger girls. I know we were only one place, but I didn’t hear any complaints from anyone.”

Her answers were more considered than when she’d been a child, looking outside her own experience. It pleased China, as did the news.

“Your sister?” he asked, hoping.

It was granted as she said, “She’s well. She actually left awhile ago to get married.”

“Not a patron, I hope?” China masked his disgust at the idea.

She shook her head. “The man that delivered our medicine. He scraped together enough to buy her out.”

That was good. And her healthy complexion and weight told him she didn’t need medicine now, which was even better. There wasn't any doubt that did make her one of the lucky ones.

“You’re still full of questions,” Jingjing said, her small lips curving up.

China mimicked her. “I’m still looking for answers, meimei.”

He always would be. The death of searching was the death of progress. And China still had many many li to go. He never intended to stop.

He voiced another question. “Do you still paint?”

“It’s hard with school, but…” Jingjing reached into her pocket with, pulling out a piece of pulp paper.

She opened it for him, revealing a small painting of a chandelier, excellently captured in oils. Even with the limited colours, the glass beads that hung from it danced, refracting light around a hall that

wasn’t shown.

China smiled, sliding his hand into North’s sleeve, working it into the padded one of his own uniform, and removing another paper, larger. He unrolled it with the care one would afford to a priceless scroll.

The inks were faded, the edges torn and crinkled, and small spots of water damage and old, rusty stains covered it. The protection of China’s sleeves and the coat of wax applied too late had done little to protect it from decades of war.

But it was still clearly the same chandelier.

Jingjing’s eyes welled with tears as she looked at it, vindicating China in his request that his Chairman rifle through his meager hoard to find and ship it to Korea with his last care package.

He really hadn't been planning on meeting Jingjing. But leaving it in whichever quarters she was staying in would have had the same effect.

His little sister turned aside, fumbling in her bag for something else, pulling out a cigarette case. China was certain she hadn’t fallen to smoking, and wasn’t disappointed as she withdrew something that wasn’t a cigarette, holding out a small, withered brown object, displaying it with shaking fingers.

It was an old trumpet creeper bloom, pressed flat, the desiccated petals flaking even as she held it up between them with a tremulous smile.

China dropped his mask, leaning in to crush her to his chest again. Jingjing gripped at his back, and he could hear the crunch as the four-decade old flower crumbled to dust in her fist.

No matter. When the war was over and summer came to Beijing again, he would get her a new one, fresh and crimson.

“I missed you,” the woman murmured, tears dampening his neck.

“I missed you, too, meimei.”

He saw no need to mask the truth, and for once didn't do it anyway. He knew what a liar looked like, and he knew Zhao Jingjing wasn’t one of them. He hadn’t met someone who could successfully lie to him yet, especially the woman who he’d watched grow up, spending hours staring at her face as he did her make-up, watching her eyes as they devoured the medical textbooks he’d taught her to read, and her mouth as her tongue stuck out the side of it while she painted. He had practiced her expressions and inflections in the mirror until if it wasn’t for their bodies, he could have replaced her. She still carried the dent in her lip that told him her tell had never stopped betraying her.

But he knew North wouldn’t believe any of that. The tears in Jingjing’s voice as she clung to him would only make him more suspicious of her, not hearing the sincerity glittering in them.

Interesting how his friend could be once bitten, twice shy, and still defend the dog that had sank its teeth into him.

Or fox. China hadn’t decided yet. He needed a meeting, and if all went well, he would never get one.

It wasn’t his place to say if things *could* still go well or not. His view wouldn’t change the course of action for either of them anyway. It also wasn’t exactly his place to spread dog safety awareness, but…

The soft fabric of the scarf North had given him brushed against one cheek as the other rubbed against Jingjing’s hair.

He really was fond of his new friend. And with how things were playing out… He would say something. Not now, when North was adorned with that dark circle under his eye and the feverish glint in it, different than the one he had when he was on stage. Or when he'd been able to hear his quick, tight breaths as he stood in this very room. But eventually, once this germ warfare was more dealt with.

Even if it was nonsense, his friend should know what he knew.

His Jingjing leaned back, still keeping one arm around him as she

wiped at her eyes with the other.

"Look at me," she sniffled. "I'm still crying like a kid."

That was good. The world had tried to make her grow up too soon. It warmed China's heart to know she'd continued to defy it even in his absence.

"Children aren't the only ones that cry, meimei."

She chuckled, wiping away a tear. "Are you sure you shouldn't call me jiejie now?"

"Aiya, when you still look so young?" China tweaked her leathery cheek. "You'll always be my cute little meimei."

Not his only one. He could still taste the dust of the others on his tongue. But the first. And the only one that had survived the appellation.

"So what are you doing here?" Jingjing asked. "I thought the reason you never came to visit was because you were busy with *our* country, not Korea."

"Perhaps I'm only here to greet you."

She arched a brow. "Really? Were you coincidentally here last May Day, too? Because I went to Tiananmen Square, and even though I couldn't get close, I think you still would have noticed me if that really was *you."*

"Gege isn't very attentive," China said, using the harmless voice he'd used for most of their acquaintance, listening as he did.

Jingjing gave him a long stare, and he sighed.

"Aiya, my meimei really is clever. Very well. I may, perhaps, have been in Korea for some time."

Longer than he should. But not as long as he was willing.

"Korea is our country, Little Sister." He reached out to toy with

one of her braids, working the ribbon from it. “Or very similar. The fate of it is the fate of China. I won’t leave our comrades to struggle alone.”

She didn’t ask why, just stared up at him with those red bean eyes, then shook her head.

“You said you didn’t want to be a hero, but it looks like you still ended up one.”

China clicked his tongue. “I’m no hero, meimei. Our Chairman Mao and all our soldiers are. I was just there to help.”

And to become the China his people needed.

“And that’s why I’m here,” he said, successfully freeing her hair and moving on to the next braid. “To help.”

Jingjing hesitated, then asked, “But aren’t you tired of war? You’ve been fighting since you left, haven’t you?”

“En. I’m very tired of war, meimei.” No matter how much he enjoyed the rush of battle and artistry of combat. “All of China is. But so is Korea.”

China had never considered himself a soldier first. But he could tell that for North, being one came before a great deal of things. He expected a life without the straightforward fixes, violence, and suffering, or at least less of it, would be foreign to his friend in a way it wasn’t to him.

But he knew the Korean would take it. The way he couldn’t speak the name of the boy that had been their little brother clearly, how he’d reacted to the girl earlier, and the look in his eye as they spoke about grief proved that.

Korea was tired of war, if only for his people’s sake.

“The only thing worse than war is not fighting a war that needs to be fought.” With her hair fully unbound, China cupped Jingjing’s face. “And *this* war needs to be fought. Korea and his people deserve to be free, just as much as China and his.”

Jingjing placed a cold hand over his, her eyes searching his face. Then she smiled.

"You've changed."

The words burst in him like a firework. *'Change.'*

She hadn't seen him since he'd became soaked in the lifeblood of their people. But he could tell she sensed it, beyond his mask, the way it had seeped inside him and watered what he was. She couldn't understand, but she felt what it meant.

China had changed, China was changing. The way they had needed to for so long.

He didn't answer Jingjing. He just hugged her again, the way they'd used to, the way they'd both desperately needed. She was more than halfway to a century old, but she drew her legs up on the broken chest of drawers like it was the old sofa-chair, curling them under her as she lay her upper body in his lap, and he wrapped her in North's coat and his arms, holding her like he would never let go.

China knew he couldn't feel about Jingjing the way North felt about his brother. He couldn't love her like a real little sister. He just wasn't wired for it. If she ever did betray their nation, he would snap her neck with his own hands without hesitating, like he had all his other little sisters and brothers. He would regret that it had to be done, not that he had done it.

But he did love her, and he knew that between her and his Chairman, the grief when he was eventually *made* to let go would be enough to make him want to agree with his friend about the emotion.

But he wouldn't. Jingjing had been the start of his change, and he wouldn't lose those years with her for anything, no matter how badly they one day hurt.

The face buried in his chest was etched with lines and wrinkles, the body pressed against his was aging, time wearing rough patches and slowly taking it apart, and the hair he carded his fingers

through had become streaked through with filaments of moonlight.

But she would always be his little sister.

I love whatever is wrong with him.

Zhao Jingjing features more in that temporarily forbidden China backstory one-shot. Also related to that one-shot, I want you to know that no matter how eyebrow-raising China and North's relationship gets, China and Mao Zedong's is *much* worse. Largely because Comrade Mao reciprocates. I like to think it's like a collective gaslighting event amongst the original government members. You try to ask if their relationship seems… weirdly close to anyone else, and you're hit with a barrage of 'Of course they're close! Chairman Mao loves his country and China loves all his people, and they're both very passionate revolutionaries,' until *you* feel like the crazy one. Then you look over and China is half in his lap (not really, they act normal in public, I just think it's a vibe you would pick up on). I don't think saying this is disrespectful towards Comrade Mao because I feel with my full heart that he would approve of me saying that he had an intensely intimate relationship with the representation of his country. I would bet money on this. And China is just not capable of having a normal relationship with people he likes and he is fully aware of this.

Hard Call

1916

Hwanghae stood next to his desk, restraining himself from fiddling with his glasses as he watched the students file out of the middling-size classroom.

Despite his nerves, he still remembered to call out, “Nakajima-san, don’t forget to turn in your essay tomorrow. It’s the last day.”

The boy half-turned back, but his peer grabbed him by the arm, pulling him forward.

“We have the game tonight,” Ishida Motojiro- one of the more affluent students- urged. “Besides, he can’t actually do anything about it anyway.”

He shot a smug look at the province. Nakajima Kozo’s was slightly more ashamed, but he left the classroom regardless.

Hwanghae sighed. A bit of disrespect was expected when he wasn’t even a professor, just a teaching assistant frequently called in to fill roles the less enthusiastic teachers wanted to perform. Not to mention he looked to be the same age as the second-year students, younger in many cases, and couldn’t even claim more years of life to counteract it. He only possessed five and nine months of them.

But he knew his inexperience and lack of authority weren’t where the majority of the students’ contempt came from.

It was because he was Korean, and a Korean province at that. The young Japanese had been told they never had to listen to the words of those whose country they were Occupying, and the young Koreans…

Well, Hwanghae shuddered to think what *they* had been told about

him. The students may be too young to fully understand what it meant to have him filling in for hungover colleagues (which was truthfully a strong word), and relegated to grading essays, but their parents understood. He could see it in their eyes when they came to observe classes, lingering on him standing like a silent white shadow in the corner, ready to leap into action when the real teacher beckoned.

They wished to pretend that their children attending this prestigious school next to the children of wealthy Japanese meant they were equal to them. But Hwanghae was a reminder that that wasn't the case. They were being *allowed* to study next to their foreign peers. And if Japan wished, he could change that just as easily as he had banned the study of geography and history.

The old Hwanghae had worn robes spun from the finest threads, and while he had eschewed the more elaborate headdresses and crowns of the other Provincehumans, his horsehair hat had been pristine, at least in the few old records the new one had been able to get his hands on before they were spirited away to Japan or destroyed forever. The province had been responsible for recording the now surely burned *'Veritable Record of the Divine,'* the record of a life even those that had compiled the *'Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty'* wouldn't dare touch. He had been Joseon's personal scribe, trusted to write his letters and proclamations faithfully, and bear witness to his country's innermost thoughts.

And now Hwanghae fetched paper cutters and graphite for Japanese teachers that distorted history. He was a trophy of how far Korea had fallen, and a reminder that no matter how deeply the wealthy Koreans collaborated with Japan, no matter how loyal they raised their children to be, it would never be enough. When even a Korean Provincehuman wasn't equal to a Japanese intellectual, how could a Korean human ever hope to match up?

Hwanghae was a permanent reminder to the Korean children that they would always be lesser, and one to the Japanese that they would always be superior.

He exhaled, rubbing a hand over his face.

And *he* had been the one to come up with the idea. He had asked for this job, even facing down Japan to attain it.

Perhaps he'd been a fool. Those first moments of life had been a whirl, and he'd known he only had seconds to act. When he had formed nearly on top of those kempei as a small, thin boy, what hope had he had but to try and win a scrap of freedom with negotiation? It at least gave him a chance to fight back from within the Occupation system.

But perhaps there *was* no fighting back. The bits of knowledge he saved from old textbooks and archives were precious, but they didn't change anything. The minds of the youth weren't set in their prejudices yet, but how was he supposed to mold them when he only saw them for a few hours each day, and was never able to teach anything *real?* If he went off curriculum even slightly, it would be punished, judging by how some of his more excitable lessons had been responded to.

It was difficult to even approach some of the sympathetic students to attempt to challenge their minds when it came with such a risk. Even the Korean boys, who should be *em*pathetic, couldn't be trusted. They could be even more ruthless in their judgement of what was deemed seditious, having it drilled into their heads that they needed to remain loyal to Japan if their families were to maintain their status. Even a simple slip of the tongue, as had happened with the boy who had reported him for criticizing Japan's banning of Korean history, could end in disaster.

Hwanghae hadn't blamed him. A child's own parents should be safe to share knowledge with. It hadn't been his fault that that wasn't the case. And it wasn't as if the province had received a hundred lashes for it, only a few days locked in his dorm, and a threat that if he shared any further criticisms, he might once more get to meet Japan personally.

The thought sent a shiver down his knobby spine as he recalled those cold, distant eyes and flat voice.

*'Once was **quite** enough for that.'*

It had made him leery of stepping out of line. Even if he couldn't fight back like this, at least he wasn't imprisoned, as there was a very good chance some of the other Korean provinces were.

Hwanghae had been keeping his head down, his nares buried in books and essays.

But now…

As the last few students streamed out the twin doors, he mustered his courage and called, "Mr. Choi. Please stay a moment."

The boy jolted, his eyes darting between the province and the door, as if calculating his escape. But then he squared his shoulders, turning to face Hwanghae, staring him down as his peers left him behind with only a few backward glances.

"Shut the door, please," Hwanghae bade, adjusting his glasses as he sought to hide his knocking knees by sitting.

Choi Jung-nam complied, muting the end of day hallway chatter, before coming to stand across from the desk, his expression defiant.

"What is it, Professor?"

Hwanghae took a steadying breath as he reached into the desk, removing an essay, one he hadn't kept stacked with the others he had finished grading for this class' real professor. Choi Jung-nam tensed as he placed it on the desk.

"That's my essay," he correctly identified.

"Indeed." The province adjusted his glasses again, reading the first few lines aloud with a dry mouth. "'The Occupation of Korea at the hands of Japan is a disgrace, both to the five thousand-year long history of my country, and to all the people of both nations. Not only does it subject the Korean people to the indignity of being treated as second-class citizens in our own land, but it also puts the people of Japan in the inglorious category of 'oppressor.'"

Choi Jung-nam shifted uneasily.

Hwanghae continued, "'With the formation of a new Japan in 1868, and Joseon's shift towards modernization as the Korean Empire, our two countries were in the perfect position to clear the slate of their history. Instead, the new Korean Countryhuman remains locked away, not even permitted to oversee Korea as a figurehead.'"

That was only an assumption, though a popular one. There was no evidence against the Korean Countryhuman being imprisoned, but it could very well be that he- or she- simply saw no reason to govern when it would only be a pretense.

Or perhaps they had more shame than Hwanghae, and refused to be used as a reminder.

But he knew the next sentence was an objective fact.

"'And Japan lords over us, demanding that we worship him as a god, and ensuring that the bad blood between our nations will never be wiped clean.'" Hwanghae looked up from the paper to a tense Choi Jung-nam. "You go on to argue your point."

Quite eloquently. It wasn't a perfect essay, taking a far too involved voice, personal biases refusing to be masked with clinical detachment, with a few redundant sentences. But it was passionate and well-researched.

The boy squirmed, then steeled himself, jaw clenching. "Yeah," he said. "And I stand by it. The Occupation cripples us and hobbles Japan. It's no good for either side."

"You're lucky that I'm the one that read this first," Hwanghae said.

If the man supposed to be sitting in this chair had done his job, Choi Jung-nam could very well have been expelled already.

'Or worse.'

"It's well-written," he praised, then said apologetically, "But I'm afraid I can't let you hand this in."

“Why not?” the boy demanded, slapping his palms down on the desk. “It’s the truth.”

Hwanghae swallowed nervously. “Yes,” he admitted, cringing, almost expecting an officer to burst in the door the moment the word left his lips. “It is.”

Choi Jung-nam blinked, as if surprised he would admit that.

“But if this is turned over, you will be expelled, fined, and blacklisted, if more drastic measures are not taken.”

The boy hunched slightly. “My Father is wealthy. They couldn’t just do that.”

“Wealthy as he is, he’s still Korean.”

The classroom was silent as they both felt the weight of those words.

“I understand your desire for others to hear this, and to change their minds,” Hwanghae said gently, despising his role in stifling a student’s voice. “But your words won’t be allowed to circulate. They will be erased. And so may you. The costs far outweigh the benefits. I would advise handing in a different essay by tomorrow. Your grade may take a hit, but it’s preferable to any other outcome.”

He clasped his hands, hoping he sounded convincing. Choi Jung-nam glared down at the paper and the treasonous words scrawled across it in neat kanji.

Then his chin dipped.

“Fine,” he said quietly, sliding the essay off the desk, crumpling it in his hand. “I’ll write another one.”

He started to trudge for the door. Hwanghae watched him, wringing his hands, the shame in his thin chest burning brighter.

It would be risky, especially considering who his father was. Rebellious words didn’t always translate into rebellious actions. And Choi Jung-nam was young and popular, with many friends

both Korean and Japanese that he could accidentally brag to about something he thought might impress them. At such a young age, a certain level of mutiny was considered fashionable, until it wasn't.

And by then it was too late.

But the boy was smart. Hwanghae had 'borrowed' his student record, and looked over his past assignments while he deliberated over this decision. His Korean and Japanese were both solid, along with his Hanja. His Morals mark wasn't the best, as this wasn't his first occasion of saying things that shouldn't be said, only his most egregious, but that could be considered a positive in this case. And his arithmetic was excellent. The province didn't want to curb the passion in him, or his desire to rebel, not when he had the sort of promise Korea needed.

Hwanghae had chosen to be a part of this system that churned out unquestioning labour for a foreign country, that snuffed out any real desire to learn and grow. He had done it to be a spanner in the works, not to facilitate the production. But if he allowed Japan's education system to overwhelm with fear his desire to inculcate, how was he supposed to make sure his students truly *learned?*

Hwanghae wanted to teach. More than anything, he wanted to teach.

"Wait!"

His voice broke slightly as he shot up, bidding Choi Jung-nam to stop with his hand on the door, looking back with a raised brow.

Hwanghae cleared his throat, fiddling with his crooked tie as he gathered his words.

"Your essay spoke true," he said, making an effort to restrain his nerves. "I would say I… empathize with the sentiments in it."

Choi Jung-nam's eyes went wide with shock at the direct confession. "You do?"

"Yes," Hwanghae managed, fidgeting.

This was it. The moment where he might be arrested. Or rather, the moment he might start a chain reaction that ended in him being arrested and- And Choi Jung-nam was still staring at him expectantly, hearing the unfinished thought in his voice.

The province boy took a steadying breath.

"And I was wondering if perhaps you would be interested in an… extracurricular class to discuss those ideas in more detail?"

And as he voiced the question he had been waiting a week- five years and nine months, really- to ask, Choi Jung-nam grinned.

—

1952

Hae was perfectly fine. She had to be.

Yes, it was true that Kangwon had a tendency to downplay the severity of an injury or illness, but certainly he wouldn't do that for *Hae.* And yes, Hwang wasn't exactly the foremost expert at gauging people, but he was just as versed in their silent language as his cousins, so surely he would have noticed Kangwon's microexpressions. Though it was also true that if his cousin wasn't intentionally broadcasting them, then he was less likely to pick up on them. Perhaps he *had* looked a bit too steady as he told him his sister was recovering well…

No. Of course Kangwon had looked steady. Because Hae was fine. There was no difference in steadiness from lying or steadiness from truth. Hwang had simply pushed North Hamgyong too far in his attempt to reconcile him with SH, so his cousin had lied with the express intent to upset him. It didn't matter that Korea *was* in a tense enough state right now that hearing that Hae had 'died' would likely set him off, and keeping that knowledge to himself to avoid further stressing him was definitely something Kangwon had done before, such as the Kim Mi-ju debacle Hwang had heard of last year, and multiple other accounts. It also didn't matter that he had borrowed a medical textbook from Kim Il-sung University to confirm that the mental file he'd found was right and that the

symptoms of cholera should only last for a few days at most, not the month and six days Hae had already been in the hospital for, and certainly not the projected two months Kangwon had claimed. Hae was weakened by a number of other factors- her unhealing burns, her calorie count that had only been satisfactory for a few days before she'd gotten sick, the sympathetic fever Hwang was sure she could feel coming on, as he did. It made sense her recovery would be extended. Though why she would be kept in the Quarantine Hospital when she was no longer capable of transmitting, especially when the Political Committee of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party had just met to discuss preparations for sowing season…

No. Hae was fine. When Hwang next got his chance to speak to his cousin, and inform him of what North Hamgyong had said, he would laugh it off and tell him she was alright. Perhaps he could even get her to write Hwang a note to prove it.

He just hadn't gotten his chance to ask yet, because Kangwon was frequently out of the city conducting fieldwork and collecting information in preparation for the Anti-Epidemic Corps, and on the rare times he was in Pyongyang, he was shuttling between the hospitals and the hidden labs, and Gangwon was always shut up in the Quarantine Hospital. And he couldn't just ask for either of them to set aside time to speak to him because Korea had said that just yesterday several more clusters of insects had been found in Kangwon's province, and that there had been a case of encephalitis in Pyonggang County, where mites and mosquitoes had been dropped at the end of last month.

The news had sent a shiver down Hwang's spine, along with the knowledge that he couldn't distract either of the Kangwons from dealing with the very important task of making sure it didn't spread. Not for his surely unsubstantiated worries.

North Hamgyong tried to hurt those around him all the time. This was simply another of those attempts. It had just managed to pierce Hwang more than any of the others had.

He removed his glasses, setting them aside on the university office desk to put his head in his hands, attempting to clear his mind to

focus on his task- combing through the list Ri Sang-cho had put together of their MIA soldiers that they suspected to be part of the missing forty-four thousand names from the enemy's list as a fresh pair of eyes.

He couldn't do it. Even without his worries over Hae, a million other subjects crowded his head. The germ warfare, the possible encephalitis outbreak, the missing POW names that the American negotiators had *sworn* would be handed over within the next few days, the essays he had to grade, the refugees clustered in the caves in his province.

Hwang's intellect might be his greatest- and only- pride, but sometimes he wished he could empty his mind like Kangwon or Hae.

And looming over it all, the fluttering, uneasy anxiety of Choi Jung-nam.

Was he alright? Had he succeeded in his mission? Was he on his way here even now?

Or had he failed, and fallen victim to everything that entailed?

Hwang knew there was a good chance he had, and a good chance that if he did, he would never even hear about it. Undercover operatives conducted work that never came to light until after the war was over, and sometimes not even then. And their deaths were often the same way. He would need more than two hands to count the number of comrades that had disappeared into Japanese prisons or organizations as spies, only to never be heard from again.

That was the worst part. The not knowing. Choi Jung-nam could be lying in a mass grave or floating in the sea even as he sat at this desk. He could still be alive, but be being tortured, beaten, electrocuted, treated like those in Sincheon as the enemy tried to force what he knew out of him, who he worked for, what other operatives he was aware of.

Hwang shouldn't have given his permission to let him meet with Grace Hartman. He should have-

He shot up as footsteps pounded down the hall, his heart beating, hoping they wouldn't stop outside his door and hoping they would.

They didn't stop, but his door did burst open, a young man with the armband of the Signal Corps wrapped around his bicep skidding in.

"Comrade North Hwanghae," he said, barely snapping off a salute. "You're needed immediately. There's a transmission for you."

Hwang was already moving as he asked questions. "From whom?"

"I don't know," the man panted, clearly out of breath. "I was just told you need to hurry."

Hwang did, cramming all his work into his suitcase before tossing his office keys to a fellow teacher and ordering her to lock it for him. Not the most secure, admittedly, but he could tell this was urgent.

Korea had been letting him stay near the city for the past week, ostensibly to focus on the list and his university work, but in reality likely wishing to allow him to hear any news about Choi Jung-nam as soon as possible.

As Hwang hustled over the hills and into the waiting vehicle, his heart pounded against his ribcage, uneasy hope filling it.

Surely if it was a transmission, that meant the man had succeeded? It was strange that it would be sent to him, but he couldn't see any other purpose for it. It certainly wouldn't be for him if he *hadn't* succeeded.

To Hwang's surprise, he wasn't taken to a Signal Corps outpost, but to the rebuilt telephone exchange nestled amongst the ruins of other buildings on the edge of the residential district. The war had damaged many phone lines, but it still kept a skeleton crew, manual operators and technicians for the automatic exchange alike.

'A phone call?'

The hope in his heart grew. If Choi Jung-nam was risking

contacting him by phone, then he had to be in the north.

Though he did suppose this having nothing to do with him was also a possibility.

Hwang was ushered into the call building, where phones awaited the majority of those who didn't have them at home, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dim light.

The room was empty, more so than it should be even for keeping lines clear to avoid obstructing priority communications. Two women awaited, one with her hand resting on a black phone in one of the booths.

One leaped towards him, her braid flying. "Comrade Hwang! This is for you."

"Report," Hwang said, scanning the scrap of paper she handed him.

A string of numbers was written on it. A phone number. One from the south, if he was correct.

"A man called and said he needed to speak to you right away," the woman rushed. "I wasn't sure at first, but he said it was really important, so I thought you should know."

Hwang furrowed his brows. "Did he say who he was?"

The older woman with her hand on the phone said with a thick Pyongan accent, "He said his name was Choi Jung-nam."

Hwang's blood went cold.

No. He was sure the Americans had cracked their military communications, let alone their phone lines. Choi Jung-nam wouldn't call from the south, not unless-

He rushed by the women, snatching the phone up. But his finger froze on the dial.

It could be a trap. If something had gone wrong, he could dial this

number and have the South's voice Command him from the other side. *'North Hwanghae, don't hang up.'* He could bombard him with more Commands before anyone even realized what was happening.

Hwang tried to counsel himself. With the ground they held, Haeju was no longer directly at the front. There was no way the enemy could have advanced far enough to capture it in a day, hence the South couldn't Command him.

But what if one of the enemy's aerial landings had succeeded? They didn't need to hold the capital for long, just enough time for Hwang to be Commanded south or to divulge military information. He wasn't supposed to know anything, but he couldn't help asking questions, and had admittedly accidentally learned things he shouldn't, and extrapolated too much from small scraps he'd gleaned.

No, Haeju couldn't be captured. Surely the Signal Corps would have heard, and he would have been notified. Korea would have sent someone to get him right away.

But the call could still be traced, and the telephone exchange targeted. Or Choi Jung-nam could be captured by the enemy, but only suspected. Hwang picking up could be the final nail in his coffin, terminating the mission.

His hand slid away from the phone.

He couldn't risk it.

"Comrade North Hwanghae?"

Hwang balled his fists on the desk, gritting his teeth.

Would Hae call? He knew she would, and he also knew it would be the wrong choice. It was too dangerous, far too risky. Even if there was important information to be passed, it wouldn't be worth the risk.

He squeezed his eyes shut, seeing that defiant face, the tentative hope as he realized he wasn't going to be punished, the joy on it as Hwang went to fight for their country, the courage as he offered to

do the same, the love as he gazed at Suzuki Yoshi.

And he grabbed the handset again, raising it to his ear slit as he stuck his finger in the dial.

Choi Jung-nam was his student. Something had gone wrong and he needed to know.

He wanted to call. He wanted to be the sort of person that would call.

"You, stay with me," he ordered the Signal Corps man as he rotated the dial. "If it looks as if I freeze up at any point, shoot the phone. Don't worry about harming me. Then detain me and notify Comrade Korea right away."

It was overthinking. He was certain Hajeu couldn't have been taken. But better safe than sorry.

"Everyone else out."

The woman with the Pyongan accent said, "I can-"

"Out," Hwang said sharply as the phone began to ring.

The women hustled away, shutting the door, leaving him with the young man and his racing heart.

Ring. Ring.

'Pick up, pick up, pick-'

"Hello?" a young woman's voice answered, incongruously cheerful with the blood pounding in his temples. *"How can I help you?"*

Taken aback, it took Hwang a moment to answer. "…I received a call from this location, and was asked to call back. Can I ask where it is?"

"Haeyansaek Tea House in Busan," the woman answered, making the tendons on his hand flex. *"Hold a moment, please."*

There was a *'thunk,'* followed by a muffled call, something like, *"Sir, your call."*

Hwang leaned over the desk, his palm slick against the plastic handset, his blood rushing so violently though his veins that he shook.

After a few seconds, a familiar gravelly voice said, *"Hey Prof."*

"Com-"

"No time," Choi Jung-nam cut him off. *"They found me."*

Hwang's heart plummeted to his feet. "How?"

"Don't know," he said, his voice low, his words coming out like sentences rushed from a typewriter. *"I saw plainclothes guys following me. They're outside. Waiting to see who's here to meet me. Then they'll come in."*

The phone creaked under Hwang's grip. "Run. You need to get out of there."

"I can't." His shaky breath crackled in the province's ear slit. *"The source is supposed to meet me in five minutes."*

Grace Hartman.

"If she comes in here, they'll know she's a traitor. Even if there's no one here to meet her. This bastard's too paranoid. He'll kill her. I need to do something to make sure she knows not to come close." He swallowed. *"Something big."*

"You *need* to leave," Hwang urged, alarmed by the words. "She's likely betrayed you."

"I don't believe that," he firmly denied. *"You should have seen her. She's just a kid. She's scared. I can't just let them kill her. I can't let him hurt her again. And you need this intel."*

"And what about *your* children?" Hwang demanded, nails scratching at the desk. "If they catch you, you put them at risk,

too."

There was a long silence. Then, *"Anything for the mission, right?"*

Hwang's jaw creaked as he made his decision. "Damn the mission. It's over. And if you don't get out of there, your life will be over, too."

"She still has the information," he replied. *"She knows where we were supposed to meet the guy. She can still get it to him. He can get her out. But it's too late for me."*

His voice was calm, steady. But Hwang could hear the waver under it.

"I just wanted to call you. Let you know." Another shaky breath. *"Say thank you. For everything."*

"No," Hwang said. Unable to find any other words, he repeated, "No."

"Sorry I couldn't see this to the end." A wry exhalation came across the line. *"Some agent I was."*

"You worked with us loyally for years," Hwang said, pleading, "And you can for many more. Just leave, *please."*

"I can't," the man rasped, resigned. *"And time's almost up, Prof. Promise me you'll look out for my family."*

Hwang's glasses had started to fog over, melting the inside of the exchange into a smear of tan and grey. "They're *your* family, that's *your* job."

"My job is to serve my country." His swallow was audible. *"Promise me, Comrade Hwang."*

"I-" The tendons in Hwang's hands strained, then went slack.

"I promise," he said quietly.

A quiet exhale. *"Thank you. And take care of the source, too. If you*

can. And tell Yoshi-"

His voice broke fully now. *"Tell her I'm sorry. Wait, no. Don't. Tell her I love her. I've loved her ever since she accidentally smacked me in the face with that copy of 'Yaregaki,' and I'll love her until I- forever. Tell her. Please. Please tell her."*

"I will," Hwang rasped.

Choi Jung-nam released a quiet, shuddering breath. *"Good. Good. Then I can die happy."*

"Comrade-"

"I chose this, Prof," he interrupted. *"And I couldn't ask for anything more than to die in Korea. When the Kanto Carnage went on, when the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and we thought it was the end of the world, that was my one regret. That I wouldn't die on the soil I belonged on. But here I am."*

"Here you are," Hwang said quietly.

"I'm sorry I'll never get to engineer anything for Korea." The man inhaled. *"But if the source gets that intel to you, then I get to say I played a part in Liberating our country, giving my family a place to belong. **All** our families."*

"You did," the province assured him, fighting to keep his voice steady. "No matter what, you've done enough, Comrade Choi Jung-nam."

There was no threat in giving away his identity now.

With a watery smile in his voice, his former student said, *"Yeah. I guess I have."*

There was a sound, and he swallowed thickly. *"And now I've got to go."*

"You don't have to."

Choi Jung-nam drew in a long breath, and when he spoke, his

voice was steady again, the waver gone.

"I do. If she was my kid, I'd want someone to do the same."

Hwang squeezed his eyes closed. "You were a good man."

"I had a good teacher." Somehow he actually chuckled, before sobering again. *"Long live Korea, Prof. Tell my family I love them."*

There was a clunk as he set the phone down.

Hwang didn't know whether he was too disconnected to realize he needed to hang up, or whether he left their connection on purpose, knowing how much his old professor would want to know exactly what had happened. Or maybe he had simply misjudged the distance between the handset and the cradle.

Whatever the case, Hwang could hear a muffled cry of alarm from the tea house proprietor- *"Sir, you have to pay your bill!"* He could hear as a door opened, and Choi Jung-nam started to scream, distant unintelligible, the only clear word *"Manse!"* over and over again.

And he could hear as the guns opened fire.

"Jung-nam!" It was irrational, Hwang knew. He couldn't hear him. But the name burst from his mouth anyway as he clutched desperately at the phone, cramming it against the side of his head like he could slip through the receiver to his aid.

"Are you okay?" he frantically demanded. "What's happening?"

There was, of course, no answer. As the guns fell silent, the only sound that came through the phone was the muffled sobbing of the woman, then boots pounding on a wooden floor as a man barked to take in everyone in the building and search it top to bottom, and that just because the rat was dead, didn't mean there weren't more.

There was a clunk, and suddenly a gruff voice was demanding in Korean, *"Who is this? Who's on this line?"*

Numbly, Hwang set the handset down, cutting the connection.

I read the phone conversation out loud to make sure it was under five minutes. I cried while doing so.

At the point in time in the flashback, Korean schools under Japan had four years of secondary school, which is why Choi Jung-nam is a second-year student in 1916 but in his final year in 1919. The parts about history and geography being banned at that time are true.

The Veritable Records of Joseon are records of all past Joseon kings (modern day they're called the Veritable Records of Feudalist Joseon, since the DPRK is also called 조선). They were recorded by scribes and faithfully detail the kings' lives (if you've ever seen that joke about King Taedong falling off his horse it's because the scribe wrote it down despite being told not to). In this world the Veritable Record of the Divine is also like that, but it's personally written by Hwanghae (even before he was Hwanghae, and carried on by Haeju during the year-long provincial dissolution before he was restored), and details Joseon personally, going from his formation in 1392 all the way to his dissolution in 1910. No one else ever got to see it but Hwanghae, so it's unknown how much of it was in earlier Korean and how much was in more modern Korean, and how exactly it was kept. Scrolls? One big book? Joseon actually ordered him to stop writing it after he became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 (out of shame), but he secretly carried on right up until the final day. Unlike the real Veritable Records, it only had one copy. This copy was destroyed by Japan at the beginning of the Occupation. But there are rumours that it was actually taken back to Japan, and is still there, or that people had torn parts out and smuggled it away, *or* that Hwanghae had actually made copies of certain passages and hidden them when he saw what was coming. Every now and then a page will crop up and people will claim its genuine, but there's really no way to tell. North and South both have a couple being studied. China has found the most convincing page passed down by Koreans that fled to his country during the Occupation and gifted it to North (not that anyone will ever

know that's where he got it from).

In other news, the DPRK recently expanded a chicken farm to raise black swans and ostriches for meat (they've being doing this for awhile, I'm just talking about this farm in specific). I think it must be fun to work in a profession for so long that you get to see life change like that. 'I guess we're doing ostriches now.' But also I would be so scared if all I ever had to deal with was chickens, then I had to square off with a bird taller than me all of a sudden. One of the officials in the video is offering his hand to an ostrich off to the side like you would to a horse to get it to nuzzle you. The whimsy of humanity is universal.

The Coming Tide

"She did it."

Hwang raised his head, hardly daring to believe his ear slits.

SH spoke up next to him, voicing her own tentative hope. "You mean...?"

Korea nodded soberly. "The source got us the intelligence."

It was excellent news. But Hwang couldn't find it in himself to feel excited by it. It was difficult to tell with the moon hidden by the peak of Jangsan above them, but Korea didn't appear any more enthused than him.

SH closed her eyes, letting out a breath. Hwang simply closed his eyes.

The question was harsh, but he needed to know.

"Was it worth it?"

Korea's jaw feathered. "We will make it worth it."

Hwang looked down at the tips of his snow-dusted boots.

Often agents sacrificed themselves for minor information, simple troop counts or deployment details, or intelligence that was outdated by the time it reached Supreme Command. That was just the way it was, he told himself. Any cost for the mission, no matter how small.

And yet this cost still felt egregiously steep.

"And what about Grace?" SH asked after a second.

"She is still in Busan."

Hwang lifted his gaze at that, clearing his throat before he trusted himself to speak. "But she delivered the information to our operative. Shouldn't she be here?"

"Our agent monitored the location they'd agreed to meet at for a day after the shooting," Korea said, his tone flat and cold as the trampled snow of the clearing. "She walked by, escorted by a full compliment of guards. He found a paper with the information on it lying on the ground after she left."

Hating to even voice the idea, Hwang said, "So it could be false intelligence."

"Yes. But we're going to look into it anyway."

There was a distant explosion, and Korea looked up at the sky reflexively, though it was empty, before dragging his gaze back down.

"There was more than we were expecting. But I can't share the rest of it."

SH's voice was soft. "So she's still with America."

Korea's was grim. "Yes. I have recalled the man supposed to transport them so he can't be captured."

Hwang's glasses had become useless, so he shut his eyes against the night. Choi Jung-nam had sacrificed himself so Grace Hartman could get away.

And she hadn't. Not truly.

"Could we... attempt to save her?" he ventured, and Korea's look gave him all the answer he needed.

"Of course," Hwang murmured. "We can't risk any further operatives. And with Choi Jung-nam dead-"

His voice strangled, making him duck his head, trying to clear his throat. SH's hand rubbed comforting circles on his thin back.

"There's no one she can give up to the enemy," she finished regretfully. "So we can't afford to save her."

"I won't waste any more resources on something that isn't tactically necessary."

Korea's words were harsh, but they could both hear the bitterness coating the word 'resources.'

SH thankfully looked saddened by the news, not reacting with the calllousness she'd displayed before.

In an attempt to comfort her, Hwang said, "At least America shouldn't have any reason to suspect she had anything to do with Choi Jung-nam. Neither him nor I referred to her with pronouns during the call, so he won't even be able to narrow the person we were talking about down to a woman."

Korean didn't use gendered pronouns in sentences to the same extent that some other languages (like English) did. So long as they knew what the subject was, it wasn't necessary. Since they had never used the word '그녀,' even if their call had been recorded, and America were to listen to it, he would likely only hear 'the source' or 'they' when Grace was referred to.

SH wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes downcast. "But she's still in her cage."

Hwang didn't know what to say to that. It was his turn to gingerly pat her back.

"I am arranging to have Choi Jung-nam's family brought to the Soviet Union as soon as possible," Korea said, not looking at the woman. "You said he mentioned Suzuki Yoshi's given name on your call. We can't afford to waste time."

The words brought a small semblance of comfort, though Hwang still felt numb, as he had for the last three days.

It was still difficult to wrap his head around. The boy that had always sat in the middle of the class, that had put his hand up to answer his questions when no one else would, even when he knew

he was wrong, and that had showed up to their first extracurricular lesson with some of his mother's homemade onion kimchi was dead.

Hwang knew logically that it wasn't his fault. Choi Jung-nam had returned to Korea explicitly to be a spy. He had come to him, not the other way around. He had been the one to want to approach Grace Hartman, and he had made the choice to stay in that tea house until she would be close enough to hear him be eliminated, and know to turn around.

His brain knew it wasn't his fault. But his heart was refusing to be convinced.

"That's good," he said quietly to Korea.

Even if they couldn't take the American woman into custody like Choi Jung-nam had wished, at least they could protect his family as Hwang had promised.

He removed his glasses to wipe the condensation from them. "Please notify me if they reach the Soviet Union safely."

"When," SH corrected.

"If I don't, I'll have someone else do it." Korea didn't make a sound, but the cloud of mist emitting from his nares plumed larger. "I'm going to pass on the information on the leak we were given."

Hwang raised his brows. "To the others?"

"Just the intelligence, not who gave it to us. We all need to be on high alert." The Countryhuman looked between the two of them. "Don't mention either Choi Jung-nam or Grace Hartman."

Hwang wondered if that should sting, though he knew his cousins being aware of Grace Hartman's role in this could compromise her safety in the future. And as for his former student... It simply wasn't necessary information to divulge. The less people that knew any covert operational details, the better. And it wasn't as if he was keeping silent on news about someone's sister- Choi Jung-nam meant the most to him.

He wondered if he should feel guilty that it didn't sting.

"We won't, Korea," SH assured, with a sympathetic glance at Hwang.

He bobbed his head at their country's look. "We certainly won't."

Korea dipped his head. "South Hamgyong, stay on watch. North Hwanghae will tell you the details after."

SH saluted, and the two men headed inside the bunker, the heavy steel door groaning as Hwang helped pull on it. It crossed his mind that Korea almost seemed to be straining more than usual, but he quickly discarded the thought.

In the dark of the short tunnel, they were both blind. Korea didn't turn on his flashlight, and Hwang collided with his back as he suddenly stopped moving.

"Korea?" He fumbled to straighten his glasses. "Are you-?"

"He died to free his country."

The province's throat bobbed. "Yes. The way he wanted."

Even if they weren't able to make the intelligence he had died for worth it, Choi Jung-nam would never know that. Hwang would be the one that had to live with it. And he knew it was par for the course when it came to covert operations. Their comrade had fulfilled his desire to feel like he was doing enough for his country, and completed the mission. That was what mattered.

Hwang just wished it hadn't been necessary.

"Thank you," he said quietly to Korea.

The man didn't answer, heading to bang on both doors at the end of the hall. He didn't stop at his room, seemingly aware that China hadn't returned to the bunker tonight.

Most of the male provinces were still awake from when Korea had came to fetch Hwang. Chagang winced slightly as he rose from his

cot, but only North Hamgyong rubbed irritably at his eyes. He performed the most manual labour out of them with the Rehabilitation Corps, and was usually asleep from the moment his head hit his pillow, unable to be roused until muster.

Hwang could see how stiffly he was moving, subtly kneading at his lower back. With Kangwon keeping too busy with the biological warfare to give him his massages that he insisted weren't massages, his back problems were likely acting up.

His cousin caught him looking, and curled his lip.

Hwang supposed it was his fault for feeling a twinge of sympathy for him after he'd felt none for him. He wanted to turn his chin up, but couldn't muster the energy, looking away instead.

The female provinces took longer, all three well asleep. Korea bade the Chinese duo to emerge as well, all of them clustering in the hallway.

Hwang listened intently as Korea recited what information 'an agent' had retrieved on their leak.

America had referred to them as 'she,' and her code name, or at least how the foreign Countryhuman called her, was 'Agent Maine.' She was in a position to be aware of how often Korea and Kangwon had been travelling recently, and had been tasked with getting proof of Gangwon residing in the north.

His lips pressed flat as Korea fell silent.

The white glare of North Pyongan's flashlight made their Countryhuman look pale and washed out, darkening the shadow under his eye. He looked as grim as Hwang felt.

North Hamgyong's snort was loud in the confines of the tunnel. "That's all? That's almost fucking nothing."

"But it is something," Hwang cut in before Korea could.

"She's a chick and she has some bullshit code name that could just be the miguk-nom's stupid nickname for her," his cousin said

scornfully. "You know how many damn women are in Korea? Way more than half our population now that all the men are dead."

"North Hamgyong," Korea said sharply, and he sneered.

"It's true."

Hwang took a deep breath, glad that SH was standing outside. "It's more than we had," he said calmly. "And I believe we can safely say she's stationed in or around Pyongyang now."

Looking at Korea, he explained, "Her knowledge of your and Kangwon's movements could be due to having contacts in other locations, or being close enough to the city to observe when your vehicles leave and arrive. But even if she's part of a network, and mostly responsible for passing on the information of others, the order to gather proof of Gangwon sounded like a direct one. She must be in the Pyongyang area."

"A woman in Pyongyang." North Hamgyong scoffed. "Good luck with that."

Hwang's hands balled into fists, though he quickly unfurled them as the burns between his fingers protested.

"Our agent retrieved the information from the south," he said firmly, understanding a bit of SH's feelings towards the man. "Now that our search demographic is narrowed down, I am certain we are capable of unearthing the traitor in our midst."

North Hamgyong narrowed his eyes at him.

"That's enough," Korea said, not as snappish as usual. "The point is that I want you to be even more on guard than usual. Don't stop at rest stations or allow civilians to mend your clothes."

North Pyongan opened his mouth, and their Countryhuman said, "When you visit Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin, do it at their place in the hills." He narrowed his eye. "And ration sharing *only* on the weekend."

"I remember, Korea," the man said quickly. Hwang caught Liaoxi's

lips twitching slightly.

It was his turn to raise his hand. "Allowing our civilians to mend and wash our uniforms builds a stronger bond between them and their provinces, as well as gives us chances to impress the justness of our cause on them. I don't think we should give that up so easily."

For some not involved in the Party or other political work, the war could seem like something impersonal whose only impact was on their own conditions. If they didn't see beyond that, they would be more susceptible to taking bribes to betray their country, such as food or money. The more they humanized their government to the populace, and forged personal connections, the less likely they would spring another leak.

Chagang dipped his head in agreement. "They are the river to our fish. And it makes them happy to help their People's Army."

Korea shifted from foot to foot, then clipped, "Fine. But never anywhere secluded, and never give away anything you don't have to. Make sure you don't mention Gangwon at all."

His eye flashed.

"We still not telling him or Kangwon the Yank's pretty much put a warrant out for him?" South Pyongan asked, yawning.

"No. And nothing about China either."

"It might be wise," Hwang ventured. "Not about Comrade China, obviously. But about the demand. Our best defense is-"

'Critical thinking.'

"Knowledge."

"Like if you'd actually fucking told us you thought there was germ warfare shit going on," North Hamgyong grunted. "Hae wouldn't be fucked up in a hospital bed."

"I *told* her-" Korea reined himself in, baring his teeth as he gritted

out, "I will reinforce to Kangwon and Gangwon that they need to be as careful as possible. That is all that is necessary. Comrades Liaoxi and Liaotung."

"Yes, Comrade Pr-" Liaotung winced suddenly.

From beside her, Liaoxi said sweetly, "Yes, Comrade Korea?"

"Pass the message about the leak on to your Countryhuman whenever he surfaces."

Hwang knew he must be tired, as he made no effort to hide his grimace.

Liaoxi dipped her head. "I can assure you for one, it will be done."

"Yes, gege," Liaotung politely agreed.

"Don't call me that," Korea deadpanned. "And tell him to meet me at the military complex at fourteen hundred tomorrow. I need to pass on the decisions of the enlarged meeting of the Military Commission."

The Chinese women agreed. North Hamgyong, of course, didn't.

"How are our military decisions any of their business?" he demanded.

With an icy look, Korea said, "If I need to remind you, we are comrades-in-arms. And we are discussing the implementation of measures to combat this germ warfare. With the People's Volunteer Army stationed all over our country, they are going to have to work hand-in-hand with our People's Army, Anti-Epidemic Corps, and our populace. It *is* their business if we don't all want to die of-encephalitis."

Had there been... the slightest hesitation there? As it always did when Korea withheld information, it made Hwang uneasy.

His Countryhuman's expression gave nothing away as he ordered, "Now everyone back to sleep." After a moment he added, "And stay close to Pyongyang for the next few days. We want to limit travel as

much as possible."

The provinces all nodded, the Chinese women included. They all likely assumed it was solely due to the risk of spreading germ warfare (alongside Hwang, South Pyongan had reluctantly shared with Korea that she, too, was developing a sympathetic fever), but Hwang knew Korea was also wary of Grace Hartman's actions being uncovered. If America knew an operative was compromised, she may be ordered to do something drastic. If she was in Pyongyang, staying here meant they were closer to her. But it also meant they were closer to *him*.

Korea didn't say goodnight. He just told Hwang to inform Kangwon of the leak's miniscule details after the meeting tomorrow, then turned away, striding down the hall, past his door.

"You should stay here tonight," North Pyongan called, sounding slightly alarmed.

"I have work to do."

It was past midnight. Work should have ended several hours ago, especially with a public appearance in a few hours. But Hwang knew that would never be the case with Korea.

"Big Brother said you could take the Jeep," Liaotung offered.

"No need." Korea pushed open the exit, and Hwang was almost certain he struggled more than usual before it clanged shut.

Liaotung muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'prickly pear' before yelping again.

"I don't know why you bother," North Hamgyong grunted.

"Because China's ob-" Liaotung shot a glare at her sister, rubbing her arm.

Innocently, Liaoxi said, "When the hour grows late, you are not quite up to task. Forgive me, dear sister, but you've forgotten your..." She twirled a hand expectantly.

Liaotung didn't answer, suddenly yawning. "Yes, I'm tired," she agreed, turning for their door. "Let's get back to sleep."

Liaoxi followed her, touching hands with North Pyongan before slipping back into the room. South Pyongan smirked at her brother, joining them.

"Nation traitor," North Hamgyong muttered at the male Pyongan, not for the first time. He'd been quite displeased when Hwang had told him their cousin was courting the Chinese province.

Hwang had his own misgivings- if it became common knowledge to their people that one of their provinces was dallying with a foreign province, it could make them believe he *was* a nation traitor, or at the very least compromised. But he had informed North Pyongan of this and received the assurance that he wouldn't announce it to anyone, so that had to be satisfactory. At the very least, his cousin was discrete. The only reason Hwang knew was because Liaotung had asked him what he thought about the pairing.

North Pyongan, for his part, patiently said, "Comrade Liaoxi is a friend that's fighting for our country, not an enemy. And I bother trying with Korea because I care."

"You sound like South Hamgyong," North Hamgyong sneered, a scathing insult from him. "And a nation traitor."

North Pyongan sighed. "Goodnight, cousin." He and Chagang disappeared into their room, leaving Hwang and North Hamgyong.

Hwang went to follow, but was stopped by the other man's voice.

"Who was it?"

Tensing, he looked over his shoulder. "Elaborate."

North Hamgyong was illuminated by the glow of the flashlight clipped to his belt. The man crossed his broad arms. "The agent that got us that shit was someone we knew, right? You've been moping around for a couple days now. That means they're dead. Who was it?"

Always humbling to be reminded that there was a good possibility he was less emotionally observant than *North Hamgyong* of all people. Though his cousin mostly seemed to use it to target a man- or South Hamgyong- when they were weakest.

"Classified," Hwang clipped.

North Hamgyong rolled his eyes. "If the Yanks take Chongjin and give the Southern bastard the chance to Command shit out of me, we're already done for. A dead op's identity won't matter."

"Not necessarily true," Hwang sniffed. "We made a comeback before, we could easily do it again."

Perhaps not 'easily.' But it did no good to say that out loud.

His cousin's eyes flashed as he opened his mouth, then grit his teeth. "Who was it? I'm not going to snitch on you to Korea."

Hwang deliberated. He supposed it really was only Grace Hartman's involvement that mattered.

He sighed. "You won't even recognize the name."

"Don't tell me what I won't recognize."

"Choi Jung-nam."

His cousin crossed his arms again.

"I told you." Even though Hwang knew for a fact that North Hamgyong had been told the names of both he and his wife, both when speaking of his life pre-Korea, and when they would retrieve information from them. He could remember the man referring to Suzuki Yoshi by a slur.

"He was my student," Hwang reminded him, feeling a pang. 'Was' suddenly seemed to no longer be neutral past tense, but to carry a decidedly negative slant. "One of those that helped us during the Occupation."

"Right," North Hamgyong grunted. "The one that married the Jap."

Negative reinforcement didn't work on him, so Hwang simply nodded. "Yes."

And how would Suzuki Yoshi feel when she heard her husband was dead? Who would tell her? A Soviet who knew neither of them? One of their own agents? Or would Korea not want to pass that information on for security reasons, and leave her fretting in the Soviet Union until the war was over, never even knowing that Choi Jung-nam would never be coming home? Did she even know he'd come here with the intention of being a spy?

She would have known. She'd always been a smart woman. Hwang had known it from the moment he caught her creating an expert distraction to steal the textbook she wanted. Even if they refused to tell her why she and her family were being uprooted, she would know.

But she wouldn't know the part Hwang had played in it. Not until he had to be the one to tell her.

Dread filled his stomach at the thought.

North Hamgyong was shaking his head.

"Care to put a voice to your disapproval?" Hwang asked, knowing he would do it anyway.

"Yeah. You should've known this would happen."

Hwang flinched at the words, though he knew they likely weren't the accusation he heard them as.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means even though you're supposed to be the smart one, you still go and get attached."

Hwang blinked at that, slightly baffled. "To our people? Yes. We're Provincehumans. That's what we're supposed to do."

So many hadn't and didn't see that. But the provinces of the People's Korea's had to be different.

North Hamgyong curled his lip in disdain. "Yeah, but you make it personal. You and *her-"* He flung his hand at the door. "And the others. Even Korea can't meet a fucking invalid without asking for their damn name."

"Don't *you* know Kim Mae-jon's name?" Hwang arched a brow as he used the name of the woman his cousin had been providing rations to.

"Against my will," he growled back. "And I don't know the names of her brats. You know why? Because they're probably going to fucking die."

"Everyone dies someday," Hwang said, pushing his glasses up. "Most Countryhumans and every human."

"Exactly," North Hamgyong snapped. "You don't have to make friends with them before they do. Do you think you'd be so fucking depressed right now if all that man was to you was just some guy that helped us out?"

"Do you think I want to talk about this right now?!" Hwang burst out, unable to help himself. "I'm already worrying over my sister, and I *just* told you I lost someone that you correctly identified as a friend. Do you think it helps to hear he was going to die anyways?"

"It would *help* if you stopped cozying up to people!" North Hamgyong snapped back.

"My personal proximity to them has nothing to do with my grief," Hwang refuted. "They are our people. Even if someone whose name I don't know, whom I've never met, loses their life, it grieves me."

He had to edit their magazines, their casualty counts from the latest air raids, the obituaries and memorials to the sheer loss of life the Americans were causing. And every number stabbed like a sharpened quill. Hwang didn't need to know them to feel their loss.

North Hamgyong growled, "But it would 'grieve' you less."

"I don't *want* it to grieve me less."

If anything, he wanted it to grieve him more.

The door to their room opened slightly, and North Pyongan stepped into the hall. Hwang jumped back, and North Hamgyong looked away as if it could remove him from the conversation.

"I can hear you in the room," their cousin said politely, keeping his voice low.

Hwang blinked, alarmed and embarrassed. "Specifics?"

"Only when you raised your voices."

He eased. That meant they hadn't heard him say Choi Jung-nam had been working for them. It wasn't serious, but Korea was on edge... 'Lately' implied 'recently,' and that wasn't entirely true. Korea had been on edge for awhile now, and he'd rather not have a repeat of the New Year's Eve ration incident focused on him alone.

North Pyongan looked at their broader cousin. "North Hamgyong, you-"

"I don't want to hear any Jesus shit," he interrupted.

The cobalt-skinned man sighed. "I was just going to say that you can't avoid getting close to our people just because you are afraid to lose them. We owe it to them to share their lives, their bitters and their sweets. We cannot guide them properly if we don't."

"Who said I want to be a guide?"

"You don't have a choice," North Pyongan said softly. "We were put on this path the moment we were formed as Provincehumans. We can either lead or follow."

His fist rose to his heart as he gazed at them both solemnly. "And we can't afford to follow."

Hwang would have put it slightly less mystically, but he nodded. "If you remain distant from our people, they'll sense it. It could easily turn your province into a base for counter-revolutionary activity."

"My people wouldn't turn against the damn revolution just because I don't go to their kids' fucking doljanchi," North Hamgyong said, and Hwang was glad to hear he sounded defensive. At least he had *some* affection for the people of his province.

"No, but they'll have less reason to follow your example, and less personal drive to be patriotic if their Provincehuman refuses to intermingle with them," Hwang pointed out.

"You could lose us, too." There was a flicker in North Pyongan's white eyes at the thought. "We are only conditionally immortal. Do you think it's better to remain distant from us?"

North Hamgyong's shoulders hunched to his ear slits as he turned his head, not even permitting them to read his facial expressions.

Hwang exchanged a look with North Pyongan. His cousin gazed back sorrowfully.

"Whatever," North Hamgyong muttered. "I'm fucking beat. I don't want to stand here and get nagged."

He barged past them, but North Pyongan caught the sleeve of his undershirt.

"Cousin," he said gently. "Grief is part of life. It's impossible to avoid. Try to make it worthwhile."

'Worthwhile...'

Hwang thought of those after-school classes hiding in supply closets with Choe Jung-nam, excitedly discussing Liberation and the Occupation in hushed whispers, and later huddling around the table in that abandoned hut with Suzuki Yoshi, laughing and chatting as they read banned books and the pieces of their old country that the province had managed to save. He thought of his smile as he told him about his family.

It had all certainly been worthwhile.

"You'll live a lonely life if you refuse to get close with our people," North Pyongan told him.

"And if you keep pushing away those you're already close with," Hwang sniffed.

North Hamgyong tugged his arm free, marching over to his cot at the back without another word.

Hwang exhaled, trading another glance with North Pyongan.

"Don't make fucking faces about me," their cousin's voice said from the dark.

The two stepped into the room, North Pyongan using his light to help Hwang navigate. His bunk was to the right of the door, at the bottom (the top filled with books he'd recovered from the wreckage of their cities; he was still in mourning over his collection).

As he climbed in, still fully dressed (sans his glasses) to ward off the chill, he asked, "Chagang, do you have any input?"

The man was a light sleeper, and he didn't like to leave him out of the conversation. And perhaps part of him pettily wanted to rub their words in to his recalcitrant cousin as revenge.

Chagang was silent long enough for him to think he was mistaken in assuming he was awake, before he said from the bunk across from his, "I don't like grief."

"Aren't you fucking special?" North Hamgyong grumbled.

"But it's part of love."

"How oddly poignant of you," Hwang remarked, before wincing as he realized how callous that came off. "Apologies, I didn't mean to imply-"

Chagang cut him off with a, "It's fine," sounding as unbothered as always.

He could hear North Hamgyong turning over in his cot, wrapping his thin pillow over his head to shut them out. Hwang sighed, bidding the others goodnight as he snuggled down in his bedroll, pulling it over the top of his ushanka to seal his body heat in.

'Grief is part of love.' It was a touching sentiment. If it came to being emotionless or filled with grief for those he'd lost, Hwang would always choose the latter. He didn't want to be some clinical, unfeeling caricature of an intellectual, and never had.

Still, he couldn't help but half agree with North Hamgyong's feelings. Not so much what he had voiced out loud, but that more subtle desire.

Wouldn't it be nice if the pain never had to come?

He struggled to let the sorrow keep him up, but even that primal force wasn't enough to prevent his eyelids from closing.

And as he drifted off, he wondered if Suzuki Yoshi would feel that the grief that would soon hit her was an acceptable price to pay for the years of love.

—

Kangwon slid into Hae's room, finding his brother on a palette on the floor, his head pillowed on his arms.

He moved quietly, checking his cousin's condition, filling with relief as he felt her heart beating under her sharp ribcage, as it had been since late January. She still wasn't stirring from her recuperative coma, but her pulse was steady. She'd recover, hopefully before Korea or anyone else realized he was lying.

Gently, he placed a small, white-wrappered milk candy on the bedside table. China had given it to him for when 'the Little Tiger wakes,' along with a knowing smile in the face of Kangwon playing dumb, and an assurance that 'his secret' was safe with him.

Hoping that was true, the province adjusted the sheets around his cousin, then sat on the edge of the bed, pulling the telegraph paper from his pocket to read it by the light of his flashlight. His russet palm cupped over the beam painted the room an ominous red colour, dyeing the paper and the words on it the colour of old blood.

Kangwon resisted the urge to bite his nails as he smoothed the strip

over his thigh, rereading the words, almost hoping they'd say something different than every other time he'd read them, so that he wouldn't have to let their cousins and their Military Commission in on what he, Korea, and Gangwon had known for almost a week.

But the message was unchanged.

The flies and other insects that'd been recovered from the parts of Chorweon County they still held had been difficult to test. They hadn't been able to detect anything in the mites, and most of the flies had been too damaged by the cold to get any conclusive proof of contamination.

But their bacteriologists had been able to see the masses of bacteria in the guts of the fleas, and isolate it, enough to determine what it was- Pasteurella pestis. The same bacteria that spread the diseases responsible for the pandemic that had led to the deaths of seventy-five million or more people worldwide in just seven years back in the 1300s.

Plague bacteria.

For the 'Hwang and Choi Jung-nam never referred to Grace as she in their conversation,' I did use she and her, but that's because using they or just 'the source' felt too impersonal for the emotionality of the conversation. So written in English she and her were used, but in the Korean they were talking in, they wouldn't have been because the pronouns would have been implied.

Pasteurella pestis is now called Yersinia pestis. Keep this in mind for a future document I'll link. Yersinia would also be a beautiful name for a girl. Me and my lovely daughters Pasteurella and Yersinia. Ultimate kirakira names?

I wrote this before the consumption, so hopefully it's coherent. I am viewing this as learning experience for future chapters. Everything hurts. The 4D shapes are inside if my skull. But I made very good pie and I am healing.

Placing The Blame

Hwang left the underground assembly hall with his mind awhirl.

The enlarged meeting of the Military Commission had been successful in discussing measures for anti-epidemic work. More observation posts were to be arranged in every army unit, workplace, residential area, and periodically along the highways, not just for planes now, but for what they delivered. The contaminated drops had to be identified and reported to the local Epidemic Prevention committees, then to the State Extraordinary Epidemic Prevention Committee and the Medical Bureau as swiftly as possible. Communications was to give all news of this sort ultimate priority, and all organizations were being rallied to the fight, from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Railways.

As part of the Ministry of Culture and Information, Hwang had been charged with the task of helping conduct information work about the germ warfare by the Premier himself, making sure every soldier and civilian knew the proper hygiene protocols and how to dispose of any biological materials.

But the influx of work that had to be carried out to make certain their material conditions were suited to combat an epidemic wasn't what had rattled him.

"It really is the plague?"

Kangwon looked around instinctively as they passed through the manufacturing district to reach the military hospital before saying, "Yeah. Sorry I couldn't tell you all before. You know how it is."

'How it was' was Korea, obviously.

"Of course," Hwang agreed, though the obfuscation made him uneasy for an entirely different reason. "But you're sure it's the plague?"

"Do you think Korea would've let me tell the Military Commission- and the Premier- if we weren't sure?"

"Fair point," Hwang conceded.

The plague. The 'Black Death' as the pandemic that had obliterated over half of Europe's population had been called. He couldn't believe he'd been worried about encephalitis just a few days ago.

The bricks that had once made up the kilns in the kilning district had been stacked neatly where the building once stood, surrounding a pile of unsalvageable rubble. A few militia members were on watch around them, guarding the resources that hadn't been taken for other projects yet, clustered around a charcoal-burning stove. They called out in greeting, and Kangwon waved back.

Hwang waited until they were some distance away before asking, "And there isn't any chance of the bacteria being natural?"

He'd never heard of any naturally-occurring cases in their country before, even during the Manchurian Plague of 1910 and 1911. And those that had emerged during the second plague in the early 1920s had came from Chinese labourers, and been rapidly contained. But Kangwon was the medical expert, not him. Though he was certainly going to be reading as many textbooks as he could get his hands on for the foreseeable future.

His cousin shook his head. "It doesn't originate here. It usually doesn't appear outside its endemic zones much at all. If it does, well."

'Well,' indeed. It wouldn't solely be Korea's problem then.

"Anyway, the closest zone for the bubonic plague is in Manchuria, over a thousand ri away," Kangwon continued as they approached the hospital. "And China says he hasn't had any cases."

"Unlikely fleas could carry the disease all the way here without infecting anyone in China," Hwang mused.

Or in their own provinces, as the fleas that had carried the bacteria were found down in Kangwon's province.

"Yeah, and they're human fleas, not rat fleas, which are the ones that usually carry the plague. Plus they were found in the wilds outside villages, when they shouldn't go where there aren't any people." Kangwon stopped outside the hospital door so they could finish their conversation. His lips were pressed flat. "So definitely not natural."

"Definitely not," Hwang agreed heavily.

He supposed having that confirmation was good for his information work. It was one more thing with which to convince the American POWs they were on the wrong side.

Yet a natural outbreak would be easier to fight than one with deliberate intent.

Kangwon let out a deep breath, then shook his head. "We'll handle it. Korea's already importing supplies for more vaccines, and rat poison and stuff. It won't become a full-blown epidemic."

There he was again with that reassurance, though there was really no way to know if it was true.

"Come on. You have to tell me about that thing."

Putting aside his misgivings, Hwang followed Kangwon into the hospital, going through the disinfection process, and sliding on a white lab coat, gloves, and face mask on over his uniform. Though the military hospital didn't house the sick, injury could compromise the patients' immune systems, so the utmost care had to be taken.

Kangwon led him though the cheery teal and white halls. As they passed the room he and his brother had used to use, Hwang noted a nurse going in with a bottle of antiseptic.

"Do you not sleep here anymore?" he asked.

"I don't really *sleep* anymore." His cousin chuckled a tinch too tiredly. At Hwang's concerned look, he said, "I'm joking. I've just been out in the field a lot lately, and when I'm here, I'm running between this hospital, City Hospital One, the Quarantine Hospital, and all the clinics. Gangwon was the one that needed the privacy of

the room, so I just sleep in a cot in the break room now. Or in Hae's room when I'm over that way."

Kangwon's cheek dimpled as he sucked on the inside of it. "We're going to need all the room we have."

The statement was grim, but Hwang had latched onto the sentence before it.

"How is Hae?" he asked in a way he hoped was casual.

"She's good," his cousin answered. "Gangwon's taking care of her. She says 'hi' again. Well, 'howdy.'"

Hwang examined his face from the corner of his eye. His cousin turned his head, raising an eyebrow.

He looked away. "Tell her I say it back."

The hospital hallway wasn't the sort of place to discuss that. And he had to prioritize information about the leak.

The break room was empty, allowing them to use its privacy. Kangwon pulled the striped curtain over the window, leaving the yellow overhead bulb as their only light as they sat on the spare cot.

Hwang wasted no time in explaining what details had been provided about the leak. He spoke more slowly than usual, monitoring his tongue so it wouldn't slip up and mention Choi Jung-nam or Grace Hartman.

And still he was finished too soon.

Kangwon's brows furrowed as he considered his words. "Agent Maine..."

"It's an American state," Hwang provided. "It's located in the northeast, next to the Canadian border."

"Hm." His cousin shook his head. "I'll keep an eye out. And tell Gangwon and Hae's bodyguards to be extra careful. If she was

ordered to get proof, she could be a nurse."

Hwang had considered that. "I don't think so. At least not at this hospital. Otherwise I feel as if she would've already been able to obtain it."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

By the line still marring his brow, something still appeared to be bothering him.

But before Hwang could ask, his cousin shook his shoulders out, and beat him to it.

"Are you feeling okay? Emotionally, not healthwise. I know you've got that sympathetic fever."

Taken aback, Hwang said, "Why do you ask?"

Kangwon shrugged. "You're usually excited when you get to tell people stuff. But you were a little low energy there." The corners of his lips turned down. "Did we lose someone else?"

The province hesitated, then admitted, "Yes."

His cousin exhaled. "Who?"

Hwang's heart squeezed. "I can't say. It's classified."

Kangwon wasn't North Hamgyong, so he didn't force the matter, just nodded. "Tell me when the war's over. We'll drink to them."

They were going to need all the alcohol in Korea if they were going to drink to everyone they'd lost.

Hwang looked down at his lap. "Kangwon may I ask- how long is it appropriate to feel grief for?" Realizing the question made him sound slightly like he had no idea how to act human, he quickly clarified, "I mean I'm well aware that it varies by person and cause, and grief never truly fades, just gets easier to bear, I only..."

He twiddled his thumbs together. "It's been four days since they

died. Is it... callous of me to already be recovering emotionally?"

He didn't want to be. He didn't want to get excited at the idea of sleuthing out who the leak was, or the assignments he was creating for some of the elementary school students, or the anti-epidemic information work he was going to get to create. When his mind started racing off down an avenue of thought, it felt like a betrayal to Choi Jung-nam.

"You've always recovered quick," Kangwon pointed out.

Hwang winced. "I'm aware."

Choi Jung-nam wasn't the first comrade whose death had impacted him. It was perhaps the most severe by virtue of who he'd been to him, but it wasn't the *only* severe loss. He tended to overcome the sorrow quickly. From the war against Japan to the nation-building to this war, there was simply never any time to be consumed with grief.

But with how deeply he'd cared for Choi Jung-nam, it felt like this time should be different. The fact that it wasn't made him worry.

"Is that normal?" he asked. "Or at least within the range of normality? Or does it make me... clinical?"

He had a feeling his sister would be upset if she knew how long her use of that word had stuck with him. But it had lodged under his skin like a splinter.

'Or a needle.'

"Hae bounces back from things fast, too," Kangwon said, leaning back on his palms. "Honestly, sometimes she does it faster than you."

"But she doesn't *truly* bounce back," Hwang returned. "She only pretends to."

As with Sincheon, both the initial event, and their visit there months ago. A mere day later and she had been her usual bubbly self, according to SH.

But he knew it had stayed with her. Every time they left Haeju together, she insisted they visit the town, even if only to stare up at the board of missing persons posters for a long minute. She was always more subdued than usual when she got back in their vehicle.

"But she's pretending to herself, too," Kangwon said. "You're both just good at compartmentalizing."

Hwang downcast his eyes. "That word does sound a bit clinical."

"If you're clinical, then I am, too," his cousin replied. "Every doctor needs to be good at compartmentalization. Do you think I'd be able to remove a bullet from someone if I was thinking about all the ways I could screw up, or everything else going on right now? I had to practice that. You're lucky it comes naturally."

He didn't feel lucky.

He didn't voice the thought, but Kangwon read it in the dip of his brows, and nudged his shoulder with his own.

"Trust me, cousin. You're not clinical. People just show sensitivity in different ways." He plucked at the lapel of his own coat. "I didn't cry when I got told Choe Bong-nam was martyred, even though we were friends."

His heavy-lidded eyes flickered slightly, but he carried on. "That doesn't mean I'm callous or anything. I'm just not a crier. And you're just not someone who gets hung up on stuff. That's fine."

It was true that he'd never seen Kangwon cry. And he'd certainly never viewed him as anything less than compassionate. The thought mollified Hwang slightly.

"So it isn't a betrayal to... those we've lost to move on so quickly?" he tentatively asked.

Kangwon shook his head. "You're not moving on. You'll still be upset, right?"

"Yes," Hwang said quietly.

He didn't think he ever wouldn't be. He knew in the future as they rebuilt their country, every time he looked at a highway or building, he would think that Choi Jung-nam could have had a hand in engineering it, if only he had lived.

"There you go," the other man said. "You're not moving on. Just moving forward. And that's good. Denying your grief isn't good for you, but neither's wallowing in it. That's what makes certain people we know so miserable sometimes."

It was clear who he meant. For once it wasn't Korea.

Kangwon placed a hand on his shoulder, giving him a warm smile. "None of us think you're a cold person, Hwang. Handle your grief at your own pace, no matter how fast or slow that is. Don't cling to it just because you feel like you should."

Hwang let out a steady exhale, then nodded. "I won't."

He knew Choi Jung-nam wouldn't have approved of him letting his grief over his death distract him. Wanting to remain in that initial stage of overwhelming emotional pain was simply him being selfish, wanting to assure himself he cared using someone else's metric.

He knew he had cared about his former student. He knew he always would. That was enough.

Hwang cleared his throat, looking away. He was open-minded, but it really was embarrassing for a man to cry as much as he had since the war began, if only because he could hear North Hamgyong mocking him for it in his head.

"Thank you," he said when he trusted his voice to be steady. "And I'm sorry for bothering you with something so silly when I'm fully aware of how busy you are."

Sitting this close to his cousin, he could make out the dark purple shadows marring the green magnolia petals under his eyes even clearer.

"I asked," Kangwon reminded him. "And it's my job. You actually

coming to me with your problems makes it easier. Please keep it up."

Hwang chuckled, though he privately resolved to only do so after the war, or if it was very urgent. No matter how skilled Kangwon was at compartmentalizing, he didn't wish to add any further weight to the burden of his anti-epidemic responsibility.

"Was there something bothering *you,* by the way?" he asked. "You looked slightly distracted after I told you about the leak."

"It's nothing. Just thinking about something."

The reflexive reassurance finally allowed Hwang to gather his resolve. He felt slightly guilty at lodging what was essentially an accusation after his cousin had just comforted him the way he had, but he knew with the efforts against the germ warfare increasing, there was a good chance he wouldn't see him alone in a nonprofessional setting for some time.

Adjusting his glasses, he ventured, "I was talking to North Hamgyong a few days ago."

"Always fun," Kangwon replied dryly.

"Quite. He said something that sort of... alarmed me."

Pulling a leg up onto the cot, his cousin waited expectantly.

Hwang cleared his dry throat. "He heavily implied- or more outright said- that Hae, well..."

It was foolish superstition to not want to say the word out loud, so he forced himself to.

"Died."

Kangwon's eyebrows went up slightly. "He really said that?"

"Yes." Hwang licked his lips nervously. "He said she died of her illness, and that you've been covering it up to avoid worrying Korea. And us as well, I assume. Is that... That couldn't be true?"

He wrung his hands as he anxiously waited for an answer.

It came immediately as Kangwon shook his head.

"No," he denied, as relaxed as before. "Hae's fine."

His expression wasn't ridden with guilt or alarm. As he gazed back at him, it was as easy-going as ever. Hwang searched it using his proficiency in their silent language.

And found nothing.

"Of course," he said. "I was certain he was only attempting to upset me. I only asked because I remember reading that cholera only lasts for a few days."

"Yeah," Kangwon agreed, not seeming uncomfortable at being called out. "But don't tell Hae that."

His meaning clicked in Hwang's brain. "Ah."

He nodded. "She's over the cholera, but she's still weak from the fluid loss. Between the burns and all the waste she was expelling, on top of her malnourishment, it was pretty severe. She's not contagious anymore, but if I let her out of the Quarantine Hospital, she's going to want to get back to work, especially with sowing season coming up."

Of course. At the meeting of the Party Central Committee's Political Committee preparations had been discussed, Korea and the Chairman reinforcing that localities needed to produce their own fertilizer to make up for the destruction of their factories (he had been able to hear SH's teeth grinding, *not* that he was judging), draught animal and implement-sharing had to be organized amongst the peasants, seed grain stores needed to be assessed so that the State could make up for shortages where necessary, and a large-scale stock farm was to be built near Paektusan to attempt to make up for their meat shortage, amongst a host of other issues. Special attention needed to be paid to Ongjin County and South Yonbaek County, which were still newly under their jurisdiction. Soldiers were to be sent to aid the peasants there specifically in

order to demonstrate the character of the People's Army to those who had formerly only known Rhee's cut-throats and high-taxers.

Hwang knew that if his sister had been there she would have been vibrating with excitement at the work to do, and would want to launch herself into it immediately, no matter her condition, following Korea's example.

"Sorry," Kangwon apologized. "I'd planned from the start to keep her longer to get some weight back on her, but I didn't want Korea getting antsy about her returning to work. I should've told you."

Hwang searched him again, digging deep for some sign that he wasn't telling the truth.

But the only thing he found was an apologetic tilt to his brows.

"No, no, it's alright," he assured him, almost physically slumping as a weight lifted from his shoulders. "I understand. And it isn't as if you lied- you said she was recovering, and she is."

"Yeah," Kangwon said easily. "She is."

Hwang let out a relieved breath. "Do you think you could have her write me a letter the next time you see her? It's not that I don't believe you-" he tried to explain, but Kangwon cut him off.

"No, I get it. I'll get her to write one. It might be awhile, though. I'm going to be busy for the next..." He trailed off. "Well, you were at the meeting."

Hwang bobbed his head. "Don't go out of your way. Your work is more important than assuaging my fears."

It was enough to hear she really was well.

"Maybe," Kangwon admitted. "But that's important, too. It would be hard for you to focus on work if you're worrying about Hae."

Hwang laughed sheepishly. "I'm not *that* skilled at compartmentalizing." He sighed, leaning back on the cot. "I'm sorry about that. You know how North Hamgyong can get under your

skin."

"I've definitely heard about it," Kangwon agreed.

"Honestly, you think he'd have more empathy about me fearing for my sister's condition after what happened to South Hamgyong during the tactical retreat."

SH had been in unknown condition in enemy captivity after suffering a wound at his own hands. He should know how it felt. (Hwang could also add that he had been nothing but empathetic to *him* after he'd been told, though it had gone unappreciated.)

"I hate to say it," Kangwon said. "But that's probably *why* he was lashing out." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I'll try to talk to him again."

"Only if you need to raise your blood pressure," Hwang muttered. "I swear he's-"

Kangwon suddenly sat bolt upright, his eyes wide.

Hwang jumped up instinctively, his hand going for his pistol and his eyes darting to the window, expecting to spot someone peering in the crack visible last the curtain, but seeing nothing.

"What is it?" he asked tensely.

"The tactical retreat." Kangwon's voice carried an excitement it didn't normally as he snapped his fingers. "When we were in the holding camp. That's what I was thinking of."

He stood, rocking on the balls of his feet as he spoke without his usual lackadaisical tempo. "There was this American nurse named Marianne, and she was from Maine."

Hwang raised a brow skeptically, certain he wasn't suggesting she was the leak. An American woman wouldn't exactly be subtle.

"And you were trying to recall that?"

Kangwon nodded vigorously. "Maybe this is a little bit of a long

shot, but I heard her in Pyongan dialect, from around the coast."

Hwang perked up at that, feeling a trickle of his own excitement. "You're suggesting-?"

"The leak seems to pass on info pretty quick with how North and South Pyongan got ambushed that one night," Kangwon rushed, eyes gleaming. "If she's got a radio, America's probably heard her voice before."

Hwang picked up the thought. "And he would hear her Pyongan accent as from-"

"Maine," they both finished.

Hwang tried not to let himself get to excited at the revelation, aware that it was made of conjecture. But it was hard not to be.

"Can you pin the location down any further?" he urged. "Or simply the coast?"

Pyongan dialect was spoken from South Pyongan to North Pyongan to Chagang. If Kangwon had simply said Maine dialect sounded like Pyongan dialect, it wouldn't have made his mind race like this- of course someone in Pyongyang spoke Pyongan dialect.

But like most dialects, Pyongan dialect wasn't uniform. It varied with terrain, isolation, and proximity to other provinces and China. 'Coastal' was already a great help.

Kangwon thought for a moment. "I'd say it was more Northern Pyongan. You know how the farther that way you go, the rounder their vowels get, and they kind of start overpronouncing things? Don't tell South Pyongan I said that."

Hwang nodded so fast the room blurred. "They become more adverse to the 'w' sound in our vowels that contain it, and don't palatalize sounds as much. Kangwon! I think you might have narrowed the search!"

As the capital, Pyongyang was filled with people from across Korea. But moving cross-country still wasn't exactly feasible for or

desired by most Koreans. Most of those that moved were either Party officials or specialists being sent out to rural locales, or specialists being called into the city. In which case they should have records.

A woman in Pyongyang who had been raised somewhere near coastal North Pyongan long enough to have developed the dialect. It wasn't exactly enough to give them an exact target, but any parameters that helped drain the pool of suspects helped.

His cousin laughed in relief. "Maybe Korea'll forgive me for letting myself get captured now."

"Doubtful!"

He sighed. "Yeah."

Hwang started to pace excitedly. "I wonder why our northwestern dialect is similar to the American northeastern one? What do you think affects that? I've heard the Shanghai dialect- of Mandarin, not Shanghaiese- also comes across as Pyongan dialect. What determines that? You know, studies have never really been conducted on-"

"Hwang." Kangwon firmly seized his shoulders. "Go find Korea and tell him."

Hwang snapped to attention. "Right!"

He darted for the door, then darted back, grabbing his cousin's hands.

"Kangwon," he said seriously, squeezing hard. "Thank you."

He couldn't tell him why this meant so much to him, but he didn't have to.

Kangwon smiled, and Hwang sprinted off to find Korea to share the good news.

Hae really was okay.

And they were closer to making Choe Jung-nam's death worth it.

—

Kangwon sighed as the door slid shut behind Hwang, slumping back onto the cot to stare up at the white plaster ceiling, his glow of excitement at being able to help out with the leak fading.

Yeah, he was going to have to get down on his knees and beg for Hwang's forgiveness after Hae was better.

He knew his cousin might want to keep her death a secret permanently, but he didn't see it happening. She'd end up telling someone, and that someone would probably be Korea.

And then he was going to have to slam his forehead on the ground until he got blood on Hwang's shoes.

Kangwon rubbed a hand over his eyes, trying to wipe the blear from them, but just making the room even blurrier.

He didn't *want* to lie to his cousin's face. But he'd already came this far, and Hae really was recovering. A couple more weeks and she'd be awake and as healthy as any of them could be right now. And it wasn't just her not wanting to worry Korea that was driving him. He didn't want to worry him either, or Hwang or any of the others. Not with all this going on.

Hwang wasn't light-mouthed, but he was right about not being good enough at compartmentalization to completely shove aside his worries about Hae. He couldn't be distracted from his information work. With their severe lack of supplies, the best way to save lives was for everyone to avoid getting sick in the first place. And to do that, the masses needed to know as much as possible about the germ warfare and how to combat it.

At least their material conditions would be slightly better after today's meeting. The State was producing and buying as much disinfectant, rat poison, and insecticides as they could for distribution, the Engineering Corps would be working on tunnels

for more labs, and the Food Administration Bureau was going to be devoting even more resources for segregated patients.

They had to hurry with the vaccines, not just for refreshers for the common ones, like cholera and typhus, but the plague. Like Kangwon had said, cases didn't originate in Korea, and there hadn't been any reported in years, so it hadn't exactly been a high priority vaccination before. Now that it was, they needed to get everyone inoculated as soon as possible.

Especially when another mass of flies had been dropped on Balnam-ri in South Pyongan's province just a couple days ago.

Kangwon wanted to rub his eyes again, but he felt like his arms were sinking into the flimsy material of the army cot, too heavy to lift. He vaguely wondered why it was so dark, then realized he'd shut his eyes at some point.

Twitching, he forced himself up, briskly shaking his head to get rid of the muzzy fever feeling in it. It was only the sympathetic type, so he couldn't let it distract him.

Putting his face mask back on, he stretched to limber himself back up, then slipped back into the hall.

First he had to find Kim Yong-hwan and pass on the list of symptoms for the nurses here to watch out for, and the protocols to follow if they were found, then he had to go to the Quarantine Hospital and fill Gangwon in on the Military Commission meeting, and grab his hazmat suit, then head for Balnam-ri with Korea.

He wondered if he should invite South Pyongan since it was her own province, then decided against it. His cousin was... more than a bit paranoid about the possibility of getting sick. Korea had had him give the others a check-up before the meeting, and she'd refused to take her face mask off near him, or for the entire thing, even leaning away from the comrades that sat next to her.

'Mm, there's another thing to do.' He'd grab her some surgical gloves. It might make her feel a little better.

He took a pair from one of the supply boxes, walking through the halls until he heard Kim Yong-hwan's slightly exasperated voice from up ahead, around a corner he knew led to a dead end.

"I'm fine."

"I'm just worried about you," An Il-rae replied with concern.

"I know. You worry too much."

"That makes one of us."

Kim Yong-hwan sighed, her voice softening slightly. "I'm sorry."

Kangwon raised his brows, smirking at the rare words from her.

"I'm just tired," the nurse said. "And stressed. That's all it is. And it's not going to go away until this damn war is won and these Yanks are off our land. So don't stress yourself over it."

An Il-rae was silent for a moment. "You'll tell me if you get sick? You promise?"

"Yes."

"Because I can't lose anyone else, Yong-hwan." Her voice quivered with tears. "Especially not you. I can't."

"You won't. I promise, Il-rae."

There was a deep tenderness under the woman's usual steely tone.

Kangwon crept back down the hall until he reached the far corner, giving them enough time to finish up, then turned and walked back, making sure his footsteps echoed on the cement floor.

The two women came around to meet him, and he got why An Il-rae had been worried. Kim Yong-hwan's dark shadows were heavier than ever above her mask, and the depth of her eye wrinkles made them look twenty years older than the rest of her face. For the first time, he realized he could see glints of silver in the bobbed black hair held back by her white headscarf, even though the New Year

had just turned her forty-six.

But at least her voice still sounded hale as she said, "Comrade Kangwon. Where's that no good Countryhuman of yours gotten to?"

An Il-rae stood on her tiptoes to whisper into her ear, "Comrade Kim, he's our Countryhuman, too."

The other woman snorted. "Not when he's been avoiding my cleaning, he's not."

Not acknowledging Kim Yong-hwan's exhaustion or how An Il-rae's eyes were still slightly red, Kangwon said, "Sorry to say, but I haven't gotten to do it either."

Even though he and Korea had been spending so much time together investigating. Every time he'd asked, he was turned down. And he couldn't try begging when there were scientists with them. He'd die of shame if anyone else ever walked in on that.

"Colour me shocked," Kim Yong-hwan said dryly. "A damn epidemic and he still won't take care of himself. Tell me when he gets a fever so I can send him a letter that says 'I told you so.'"

"Yong- Comrade Kim, you can't say that," An Il-rae hissed in alarm as Kangwon handed the woman his list.

Kim Yong-hwan sobered slightly. "I didn't mean with the plague. I'm talking about exhaustion."

"I know, but he might still be here." Her 'friend' looked down the hallway both ways with brown eyes.

"Korea was here?" Kangwon asked, confused.

Weird that he'd send Hwang with him to talk to him about the leak when he was coming here anyway. But maybe he'd just wanted to dodge another attempt at cleaning his wounds.

"Yes," An Il-rae replied. "He was asking about diseases."

'Oh no.' There shouldn't be any reason to ask anyone but *him*

about disease.

"You didn't tell me that," Kim Yong-hwan said sharply, jerking her head to her.

The brown-haired woman blinked in confusion. "He asked you, too, didn't he?"

"Yes, and I said I'm a war nurse that doesn't know the next thing about diseases. Which is what I hope *you* said."

An Il-rae bit her lip. "I mean, I know a *little* about diseases. Our soldiers used to get dysentery all the time. And I've been reading up on them in case we need more hands on anti-epidemic work. Scarlet fever, yellow fever, typhus, the plagues, cholera."

"What ones did he ask you about?" Kangwon cut in, trying to sound casual.

"That one," she said. "Cholera. He just asked how long it lasts for, and I told him it's usually between a few days to a week or two."

Kangwon's heart sank.

Her eyes flicked between the two of them, and she suddenly looked nervous. "That's right, isn't it? I read it in a textbook."

"Yes," Kim Yong-hwan said grimly. "It's right."

She shouldn't know anything about Hae's condition, but unlike An Il-rae, she knew enough about Kangwon and Korea to lie to the latter instinctively. She cut her eyes to the province, who trapped his fingers in his palms.

"I've got to go," he said calmly. "Work hard, comrades."

He turned and quickly left while Kim Yong-hwan assured An Il-rae she hadn't done anything wrong.

Kangwon met his guards at the entrance, and immediately started for the Quarantine Hospital, *really* hoping he'd run into Korea on the road in time to feed him the same story he'd fed Hwang.

But he didn't, and when he reached the semi-dug-out hospital, the Jeep was parked nearby, not even covered by a tarp.

The province left his guards, darting inside, every minute of decontamination protocols making it harder to resist shoving his fingers in his mouth. As soon as he was free, he jogged down the hall for Hae's room, nestled safely towards the heart of the aboveground portion.

*'Don't be there, **please** don't be there.'*

But when he made it around the last corner and saw Gangwon loitering nervously outside the door, he knew his time was up.

His brother made wide eyes, silently warning him. Kangwon winced, reaching for the door. Gangwon grabbed his sleeve before he could, furrowing his brows.

'Do you want me with you?'

Kangwon shook his head.

It was his fault. Korea's anger should be focused on him.

Gangwon hesitated, then his expression firmed, his grip on him tightening. *'I'm coming with you.'*

At least he wouldn't be able to get any more deaf.

Kangwon blinked appreciatively, steeling himself before entering.

Korea was standing over Hae's unconscious body, a face mask crumpled in his hand, and his back to them. As Kangwon slid the door shut, his head slowly turned, the rest of him staying completely motionless. The look on his face made the province instinctively step in front of his brother.

"Comrade An Il-rae told me that cholera only takes a few days to recover from." His Countryhuman's voice was as scarily blank as his expression.

Staying calm, Kangwon said, "It can take up to two weeks. And

patients can be contagious for longer."

Korea continued like he hadn't spoken. "It has been six weeks." His chin touched his shoulder, his head still the only part of him facing them as his eye narrowed. "So *why* is South Hwanghae still in here? And *why isn't she waking up?*

Kangwon opened his mouth, and he bared his fangs, his voice lowering to a growl as he finally faced them fully.

"If you lie to me again, it will *not* end well for you."

The province finally broke, looking away, unable to help the way he cringed. "Gangwon doesn't have anything to do with this, just me. I'm sorry. I didn't want to lie to you, I just-"

He saw Korea's eye flare and braced himself, shutting his mouth so he wouldn't bite his tongue as his Countryhuman slammed him back into the door, Gangwon diving out of the way with a yelp.

"For the last time- *I don't need you to protect me!"* he snarled in Kangwon's face, spraying him with spittle. "It is *my* job to protect *you!* So stop *lying* to me like I'm a fucking *child* that can't handle bad news!"

He heaved Kangwon forward and slammed him back again, rattling the door in its frame. Gangwon watched anxiously, his hands hovering like he wanted to stop him.

Kangwon shot him a subtle look, telling him not to. When Korea was worked up like this, touching him would only freak him out more.

"I warned you after you kept Kim Mi-ju's death a secret from me that if you *ever* did anything like that again, I wouldn't be able to trust you to treat our people," Korea growled, his fingers balled in his province's lapels. "Or *me."*

Alarmed, Kangwon forced past the fist pressed against his throat, "You can still trust me. Korea please, you need to let someone clean your wounds. If it's not Kim Yong-hwan, it has to be me."

"You should have thought about that before you neglected to tell me that South Hwanghae fucking died!"

"K-Korea!" Gangwon cut in from a safe distance away. "It's n-n-not Kangwon's f-fault! Hae's the one that didn't want to tell you."

Korea swung his head his way. Kangwon could've used his distraction to escape, but he stayed pressed up against the door, letting him keep his hold on his coat.

"Why would she do that?" he demanded, making Gangwon shrink back.

"Because she didn't want you worrying about her either," Kangwon said calmly. "And she didn't want you to be mad at me for losing her."

"And why shouldn't I be?" Korea spat, tightening his grip again. "You *did* lose her. She's dead because *you* couldn't save her!"

Kangwon flinched, heart cracking, all of the guilt he'd been feeling ever since he'd found Hae on the floor rushing out.

"Hey!" Gangwon cried disapprovingly. "Korea that's t-too far."

He came closer, and their Countryhuman twitched away, forced to release Kangwon so he could face them both, his hackles up.

"I kn-know there's no way Kangwon didn't do everything he could for Hae," his brother defended. "He would've tried everything he could've."

He had. He'd had her on a constant saline drip, kept her with a supply of water and rice, and even hooked up an IV with his own blood in it to her other arm, even though it didn't work like it did with their people.

Even with all that, she'd just lost fluids too fast.

"And it wasn't enough!" Korea snarled.

"But it means it's not his fault," Gangwon said firmly.

"She's still dead." Korea flung a hand at the unconscious woman on the bed. "Look at her! She's going to miss preparing for sowing, and she might even miss sowing itself. She *died."*

Kangwon watched his Countryhuman's face fall slack as his words echoed in the small room, like he'd finally realized what they meant.

"She's gone."

Gangwon looked confused, either because the words were too quiet or because they weren't.

Kangwon shook his head. "Korea, she's not gone. She's just in a recuperative coma."

He didn't seem to hear him. "She's gone and it's all your fault."

His eye didn't look like it was looking at Kangwon now. It was wide and glazed, burning with a feverish light as he started to back towards the wall.

"South Hwanghae is dead."

"She *was* dead," Kangwon corrected soothingly, careful to make sure Korea had a line of sight with the door. "But she's alright now. She's healing. I wasn't lying when I said she'd be better in two months."

"You don't fucking understand!" Korea was suddenly fierce again, his eye snapping back into focus, but still filled with that unsteady light. "She's dead and it's my-!"

His jaw clacked shut, and he suddenly lunged for the door. Kangwon made the mistake of trying to stop him, knowing he shouldn't touch him, but not wanting him to go. He put an arm out, hoping it would stop Korea short, but he collided with it and seemed to think it was a precursor to being grabbed because he whirled and launched himself at the province, who went down at the sudden attack.

He grunted as his back hit the hard ground, hearing Gangwon cry

out in alarm as the two of them tumbled across the floor, Kangwon trying to free himself, and Korea taking it as trying to capture him, and fighting harder, grabbing at his arms and legs, attempting to work him into a hold.

Kangwon was alarmed to find that even though he wasn't actually fighting back, and was being careful where he put his hands, not wanting to hurt that deep burn on his country's body, he was winning.

He quickly backed down, allowing Korea to slam him back onto the floor, straddling his stomach as he pinned his arms at the shoulders, growling down at him, his chest heaving. Kangwon was barely out of breath, but the man on top of him was sucking in air in jagged gasps.

He suddenly cracked his neck around like he thought Gangwon was sneaking up on him. But the other province had pressed himself against the far wall, as far from the door as possible. He held up both his hands to show they were empty.

Korea looked back down at Kangwon, still breathing erratically. Kangwon gazed back up calmly.

"Is it because she was looking for the dog?"

Korea's fingers dug into his shoulders as his jaw tightened.

"We know," Kangwon said, keeping his tone easy. "We lived off of deer for years, remember?"

They'd never eaten that meat until after they went with Korea, away from the starving dog pack with feral eyes, and they hadn't eaten it often, so he might not have recognized it. But the deer they'd used to catch could last one man half a year. They both knew what venison looked and tasted like better than any other meat.

And though his brother hadn't said anything out loud, he knew they both knew Korea's New Year soup hadn't been venison.

Korea darted a look at Hae, then scrambled off of Kangwon, lurching unsteadily to his feet. The Provincehuman sat up, but

stayed on the floor.

"I'm not judging you," he soothed. "I think you did the right thing."

His Countryhuman narrowed his eye warily as he put his back to the door. "I know I did. I don't need you to tell me that."

"I'm not just yes-manning you." With some distance between them, Kangwon climbed slowly to his feet. "You know I don't believe in that. Hae needed that meat. Everyone did."

Not just for the nourishment they'd been giving away. Kangwon and Gangwon hadn't eaten with the others, but as they slurped down the marrow and chunks of fat Korea had made sure went into their bowls, they'd both felt warmed from the inside out. The effect had been clear on their cousins, too.

Kangwon would call himself an animal lover. But he was also a doctor. And his patients' health came before anything.

Korea's jaw feathered. "Don't tell her."

"We won't," Kangwon said, casting a look at Gangwon. He couldn't hear what they were talking about, but he nodded at the prompt. "If you had, I wouldn't be able to approve."

He'd been a little worried after drinking the soup, which had been part of the reason he was at the bunker the night Hae got sick. For check-ups, yeah, but also to make sure she wasn't acting strange, since he wasn't able to see her before she left for her province. He'd been relieved to hear her mention not seeing the dog, like she still *expected* to see it.

Hae needed the calories. She didn't need to have her spirit broken.

Korea's shoulders lowered slightly, though Kangwon could still see the tension quivering through his muscles. Or maybe he was just shaking.

Knowing any sign of concern over his health would make him flee for real, he kept his voice slow and neutral. "You had good

intentions, Korea. And they worked. It's not your fault Hae went out looking for that dog after, and it's not your fault she ate that clam."

"She shouldn't have been out there," he said tightly.

"No," Kangwon agreed. "But she chose to go looking, and she chose to eat the clam. You're right that she should've known not to."

Korea's eye flicked to the sleeping woman. "She only did it because she was hungry."

Yeah, SH was definitely right that they shouldn't mention their hunger around him anymore. Kangwon could tell he was still thinking about Hae saying those words.

"And you did something so she wouldn't be," Kangwon said. "If you hadn't done what you did, and Hae had ran into the clams anyway, you'd still blame yourself."

Korea opened his mouth, but shut it at his knowing look, glancing away.

"But it's not your fault either way." For someone else, Kangwon might've put his hand on their shoulder. He kept them at his sides. "Hae would've been hungry no matter how much you fed her, because she's hungry because of the war. And the war *isn't* your fault."

He gave his Countryhuman a pointed look that he avoided.

"It's America's. And the clams were there because of America. That's whose fault her death was."

The foreign country with the sick canine grin.

"Not yours."

"And n-not Kang's," Gangwon added loudly, having been watching his lips carefully.

"And not mine," Kangwon agreed, trying to make himself reinternalize the words.

He'd done everything he could. His cousin's death wasn't his fault. He knew that.

"And she's going to be fine."

Tentatively, he reached for Korea's hand, but the man hunched, so he beckoned him towards Hae instead. Putting a finger on her chapped bottom lip, he gently pulled it open, inviting Korea to hold his hand in front of her mouth.

"See?" he said when he'd had time to feel the soft brush of her breath against his palm. "She's alive. Just sleeping."

Almost like he didn't realize he was doing it, Korea's hand brushed over the bandage on Hae's forehead.

"It's almost been two months," he said, still tense. "Why is she taking as long as I did?"

Kangwon sighed. "I've told you before- there's no way your recovery should've taken only two months. Hers isn't long- yours was short."

And it hadn't been complete. Even after the extra months of non-coma rest, it had been even more into their travels before Korea entirely stopped limping, and his wounds finally healed over, allowing Kangwon to stop giving him his daily check-ups.

That was back when he'd actually let him take care of him.

"Hae is fine, Korea," he patiently repeated, catching his hand this time.

Korea's fingers spasmed in his gentle grip, and he noted with concern that the skin under the bandages was burning hot.

Carefully he guided his hand to over Hae's left ribs, pressing his palm against the fabric of her hospital gown so he could feel the sturdy, rhythmic pumping.

"See?" he hummed again. "Alive. She's going to be better in no time. I really wasn't lying about that."

Korea's fingers curled into claws, scratching at Hae's gown like he was about to try digging down to get at the organ pumping blood under her skin to make sure it wasn't some trick. Then they went limp, and he snatched his hand away.

"I know she's alive," he said gruffly, not meeting his eyes.

Kangwon turned to him. "I'm sorry for not telling you, Korea. But I promised Hae."

"The promises you make amongst yourselves aren't as important as your responsibility to tell the truth to your Countryhuman." Korea's voice had lost the growl, going stiff and cold like it did when he was embarrassed.

This time Kangwon didn't bother trying to tell him there wasn't anything he could do anyways. That'd never worked before, and he knew it wouldn't now.

"It was important to Hae," he said instead. "And I didn't want to let her down more than I already did."

Korea's eye flickered as he looked back at Hae. He didn't apologize, but Kangwon didn't expect him to.

"But I'm sorry," he said again. "I promise it won't happen again."

'Hopefully.'

"This is your last chance," Korea said, his hand twitching towards the cot. "If you ever hide the truth from me like this again, I am *done* trusting you to treat me or our people."

He could've said 'The reason I want to hide the truth from you is because you react like this to it.' But he knew Korea would hear it as a provocation, not advice.

Instead Kangwon quietly pointed out, "You already don't let me treat you."

His Countryhuman's gaze strayed, then met his again. "I mean it."

Exhaling imperceptibly, he said, "I promise, Korea."

Korea looked to Gangwon.

"He really didn't know," Kangwon said quickly. "I didn't tell him until you sent him here."

"I've spoken to him since then," Korea said coldly. "He had the opportunity to retract your lie." To Gangwon, he said, "No more lies, either from you or your brother. I don't care *who* you've made promises to. Got it?"

Gangwon watched him sign the words, and nodded vigorously. "G-Got it, Korea."

Korea glared between them both, then at Hae's body. Then he turned for the door.

Kangwon really just wanted to let him go get fresh air, but he knew if he let him hear the news from Hwang, if he was still in a bad mood he might count it as Kangwon withholding information again.

"Wait," he said. "I've got a possible new lead on the leak."

Korea whipped back. "Talk."

Kangwon briefly explained, and he thought for a moment, then nodded.

"It's worth looking into, at the very least." Korea rubbed under his eyepatch, staring past Kangwon at the window, long enough that the two provinces exchanged concerned glances.

Then he shook his head.

"Fill Gangwon in on the Epidemic Prevention Committee measures, then meet me at the lab for the truck to Balnam-ri."

He whisked away without another word, leaving Kangwon to slump over in relief.

Yeah, he was *really* looking forward to that truck ride.

"Thanks for sticking up for me," he said to Gangwon.

He shrugged. "It's what brothers are for, I think."

His lips curved up like he couldn't help it, and Kangwon found himself mirroring the expression.

"And it really isn't your fault, Kang," his brother said, resting a hand on his arm. "Hae didn't want you blaming yourself either."

He sighed. "I know."

He'd promised he wouldn't. He'd try to keep that one.

At least he didn't have to lie to Korea anymore. Though he'd literally just doubled down on it to Hwang, and he had a feeling his Countryhuman was going to tell the others he'd been lying.

He was escaping the ultimate punishment of losing his trust, but that didn't mean he could escape punishment altogether.

'Hate to vindicate North Hamgyong's pessimism.'

Picking up on what he was thinking, Gangwon said, "The others aren't going to be mad. They'll g-get it."

"They'll be a little mad." He knew they'd all get why he hadn't told Korea, and couple would get why he hadn't told Hwang. But every single one would think 'But you should have told *me.'*

"W-Well, maybe just a little." Gangwon fidgeted. "I guess I'd be upset if no one told me you'd d-d- You know."

"Yeah, me too." Kangwon admitted.

That was because he'd want to be there to comfort him in his coma, though. If he couldn't visit the hospital anyway, and his brother was going to recover, he'd understand not being told. It wouldn't help him get better, and would just distract Kangwon from helping others.

But he wouldn't begrudge any anger his cousins might feel, just like he didn't begrudge Korea's, even though he kept proving that all of Kangwon's reasons for not wanting to tell him about Kim Mi-ju, Hae, or similar situations were reasonable. It was only human to want to know what was happening to the people you loved, even if you couldn't change it.

Kangwon just wished Korea wouldn't blame himself for that, too.

Gangwon was already looking at the door in concern. "D-Did he seem...?"

Kangwon could still feel the heat emanating from Korea's skin clinging to his hand. "Yeah. I'll keep an eye on him."

And that'd be it, since he definitely wasn't going to be able to squeeze a field check-up in after this.

"I'm sure it's just his sympathetic fever," he said, mustering a reassuring smile for Gangwon.

He smiled nervously back, not buying it. Kangwon didn't really either.

Whether Korea liked it or not, he'd been his doctor for over thirty years, and he knew when he was getting sick.

The only question was how long he could pretend he wasn't.

I do like to consider myself the leading authority in using a one-off line as an important plot point around a hundred and seventy chapters later.

North Hamgyong working hard to single-handedly reinforce the patriarchy in the family unit by attempting to bully the emotionally open men around him into being ashamed of crying. It must make him so mad that modern day it's seen as admirable for men to cry in the DPRK. (I'm not sure about the personal level, but aside from the funeral tradition of wailing and sobbing, Kim Jong-un has cried openly multiple times, and it's common for Party members to tear up at important

speeches, or for farmers to do it when receiving free homes).

Can I tell you a secret? Chagang is spelled 자강. So I should be spelling it in English as Jagang. But when I was creating his character I used the old romaji version because I think it looks better than when it starts with a J. I actually use the old romaji for all of the Northern provinces. Just another example of my sporadic transliteration. Such as using Choi and Choe in one chapter. They're both 최. But they have different vibes to me.

Also I'm healthy again finally. Yay! ^^

Pestilence And Plague

The plague was spreading.

They hadn't been able to destroy every fly dropped on Balnam-ri. Five days after Korea and Kangwon had visited, the first case had emerged. Five days later and over fifteen people were already dead, with dozens more in the village of six hundred ill.

It worried Choe Yong-gon. His expression was military-firm, but Chagang could see the wisps of olive floating around him as he watched Korea over the war table. He didn't voice his concerns, but he kept his distance as they spoke about the talks.

"So that's our final message on those POW lists?" Choe Yong-gon grunted. "We won't be getting them?"

Korea stared at him, his expression slack. It almost looked like he didn't know who he was.

Chagang made himself speak past the throbbing in his head. "No."

The enemy had never handed the list of forty-four thousand names over as promised. They had said on the radio that they had. Then retracted the statement almost immediately. Then yesterday they had finally said directly that they wouldn't be handing it over.

It would satisfy Chagang more if he could slot the missing number into enemy counts. Forty-four thousand reactionaries from their ranks to keep on guard for, either sent to replenish the destroyed garrison on Yuk Island, or parachuted in.

But there had been a mass shooting on Geoje Island, where the biggest enemy camps were, on the 18th. The foreign newspapers were all giving different stories, but the main one was that prisoners had resisted screening, and attacked guards, or been attacked. The screening of the soldiers should have been done with. Either the Americans had lied, and their claim about the majority of

KPA soldiers not wanting to return home had been based on unfinished screening, or they had lied, and the forty-four thousand 'civilians' still waiting to be screened weren't civilians at all.

Chagang thought some of the missing could still be reactionaries being used as infiltrators. But from the American's refusal to provide information on the shooting when they had asked for it, he was also sure that the majority of the forty-four thousand were still theirs. Korea was, too.

If they had been enemies, it would have been easy to eliminate them. But the enemy was refusing to return comrades.

Choe Yong-gon sighed, raking his fingers though his short hair. "Pity."

Dark red flickered from him.

Chagang looked at Korea. He swayed slightly.

The air around him was empty of colours. But it was distorted like a heat wave. The Peninsula map behind him wavered, undulating from Jeju to Gangwon.

Then he jolted, and shook his head like a fly had flown at it.

"We saw it coming," he said gruffly. "We keep trying for the armistice without the list. We've made our own. We know who is missing, and who needs to be accounted for."

His voice lowered, inky black and red seeping out of the heat wave. The sudden assault of colour made Chagang's jaw lock.

"And who the enemy will need to pay for when this is over."

Choe Yong-gon dipped his head. "And what of Comrade Gangwon?"

Chagang had braced himself as soon as he heard his cousin's name. He squinted against the onslaught of maroon.

"We do not hand him back," Korea growled low in his throat. "No

matter what they try to use against us."

America had finally made the threat. There would be no armistice without Gangwon in South's possession. They had pulled away from the talks again.

"Comrade Nam Il has concerns about the fate of the ceasefire," the Minister of Defense said neutrally.

"I'm aware," Korea clipped. "They're only doing this for show. They've 'pulled away from the talks,' but still have their junior team discussing the POW issue with us."

"And when the POW issue is settled?"

The red around Korea suddenly flared as he pounded his fist on the table. "I am not handing over Gangwon! He has chosen to be here, and I'm not putting him back in the same hands that are spreading plague!"

Surprise tinged with alarm spiked from Choe Yong-gon at the outburst. "I didn't mean to imply that we should," he said quickly.

Korea gripped the table, lost in a haze of red and the shimmering heat. "I need to save them."

More alarm rose from Choe Yong-gon. And from Chagang.

"Korea," he made himself say. "You can't go rescue our POWs."

Through the haze, he gave him that vacant look, like he didn't know who he was.

After a second, he muttered, "I'm not going anywhere."

Teal belied Choe Yong-gon's stern face. "That's good. Your guidance is needed here, General." He leaned over the table. "Since we won't return Comrade Gangwon, why don't we remind the Yanks why they gave in to the talks in the first place?"

Golden-green excitement shimmered across Korea, then vanished. "No. We initiate nothing. We give them no chance to place this on

us. With their refusal to provide proof that we have Gangwon, right now they're pulling away because of their own suspicions. It's harder to justify."

"And we need to limit combat," Chagang said. "The more chaos, the faster the germ warfare spreads."

Kangwon was already at his limit. He had seen him for his check-up yesterday. But he hadn't actually been able to see him through the thick grey and olive cloud of exhaustion and anxiety around him, only made denser by now knowing about how badly the enemy wanted his brother. The news had been too openly-known to keep from him. Though they were still hiding it from Gangwon.

All of the nurses at the hospital had been drowning in those colours. Even the ones that didn't specialize in disease had to be involved in its prevention.

Choe Yong-gon nodded grimly. "I see your point." He looked between the two of them, then said, "There's been a few rumours from the frontline, where the pockets of fighting are. Some of the infantry are saying they've had insects launched at their positions in artillery shells."

Olive spiked from Korea. "What?"

The man shook his head. "I don't have anything more than that. But the men were told to report it to Epidemic Prevention."

Korea's jaw feathered. "Ssi-bal."

"It's too close to the front for you to investigate," Chagang said.

"Don't tell me what I can do," his Countryhuman snapped, dark blue bristling from his shoulders.

Chagang was undeterred. "The enemy might try to take Kangwon."

They didn't have to worry as much now. But they did still have to worry.

Korea ground his teeth, reaching his hand under his eyepatch, a coarse scratching sound coming from it as he dragged his nails over the scar there. He didn't answer.

Choe Yong-gon finally spoke up. "Comrade Korea, have you been to the hospital recently?"

The Countryhuman stared at the blank wall, his hand moving rhythmically under the star patch. The Defense Minister gave Chagang an olive-shrouded look.

"Korea-" Chagang tried.

He flinched, sick yellow pluming out of him before being strangled by irritation.

"I'm fine," he clipped, spinning on a heel. "Continue to hold the line. I'll speak to Comrade Nam Il."

A hand clamped on Chagang's shoulder before he could follow.

"Take care of him," Choe Yong-gon said in a low voice.

Chagang didn't know how. But he still said, "I will try."

His head ached as he hurried through the halls, Korea already gone. Even with no one around, and no colours to choke the corridors, his temples still throbbed. It was getting harder to push everything back.

His province hadn't been hit as hard as the others by the germ warfare, but the slight sympathetic fever was enough to make it worse. He wasn't looking forward to returning to the bunker tonight. His cousins' unending fog of pain and hunger had been tinged grey ever since they had been told the truth about Hae.

Chagang hadn't been mad. He had already known Kangwon was stained with too much olive and guilt to be telling the truth. The others had been, but by the time they saw Kangwon, the colours had faded.

And they had all been able to tell that now wasn't the time.

He found Korea outside, standing rooted outside the cluster of red brick buildings that disguised the military complex. The body of winter was over, but light snow still dusted the hills outside Pyongyang, heavier in the hollows and crags.

His Countryhuman was staring at these with his eye wide, a cloying swirl of colours filling the air around him. Chartreuse, ochre, gold, teal, irritation, anger, unease, and hurt. A confusing mix.

"It's March First," he said in a small voice Chagang hadn't heard from him before.

He could smell blood. "Korea, I think you should be in quarantine."

He whipped around like he hadn't heard him follow him up. "I'm not sick."

"You were at Balnam-ri before the plague broke out," he reminded him.

"I wore my hazmat suit," he snapped. "I never took it off."

Chagang felt a sharp pain in his left temple, as if Korea's frustration had just stabbed him in it. His tongue felt too heavy to speak.

"I'm fine," Korea said, his voice rasping.

The province slowly forced out, "I think… you are getting sick."

More sick yellow burst from Korea as he curled his lip. "I wasn't aware you were a doctor. If you are then you should be in the hospital with Kangwon."

"I'm… not."

"Then I will follow his instructions. And he says I don't need to quarantine." He turned away. "Go get me information on coastal defense. I need to talk to the General."

“You shouldn’t walk back to the city alone.”

“Don’t tell me what I shouldn’t do,” he snapped back, not turning back.

Chagang watched him go. He was swaying side to side, and making the road look like it did on a summer’s day, heat waves shimmering off it.

‘Take care of him.’ He wished he could do that.

He wished any of them could.

—

North tried, he really did. He tried to push back the heat and headache, he tried to crush it down inside of himself and keep it as a sympathetic fever. He wasn’t sick, he could just feel the plague crawling through his villages, the tuberculosis that was spreading through the towns, the cholera that had already killed a dozen, and Hae, and Hae, and Hae. That was all it was, his people’s sickness rampaging through his body, invading him, invading them, and now China, too. Springtails, spiders, and flies, infected with diseases that could kill animals as well as humans, dropped over Liaoxi and Liaotung. And more plague for Korea, for Cholsan, and Yangdok, and Kowon.

They had made it through winter, and now they had to pay for it.

He didn't know how many days past March First he made it because every time he fell asleep at his desk, those were the first words that echoed in his skull when he woke, bleary and apocryphal.

‘It’s March First, it’s March First, get up, it’s March-‘

It wasn’t. He didn’t know what day it was.

It came on suddenly, he told himself. He had been fine. He wasn’t sick.

And then he was. A persistent scratch in his throat, like he’d

swallowed a nail, growing worse and worse, gouging at the sensitive flesh. The heat that had been simmering inside him for days rose and rose, slow-cooking him until it reached his head, and he suddenly couldn't remember why he was sitting in a wooden pew listening to someone talk.

No, he could. They were going over epidemic prevention measures. Party members were the most active in their communities, and many of them had gotten sick. He had to speak.

He clung to that as he tried to clear his throat to no avail. Every swallow made it close a little more, every light cough made the nail dig deeper.

By the time he got up to speak, it was in his head. As he stood, a deep pain shot through his bones, throbbing in his thighs and hips, like the old ache had never left. He wanted to limp up to the podium, but he made himself stand tall, his spine aching all the way into his tailbone.

He didn't know what he said. He hated not knowing what he said. Every ounce of concentration went towards gripping the podium and standing straight, looking into the sea of faces and trying not to waver before them. It took five minutes, it took five hours. As he staggered off the stage with applause ringing in his head like someone was smacking it into a gong, he didn't take his seat, but kept going, pushing out into the hall, then into the outside.

There was still snow on the ground, it was still winter, but it only felt hotter. The heat dwelled in his sore back and pounding temples, and in his swelling throat. It burned behind his eyepatch like the sun.

Someone said something to him, and he said something back, the panic in his chest tightening as he realized he'd already forgotten what it was. He knew the person, whoever they were, could tell. He knew every single person in that hall had been able to tell.

He was sick. He was sick and vulnerable and he wasn't safe here.

Not knowing where he was going, just knowing he had to *get*

away, North left Moran Hill, his head stuffed full of heat. He could feel it spreading though him, each pump of his heart pushing it through his veins like poison, like the plague. His heartbeat shook his entire body, beating in his temples, in his burns. His skin pulsed, down into that deep gash. His organs throbbed against the flimsy skin between them and freedom, and North knew if he put his hand in there he would be able to *feel* them, like if he just applied enough pressure he would break through the membrane that kept them inside him. It was what they were going to do if they caught him.

He was on the highway, somewhere, out in the open, away from the city, from the endless maze of ruined buildings. The walls of Seoul rose up around him and fell away, again and again like waves, and he could hear their voices on the wind, *'Find him, catch him, bring him to Japan.'*

Someone called out to him, and he was on the road again, looking up at a truck that slowed beside him, trying to see the guns sticking out of it for what they were, and keep his own holstered. *'Not danger,'* but not help, they couldn't help him, he couldn't let them. He had to do this on his own.

One of the men looked behind him, then smiled down at him, saluting, and the truck drove off, allowing him to continue on.

Had someone said something to them? Had it been him? He didn't think so. He'd just been trying not to shoot.

Almost there. Almost where? The bunker. This wasn't like back then, he had a place to go. And this wasn't like back then, his organs were still inside him, not leaking through his body. He just needed to sleep off his fever, that was all.

He staggered though the sea of severed tree trunks, trying to look behind him for pursuers. He caught a glimpse of olive, then his legs tangled around a stump, and he hit the ground, scrambling up, back onto his feet, burning with shame, hoping no one had seen, burning, melting.

Throb throb throb. His heart felt like it was going to burst, shaking his frame as he stumbled into the forest, feeling it beat in every inch

of him, overwhelming, every thrum making his brain swell against the inside of his skull.

A mangy dogwood loomed in front of him, and he lashed out, trying to tear the eye from the distorted face leering out at him, and meeting air instead, tumbling forward into the snow.

North thrashed, trying to get up, before curling onto his side, trapping his temples between his palms, feeling them beat against the bandages, feeling his organs *throb throb throb* against each other as he drew his knees closer.

He couldn't rest here. He wasn't safe.

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself onto knees and shaking arms, suddenly feeling as weak as he had when he was first formed, or in those awful days before the March First Movement.

'It's March First, get up, it's-'

He heaved himself back to his feet, staggering sideways, catching himself on a larch that was actually there, shoving off of it, his momentum sending him for the bunker again.

As he emerged into the clearing, the door loomed large before him, and he felt all the hair on his arms rise.

'Trapped trapped trapped.' The word beat in time with his pulse. He couldn't go in there. There was only one way out, it was too small, and he couldn't let his provinces see him like this. He *couldn't.*

North twitched back, then forward, then sideways, his head spinning, unable to think of anywhere to go. His breath came in sharp, unsteady gasps, filling the air with mist and his tight lungs with stabbing pain and too little oxygen. Then he went to the left, off into the woods, ricocheting off of tree trunks and boulders.

His body weighed him down, begging to just let it rest, but he sank his fangs into his lip and pressed on. He couldn't sleep here. He wouldn't. He was strong enough to make it. He'd faced worse, this was nothing, he could make it, he was fine.

The mountain towered above him, and he dragged himself up it, over sharp rock and slick crags, even once he was forced to his knees. His arms strained, quivering, refusing to lift, and he tore his palm over something sharp, feeling a new blast of heat, sharper than before, giving him the strength to drag himself the final few feet.

He didn't know where his resting place was, and he didn't know when he passed out. All he knew was that he had made it, that no one would find him here.

He wasn't sick. He just needed to…

—

1919

North didn't know where he was, didn't know how he had gotten here. All he knew was the heat and the pain, throbbing through his whole body. When one would recede, the other would rush in like waves against shores he had never seen, leaving him with no chance to gird himself.

Was South seeing him like this? Was he afraid, trying to shake him awake? He had to wake up, to get ahold of himself for him.

It had to have been a dream, a nightmare, a dream, leaving him, hiding in those alleys, body shaking, bleeding. Stumbling out of the city, somehow not being caught, out into the wilderness for he didn't know how long. Waking in that small house, those people- *Kim Sun-hon and An Yong-un, he had to remember, even if nothing else he had to remember their names*- unable to do more than wash the jacket of the Jap he'd managed to kill, and the remnants of South's shirt, rebandaging him, then taking him… somewhere. To find someone he had wanted to find.

Kangwon. They said they thought they knew where Kangwon province was.

He had found him, hadn't he? Was that the dream? The villagers, the woods, the boy with the big, frightened eyes that had reminded

him of South's?

'South,' he tried to say, unsure of whether his lips moved. He couldn't open his eyes. They were swollen, heavy, gritty.

Why hadn't he come with him? Why had he looked at him with those hurt eyes, like North was in the wrong?

'I'm sorry,' he tried to say, not for leaving, but for not forcing him to go with him.

He should have dragged him, made him. Now Japan was going to kill his other half.

'South,' he tried to say again. Maybe it had been a dream. Maybe he hadn't woken up from the- *his chest burned like the old fires inside Paektusan, hot and sick, five thousand has it been five thousand?-* yet. Maybe he could try again, do it all again but with South at his side.

'I'm sorry.' Not for leaving, he would do it again, for their people, for *Kim Sun-hon and An Yong-un,* he would do anything. Sorry that he would.

'Why didn't you come with me?'

Even outside of this feverish limbo, he knew he could not fathom it. Why had his other half stayed, *why?*

South.

'South.'

"Please wake up."

'South?'

It *had* been a dream. He could hear his brother's voice in his fevered darkness, reaching out to him like a lifeline.

'I will,' he tried to promise. *'I'll wake up, I'll come back for you. I'll take you with me, South.'*

“North… it’s okay.”

It wasn’t right for South to be saying that. North was the one supposed to be comforting *him,* to be strong.

He had to wake up, had to protect him. But why did he feel disappointed it had been only a dream?

Because he had to save their people. He had to *fight* for them.

He would. If he could escape in a dream, he could escape in real life. With South.

‘South.’

“We’re going to… be okay… You’re going to be okay.”

His brother’s voice was fading as the sea of pain and heat dragged North back into its depths. But he wasn’t leaving. He could feel him laying down next to him, pressing his back to him like they always did, even though he couldn't feel his own body past the agony.

Next time. He would wake up next time. He would save the boys with the scared eyes, and Kim Sun-hon, An Yong-un, and everyone else.

“We’re…. okay….”

North went under again.

This chapter perfectly is how I felt when walking to the store on my first day of illness, not counting the hallucinations. Though I think I might have been close.

South Pyongan during covid lockdown, pointing a gun at Kangwon outside her house: Six fucking feet.

Kangwon: I just need to come in a give you a check-up-

SP: SIX FUCKING FEET, DOC. I WILL SHOOT.

The provinces spent the first part of serious lockdown alone in their capitals to disperse the chances of them all getting sick, or getting North sick. Hae found it to be the most miserable experience of her modern life. But South Pyongan was more than happy to completely lock down her house and self. Respiratory illness? Permanent lung damage and weakened muscles? Brain damage or whatever? Noooo thank you. She was *not* getting sick, and she didn't.

Broken Wings

[image]

1919

Kangwon had not been formed a medic.

It had started small. The desperate wails of a mother with a child that had caught cold had drawn him from his solitude, terrified, but unable to resist trying to help. He had tried leaving dried leaves with which to make a soothing tea outside her door at night, but he had no way of knowing if they'd been used. Eventually he had worked up the courage to introduce himself, and after the initial shock, he had been allowed to nurse the child back to health with the same methods he used on himself.

Nothing fancy, simply herbs for a sore throat, and heat to sweat the fever out. But it had earned him enough of a reputation that when a local man was run through by a Japanese officer, the villagers had brought him to Kangwon.

He could remember insisting there was nothing he could do, but they had begged and pleaded, and in the end, it wasn't like the man could really get worse. Not that that was what had convinced him back then. No- it had simply been the amount of eyes on him, pressuring him.

Common sense had dictated that the wound needed to be cleaned, and with how deep it was, cauterized. Looking back, there would have been better methods, but none available to a hermit province and a handful of starving peasants.

The man had, miraculously, pulled through, something that Kangwon was convinced was at least fifty percent luck. But it had cemented him as a healer in the village's eyes.

Coughs, fevers, scrapes, fatigue, broken bones. All manner of ailments had been brought to him over those nine years.

Mostly, he was pressured into it by how desperately they needed treatment, and how unlikely they were to get it elsewhere. When a man needed stitches, he was the only one who could give them. He had some skill with a needle and thread from patching his clothes, and wasn't the concept the same?

It was not. Sewing was much more difficult when the cloth you were stitching together was flesh. But it was manageable.

In the end, it was a good exchange. They needed a medic (he couldn't yet call himself a doctor), and he needed help surviving in the woods. They brought him offerings of thread, antiseptic, clothing, and foodstuffs, and he saved their lives.

He hated taking from those who had so little, but they insisted, and he really did need the food, especially in the winter months. While he was an expert forager and skilled with snares, he sometimes had difficulty hunting animals. He didn't mind eating meat (even if he had, beggars couldn't be choosers), and he had no problem killing an animal quickly, but when one was injured…

A rabbit had gotten caught in his snare once while he was within earshot, and its squeals had been so full of pain that he couldn't resist cutting it free. Then he had gone hungry that night.

Another time he had encountered a goshawk with a broken wing that would have made a full meal. But when he had approached to put it out of its misery, it had cried at him so defiantly that he brought it back to his hideaway. If a splint helped a broken leg mend, surely it would work for a wing.

He had nursed it back to health, feeding it bugs and strips of rabbit meat. At first, it had pecked at him, but by the end, the bird would sit on his shoulder as he did his chores. Then he had set it free. It had flown away, soaring into the sky with a glad cry, and the province realized what it was to feel alone for the first time.

He had also gone hungry again.

He had only ever lost three patients- a girl with cholera too far progressed, an elderly man with a severe cough that needed

medicine, not herbs, and a woman that had taken her own life after a severe… beating.

Every time it happened, Kangwon was convinced that the villagers would blame him and run him out or expose him. They never did, but it didn't stop him from spiralling into a nervous breakdown. If he had tried harder, been better-

Kangwon in the future could look back on the first two cases and know that he had done all he could. They had always been going to die, through no fault of his own. The only thing he could have done 'better' was have access to free, advanced healthcare, something that had been beyond him at the time.

The woman was the only one who haunted him. Her physical injuries hadn't been severe, only her mental trauma. Kangwon should have talked to her, tried to help her through it. But he had been too nervous and awkward, and when he had released her she had walked into the frozen river that very night.

In the end, patching a wound was only a small part of the healing process. A valuable lesson, but one he had paid too high a price for.

That had been what Kangwon had been thinking about on that day. As he strolled through the forest to see if the villagers needed anything or had left him supplies, he'd been mulling over that woman, or more accurately, his regrets.

He thought of the goshawk, too. Helping it hadn't been a regret, but rather… He regretted that his solitude was no longer quite so comfortable.

He'd taken on several apprentices since then, men and women, young and old, to share what little he knew of medicine in case anything ever happened to him. But they could never stay away from the village for long or the landlord would notice, and in the end, it was just him in his cave.

He could still bear it, but… It had been easier before, to think that his life would always be this way.

He had just reached the meeting spot he had set with the villagers when he froze. Something was crashing through the woods ahead, coming straight for him. By the way that branches and twigs were breaking underfoot, he knew it wasn't an animal. They weren't calling for help, so he didn't think twice, instinct driving him up the nearest tree.

He perched amongst the spring foliage like a cat as whoever- whatever- it was came closer.

The person- and it was a person, thankfully- staggered out of the brush. They were wearing a tattered Japanese military jacket, with a hood that hid their face, but when they called out, their voice was Korean.

"Kangwon-do?"

The province stopped breathing. Had the villagers finally given him away? Had they decided that the death of that young woman really was his fault?

The person raised his voice. He sounded near Kangwon's own physical age, maybe, but raspy and exhausted. "Kangwon province. I know you're out here. I- *Ssi-bal."* The boy hunched over, clutching at his ribs. He staggered over to the nok tree that the villagers hid things for Kangwon under, leaning against it.

"I need your assistance!" Slowly, he slid down the trunk until he was sitting. Even from so high up, Kangwon could hear how laboured his breathing was.

The boy ripped his jacket open, revealing a bloodstained white shirt so filthy it was grey, then threw back his hood, making Kangwon almost fall out of his tree. He knew that face! He had never seen it, but he knew it, the same way he'd know his heart if it was carved out of his chest and placed in his hand.

"Korea." He just barely whispered the name.

The Countryhuman painstakingly unbuttoned his undershirt, exposing a bloody mass of fabric wrapped around his chest.

Kangwon sucked in a breath.

'Bad.' He knew just from looking. Thoughtlessly, he put his thumbnail in his mouth.

Korea peeled back an edge of the makeshift bandage, wincing. "Ssi-bal," he cursed again, shutting his eyes tight. "Kangwon." His voice was barely above speaking volume. "If you're out there…" He gritted his teeth. "I need you."

Kangwon was so nervous the branch he was on was trembling. But the pain in those words was so clear that he couldn't sit back. Taking a steadying breath, he swung out of the tree.

Korea jolted when his feet thumped on the ground, not relaxing when he saw it was who he had been searching for.

"You're Kangwon?" he demanded, and Kangwon thought he was doing a good job not sounding like he was dying.

"Uh, yeah." He smiled nervously, chewing on his thumbnail.

"Good." Korea nodded grimly. "Fix me."

Then he slumped over, unconscious.

He didn't wake when Kangwon gathered him in his arms (so light!) or when he carried him back to his cave. And he didn't wake when he carefully undressed him and peeled off the bandages. They looked like they were the remnants of what had once been a nice shirt, one similar to what Korea had been wearing.

When the province saw the full extent of the damage to the other boy, his nail snapped off between his teeth.

His white skin was mottled blue-black over his entire body. Both eyes swollen almost shut, head covered in contusions, throat bruised where Kangwon could see the imprints of fingers that had wrapped around it. Similar finger-shaped bruises marred his wrists. The mottling continued down his torso- Kangwon's eyes skirted away from the most obvious wound- and his legs. One ankle was definitely at least sprained, and his right arm was tender, leading

Kangwon to think that it had been relocated. On top of that, he was twig-thin, ribs and rotator cuffs sticking out like branches on a leafless tree, several of the former being broken.

Finally he looked at the real injury, the one that couldn't be ignored.

Starting from just above his left collarbone, crossing his thin chest at a diagonal to end over his right ribs, was a gaping gash. Glints of white could be seen where it began and ended, and the edges were crusted with dark blood and pus.

Kangwon… How was he even supposed to treat this? *'Fix me,'* his country had said. But how when it looked like he had been attacked by… No, there was no equivalent to this. It could only be a knife or other tool that had been dragged over his skin repeatedly in roughly the same spot dozens or more times.

Actually, his body looked like when Kangwon scored the flesh of animals to cook. And he was *not* going to think of that the next time he made supper.

He couldn't panic or let himself be overwhelmed. He had to take things one step at a time.

First step- was the wound infected? The pus made it clear it was, but Kangwon still hesitantly sniffed at it. Definitely gangrenous, but surprisingly not as bad as it could be. Someone had clearly washed it before bandaging it. Had Korea managed to do that *and* relocate his arm? Impressive, if so.

Second step- blood poisoning. As hard as he looked, he couldn't see the telltale sign of black veins spreading out from the wound. Lucky, incredibly lucky. From the slightly green colour of some of the bruises, he suspected this damage was a couple weeks old, well enough time for poisoning to set in.

Third step- internal bleeding. Oh yeah, definitely. Dark purple streaks covered Korea's stomach, and it was oddly distended. He had no idea how he was going to handle that.

His mental steps faltered and he ripped off another nail. Well, he had to try, right?

Try he did. Kangwon had no illusions of sitting back and waiting for the regenerative powers of a Countryhuman to do their work. He was fairly sure this hadn't been done to the country by a human. If he didn't act, it could kill him. And even if it wouldn't, it would take forever to heal.

For two months he cleaned Korea's wound twice, sometimes thrice, daily, burning though his supply of antiseptic and bandages, even when the villagers had brought him more. It had been they who had directed Korea to him, something he thanked them for. He brewed teas to tip down the unconscious boy's throat, and made poultices out of leaves and flowers. He found berries and wild vegetables and meat to grind into paste to feed him.

The entire time his patient didn't stir, sunk deep into a coma.

Around the two month mark, though, things were looking up. Kangwon had scraped the pus out, cutting away more of the infected flesh (wincing guiltily as he did), and the internal bleeding hadn't taken a turn for the worse. Korea most likely still wouldn't wake up for several more months, but-

Kangwon yelped as he walked into the cave and saw eyes looking at him. Eyes that were still slightly swollen.

Korea was up. Sitting up, even. And staring at him.

The province had almost dropped his firewood. The two stared at each other for a pause, then he ventured, "Uh, hey. I'm Kangwon."

The country didn't blink. "I know."

"Oh. Right. Okay." Kangwon nervously inched into the space, placing his wood at the back of the cave. "And you're… Korea."

A muscle feathered in his jaw. "Yes. I am."

Of course he was, but still, to hear him confirm it… Kangwon couldn't fight his smile.

"I need to- to clean your wound again," he said, gesturing. As if Korea wouldn't know what he was talking about.

The country hesitated, then nodded his assent.

Kangwon squatted next to him, preparing his supplies. "You shouldn't be sitting up yet, you know."

"I'll be fine."

'Stubborn, then.'

Kangwon of course had a million questions, but he didn't want to disturb the other boy. He'd obviously been through something physically traumatic, and the province didn't want to stir up any mental trauma to go with it.

As he started to peel off the bandages, he asked, "Who did this to you?"

"Japan," Korea answered bluntly, then refused to answer anymore.

Kangwon had suspected as much.

Working on his- and wasn't that a word? *His-* country was far more unnerving while he was awake. He watched Kangwon with an intensity, barely blinking. The province tried to stay focused on his work, ignoring the eyes he could see on the edge of his vision.

"Why are you shaking?" his country abruptly demanded.

Kangwon winced, clenching his fingers. He added 'blunt' to the list of traits.

"I just d-don't- don't want to mess up."

Korea was unimpressed. "If I'm awake, obviously you haven't screwed up yet."

Kangwon swallowed. "That honestly has less to do with me and more to do with you taking good care of the wound." Then again, it looked sort of only initially taken care of. "Oh, uh, you were the

one who washed and bandaged it, right?"

The other boy stared at him for a long, unsettling time, then clipped, "Yes. Me and some farmers."

Perhaps he hadn't had time to clean it again, since he was almost definitely on the run from Japan.

"You're lucky. It probably saved your life." Kangwon smiled at him, and he looked away.

With the eyes no longer piercing into him, it was far less nerve-wracking to finish his work.

Over the course of the next month, the two settled into an nervous cohabitation. Well, nervous for Kangwon, who wasn't used to having people around for this long. Korea seemed unfazed.

The boy was cold, but Kangwon sensed a great anger simmering just under his surface. He tried to gently prod at him to work out what it was, but only ever received brief, terse responses. And there was that odd, deep grief that he occasionally caught flashes of.

The province kept treating him, becoming less awkward at it up until Korea turned his eyes to him again. Then it was hard to still his hands.

He quickly learned to bring food back when Korea was sleeping and leave so he could eat. He got the sense that the country resented having Kangwon be responsible for everything, but the province put his foot down and refused to let him do anything physical until he was better.

At first he wondered why Korea watched him with such intensity when he made the fire and cleaned the kills, but when the country started to insist that he be the one to do it, he understood. Kangwon was impressed at the speed with which he picked the skills up, and it left him more time to forage and replenish his supplies.

It was nice to have the help, and Kangwon liked the feeling of having someone keep watch at night, even if it was repeatedly terrifying to wake up thinking you were alone, then spot a still

shadow at the mouth of the cave. It got him into the habit of keeping watch, too, since Korea didn't seem to rest easy if he didn't. Though honestly, he also didn't seem to rest easy when he did. Kangwon frequently caught him with his eyes open when he should have been sleeping. Though whether he was watching Kangwon or the glimpse of the forest behind him, the province didn't know.

It was also relieving to have someone nearby when something snapped in the woods. Usually something like that would freeze Kangwon on his hay bed and leave him unable to sleep for hours. But when Korea would tense at the sound, he would have to search for an explanation, listening carefully to hear if it was a deer or squirrel or simply the forest. Which drove away his thoughts of kumiho and ghost lanterns. He wasn't actually sure if a kumiho could affect him, but he also wasn't eager to find out.

As Kangwon set out for the meeting tree to see if the villagers had managed to get him the antiseptic that he had requested, he mulled over the possibility of Korea leaving. He was restless in the cave, and while Kangwon didn't quite know what exactly his country wanted to do when he was fully healed, he didn't think it was play house in the woods.

The thought left him feeling more than a bit melancholic. If the goshawk had changed his contentment with a life of solitude, then it stood to reason that actually living with another person would shift it even more. Even if that person was blunt, terse, and not very talkative.

As he neared the meeting spot, shouting started to filter his way, and the province broke into a jog. The voices hadn't been raised in anger, but in fear, so he didn't hesitate to rush into the clearing.

"W-What's going on?" he asked, then saw.

Oh Kye-ok- one of the mothers from the village- was kneeling by the tree amongst several of the villagers, clutching a motionless lump in her arms. Her son, Bong-nam.

"What happened?" Kangwon demanded, crouching next to the woman.

She was crying too hard to answer him, but one of the men with her said, “He took an apple from the landlord’s tree. The police had him whipped.”

Kangwon winced. Whipping a child over an apple… Those who had everything really couldn’t bear to give anything. He was used to stories like this, though, and it no longer paralyzed him in horror.

“Ajumeoni.” He placed a brief, gentle touch on Oh Kye-ok’s shoulder, and she looked at him with glimmering eyes. “He’ll be okay. Whippings are rarely ever fatal, if they’re treated right. But I’m going to have to take him. Are you alright with that?”

The mother hesitated, clutching her son tighter, then relinquished him. “Please take good care of him. I can’t lose another son.”

Kangwon smiled, trying not to sound as nervous as he felt. “I will. And you won’t.”

One of his ‘apprentices-‘ a man named Kim In-ho- had accompanied her, and he informed Kangwon that the child had been given ten lashes, and fallen unconscious after.

“I thought it best to bring him to you right away, just in case.”

“You did the right thing.” Kangwon sort of wished he, too, could pass on the responsibility, but such was life.

Swiftly he carried the boy back to his cave. When he arrived, Korea looked up from his act of using Kangwon’s knife to sharpen a branch into another stake for the barricade. Kangwon had never thought he needed a barricade, but apparently Korea did. At least it kept him off his feet.

“Ssi-bal, what happened to him?” he demanded, looking at the boy.

“He picked an apple from the local landlord’s property.” Kangwon filled him in as he set the boy on the pile of dried grass that served as his bed. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, so he immediately got to work on wiping the blood from his back. “They whipped him for

it.”

“The Japanese?” Korea’s voice was dark.

“The police, anyway.” Kangwon glanced up, seeing that the look on his country’s face matched his tone. It was a savage look that frightened him more than a little. He nervously repeated what Kim In-ho had told him, then made no further attempts at conversation as he worked on the boy, except to ask Korea to pass him things.

“Needle and thread.” He swallowed as the objects were placed in his hand. Luckily the boy only needed a few stitches, where the crop had cut into the delicate skin of his lower back.

It was still too many for Kangwon.

He paused with the needle hovering over the cut. Working on children terrified him the most. There was even more responsibility than with adults. It was up to him to make sure that they would heal well and be able to live a normal adult life, or a life at all. And if he didn’t…

The girl who had died of cholera had been called Pak Kyong-mi. She would never fall in love or get married or have her own kids. Her life had ended before it began.

“You’re shaking again,” Korea noted icily.

Kangwon flinched, his hand trembling harder. “S-Sorry. I really can’t help it.”

“It’s just a cut,” the other boy dismissed. “If you fixed me, he’ll be fine.”

“But if I mess up and it’s my fault that he…” Kangwon trailed off at the frankly terrifying look Korea was giving him.

“If you treat him wrong and he dies, it wouldn’t be your fault,” Korea growled. “It would be the fault of the Jap that beat him, and that miserly landlord’s. But if you’re too scared to treat him at all, and you let him die, *then* it’s your fault.”

The words were reassuring, ostensibly, but the tone the Countryhuman used was less one of comfort and more one of threat.

But in a way, he was right. It was at least enough to motivate Kangwon to start his stitches. Korea watched him with a visibly clenched jaw, dark energy radiating from his corner.

Kangwon made the stitches with little to no difficulty, because of course he did. It really was just a small cut. By the time he had finished and dressed the boy in one of his less-worn shirts, the child was stirring.

"Where am I?" he asked immediately, trying to sit up.

Kangwon told him what had happened, and Bong-nam relaxed.

"You're the doctor? Mom says we're not supposed to talk about you or the Japanese will take you away."

Kangwon nodded. "Your mom is right. So I'd appreciate if you didn't mention me when you go home."

The boy's eyes widened. "Would they whip you, too?"

Kangwon didn't really know what Japan would do to him if he was captured. It wasn't like he'd ever committed a crime or anything. He wasn't sure if that mattered or not, though, and he wasn't keen on finding out.

"They would," Korea answered for him. "Or do worse."

Bong-nam blinked fearfully at the country. "What's worse?"

Korea's eyes darkened. "You don't want to know."

"Big Brother over there is a bit scary," the boy whispered to Kangwon, who smiled.

"Yeah, but he's alright." Behind him, he heard Korea *'tch.'*

Kangwon made a soup out of dried meat and some roots he'd

found, and as the sun set, they gathered around the fire to eat. Built at the mouth of the cave, it tended to get a bit smoky, but it was better than sending up a signal to anyone that might have bad intentions.

He eyed Korea, smiling as he watched him devour the soup, clearly trying not to scarf it, but also clearly too eager to try very hard. He always ate like it was his first time being given food. And considering how emaciated he'd been when he came to Kangwon, it might have been.

"How are you feeling?" the province asked Bong-nam, noticing him wincing.

"It really hurts," he whined, tugging at the hem of his oversized shirt. "Do you have anything to make it stop?"

Kangwon winced. "Sorry, but no. You'll have to tough it out." Since painkillers didn't actually heal an injury, he could never prioritize acquiring them. And they would be far too expensive, anyways.

Bong-nam pouted, and his eyes glimmered slightly. Kangwon opened his mouth to reassure him, but was surprisingly cut off by Korea.

"You were brave," he said, not in the soothing tone that Kangwon would have used, but more like that of a commanding officer giving commendations. "I heard you didn't pass out until it was over."

Bong-nam brightened a bit. "That's right! I was awake for all ten lashes. And I only passed out because I, uh, got a bit tired after." He swiped an arm across his eyes.

Korea opened his mouth as if he might dispute this, then closed it, giving the boy a brisk nod.

The child chewed on his lip, then asked, "Doctor, why did they whip me?"

"Because they're bastards," Korea said, ignoring Kangwon's look.

"Didn't they tell you the charges before they sentenced you?" the province asked before his country could say anything else.

"They said I stole someone's property." Bong-nam looked up at him, confused. "It was just an apple, and it was on the ground."

Kangwon closed his eyes. Ten lashes for a boy not yet twelve years old, all over a windfall.

"It wasn't like anyone else was going to take it!" the boy continued defensively. "Chang-gyeol lives there and he's always bragging about how much he eats, but my mom can't afford fruit, and it's her birthday tomorrow, and-" He sniffled. "I just wanted to get her something nice."

Kangwon looked away, gathering his words, but once more Korea beat him to it.

"You weren't the one in the wrong. *They* are," he assured him. "There's no reason someone should have apples rotting in their yard while someone else starves."

"There *is* a reason," Kangwon pointed out nervously. "It's called 'the law,' and breaking it gets you whipped, 'or worse.'"

Korea whipped his head to him. "Are you saying that's right?!"

"No," he quickly denied. "It's awful, no property is worth harming someone over." He glanced at Bong-nam, then leaned over and whispered, "But you're talking to a kid, and I don't want to see him get hurt again because you encouraged him to break the law."

"He will get hurt again," Korea said, not lowering his voice at all. "So long as some people have too much while others have none, he will go hungry. Then the Japs will punish him when he's forced to steal. And if he's not told that's fucked up, he'll grow up to tolerate it instead of fighting back."

"Fight back?" Bong-nam asked with an eagerness that made Kangwon gnaw on his nails. "How?"

"*You* can fight back by getting better soon," the province

interrupted, shooting Korea another look. “Time for children to sleep.”

“You don’t even look that much older than me!” the boy protested.

Actually, Kangwon was younger than him. Two years, younger, technically. But that wouldn’t get him to bed.

“Your mom wanted you to behave yourself while you were here,” he chided. “She’s already upset, you don’t want to stress her out even more, right? Especially so near her birthday.”

Bong-nam deflated. “I guess not.”

Eventually, he was coaxed to sleep, lying on his stomach. Kangwon pulled his blanket over him, then returned to the fire.

“I’m going to go pick some fruit tomorrow,” he told Korea. “The wild apple tree should have a few ripe ones by now.”

It would be a few more years before the one he had planted outside his cave bore fruit.

His country caught on. “For his mother?”

Kangwon nodded. “When I’m out, please don’t rile him up. I don’t want him back here in a month because he picked a fight with the landlord’s son.”

“How are you so calm?!” Korea burst out, only lowering his voice slightly when Kangwon hushed him. “Look at what they did to him over a damn apple! What gives them the right? Doesn’t it make you angry?"

The light from the fire mingled with the smoke, painting tiger stripes on his white face.

“Of course it makes me upset,” Kangwon replied. “It’s unfair. But I don’t see the point in getting worked up over something I can’t change.”

“We *can* change it!” Korea snarled. He took a deep breath, and

when he spoke again, it was slightly calmer. “When will he be healed?”

Kangwon cast a glance at the slumbering boy. “He should be safe to go home in a week or so.”

“Good.” Korea nodded. “I’m leaving next week.”

Kangwon’s heart sank. “You’re really not healed properly yet, you shouldn’t-“

“I won’t sit around while every day the Japanese are doing things like that to our people,” Korea interrupted. “Maybe *you* can, but I can’t.”

That had stung a little. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to find the rest of my provinces, then we’re going to organize our people, give them the means to fight back.” Korea’s eyes gleamed in the firelight, making him look more tigerish than ever. “Together, we’ll overthrow Japan. We’ll make our country *ours* again.”

Kangwon blinked, astounded, unconsciously bringing his finger to his mouth. That first part hadn’t come out of nowhere- Korea had mentioned fighting back and ‘doing something’ about the Japanese several times now, along with finding the other Provincehumans, and helping their people. But Kangwon had thought he’d meant, like, bringing them food or something. Not…

“A revolution.”

“Yes.” Korea seemed to like that word. “I want you to come with me.”

That part *had* come out of nowhere.

“But-“ Kangwon realized he still had his fingernail in his mouth, and quickly removed it. “Who would take care of the villagers?”

“You being here isn’t actually changing anything,” Korea impatiently told him. “So long as we live under someone else’s

laws, those people will come to you with illnesses and injuries, and it will never stop. You might save them, but there are hundreds of villages with no one to save *them,* and there won't be unless we change things. We could-" A spark lit in his eyes, and he started talking faster. "We could make healthcare free. Why should they have to pay to live?"

Kangwon had thought the same thing many times. Korea was far more animated than he had ever seen him, eyes aglow with whatever possibilities he was seeing. It was… sort of contagious.

The country shook his head. "But we won't be able to do anything until we control our country again. Until then, everything you do is just… putting a bandage on the wound. That won't heal it."

He leaned forward, almost in the fire. It made him look as if he were burning.

"We need to *cauterize* it."

Kangwon swallowed, the only sound in the cave the flickering of flames and the snap his nail made when it broke between his teeth.

He was right, of course. There were so many people suffering that Kangwon couldn't reach. They needed change. But…

"I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I really hope you succeed, but I don't think I'm the right person to help you."

He wasn't a fighter. He wasn't even a good enough doctor to be useful. He was just a hermit who lived in the woods and helped those who had nowhere else to turn.

Korea sat back, shadows sliding over his face. "Fine," he bit out, his tone returned once more to flint. "I only want the willing, anyway. I don't need cowards."

Kangwon couldn't be mad. He was right. But he could add 'lashes out when hurt' to his list of traits he was compiling for Korea.

He didn't sleep right that night, or the rest of the week, really. Whenever he laid down, he would find himself watching Korea

sitting alone by the mouth of the cave, sharpening stakes. And when it was his turn to keep watch, he could feel his country's eyes on him.

Korea seemed so confident, so sure. Kangwon had no doubt he could accomplish what he needed to. He didn't need him.

But there was such an anger in him. Kangwon could always feel it radiating off him like a physical heat. He wasn't the only one.

"I don't think Big Brother likes me very much," Bong-nam had whispered once. "He seems mad a lot."

Kangwon wasn't sure how to explain that it wasn't the boy he was mad at, but rather the world. So instead he had said, "He likes you. He's just… not great at expressing himself."

Kangwon couldn't help but think of the woman that he had let walk away, and how she had walked straight into the river. He didn't want Korea to leave like that for fear he would do the same thing, plunging into fire instead of icy water. But there were no words he could use to comfort him or reassure him. Nothing but the change his country was seeking could do that.

The week ended far too quickly.

"Alright," Kangwon said, wrapping the bandages tightly around Bong-nam's torso for the last time. "You're officially discharged."

The boy jumped up, wincing only slightly. "Thanks, Doc! That means I can go home now, right?"

"Yeah," Kangwon said, glancing at Korea. The Countryhuman had a threadbare pack that he had requested Kangwon give him. Into it he was packing dried meat, nuts, and fruits. "I'll take you back."

"I'm coming." Korea slung the bag over his shoulder, wrenching one of the longer stakes from the ground.

This was it then. His wing was healed, and he was preparing to take flight.

As they walked through the woods, Kangwon couldn't help but glance over at his country. He was still limping, the spear doubling as a walking stick, and occasionally he would close his eyes for a bit too long, as if stifling pain. He really wasn't ready to set off, but there was no stopping him.

When they reached the meeting nok tree, Bong-nam broke into a sprint.

"Mom!"

"Bong-nam!" Oh Kye-ok caught her son in an embrace, squeezing him tight. "Are you alright? How are you feeling?"

"Great!" he cheered. "The Doctor says I'm all better, and Big Brother says I was brave. And he said that one day when I'm older, I can fight the Japanese!"

Kangwon shot a sharp look at Korea. Clearly, he hadn't listened to the 'don't rile him up' suggestion. At least he had specified when the boy was older.

"Big…" Oh Kye-ok looked up and paled when she caught sight of Korea. "Boy, show some respect! That's our country." She hurriedly bowed, forcing her son into one as well.

"It's fine," Korea said, slightly uncomfortably. "It doesn't bother me."

Kangwon raised his brows at that, biting back a smile. He had been telling the boy repeatedly not to call him by the familial honorific.

"Thank you, both of you." Oh Kye-ok bowed again.

"He did everything," Korea dismissed.

"I didn't really…" Kangwon trailed off at the country's fiercesome glare.

As he gave Oh Kye-ok his instructions for keeping Bong-nam healthy, he kept one eye on Korea, who was talking with Kim In-ho.

The man had given him a roughspun cloak to cover his tattered military one.

"We looked into it like you wanted, sir."

"Don't call me that."

"Yes, s- Yes, Korea." The man cleared his throat. "There are rumours that a Provincehuman has been arrested and sent to the Pyongyang Men's Prison in South Pyongan province."

Kangwon raised his brows. Had Korea asked them to gather information back when he had been injured? He really had been planning ahead.

Korea narrowed his eyes. "Arrested for what?"

Kim In-ho said awkwardly, "Murder, so the rumours say."

Kangwon raised his brows higher. It seemed while he was living an inconspicuous, crime-free life, some of his fellow provinces were not.

"No Korean province would kill someone without good reason," Korea dismissed. "It must have been self-defense. Or a Jap plot."

"Most likely," Kim In-ho agreed quickly.

"Good work," Korea praised. "I have nothing to thank you with, aside from the promise that one day, I will free you."

His voice was so assured that those gathered had no choice but to believe him. He had a way about him, Kangwon thought. When he spoke, you got the sense that what he said had to be true.

'Kangwon, I need you,' he had said on that first day.

But that had been when he was injured. Now that the healing was up to his own body, he didn't, surely. Kangwon chewed on his thumbnail.

"That promise is enough for us." The man dipped his head.

“I’m going then.”

“Kangwon-do?” Kim In-ho turned to him. “Will you be going with him?”

All eyes turned to Kangwon. Korea’s were especially piercing, as if challenging him.

‘Are you?’

Was he? He didn’t know the first thing about fighting back or revolution.

Then again, neither did Korea. He only spoke like he did, and he was so confident that you had to believe him when he said he was going to change things or that the stitches would be no problem for you. Yet he was still going to fight. To try, at least, to fix the rot that spread through their society.

His wound analogy had been accurate. Their country was a gangrenous wound, one that needed the infection scraped out, not just those Occupying them, but people like that landlord, who would have a boy whipped for taking something that he had plenty of, or those that decreed if you had no money you would receive no care.

Did Kangwon want to spend the rest of his life watching the village rot before his eyes? Did he want to see Bong-nam come back in a month, beaten for going after the landlord’s boy, then see him as a teen, whipped for stealing what he needed to survive, then to hear that as an adult, he had been executed for daring to fight back?

His jaw clenched, and he felt his nail snap down to the quick. It *was* unfair. It had always *been* unfair, he could just never do anything about it.

*‘We **can** change it,’* Korea had declared. Kangwon believed him. And while he wasn’t sure he would be a great help…

He didn't think he could just sit back and do what little he could anymore. Just as setting that goshawk free had left him with the

knowledge of what loneliness felt like, he knew that if he let Korea fly away, he would be left knowing what anger was.

"If I left," he began slowly. "Would you be able to get by?"

Kim In-ho nodded immediately. "I may not be as good as you, but I remember everything you taught me. So do the others, and we've been teaching some of the kids, too. If you have to leave, you can know that we'll be fine."

"Yeah!" Bong-nam cheered from his mother's arms. "Doc's going to go fight the Japanese with Big Brother!"

Kangwon inhaled deeply. "Yeah, I am." From the corner of his eye, he saw Korea's muscles relax the slightest bit. "And you aren't. You're going to grow up and take care of your mom and not get in any more trouble, right?"

Bong-nam pursed his lips. "Right."

"Promise."

The boy's shoulders slumped. "I promise."

"Good." Kangwon hesitated, then added, "Korea is right. What happened to you was unfair. You need to remember that. Don't ever let yourself tolerate it. But be smart, so one day you can grow up and try to *make* things fair."

Bong-nam brightened. "I will!"

"Thank you, Kangwon-do," Oh Kye-ok said, tears in her eyes. "For everything you've done for us."

"You've done far more for me," Kangwon replied, a bit guilty. "But I'm afraid I can't pay you back."

"Just help Korea free our country." Kim In-ho clasped his arm. "Good luck."

"Luck doesn't exist," Korea said. "We'll succeed because we have to. Let's go."

“Yeah.” Kangwon took in a deep breath, then smiled, feeling less nervous than he’d thought he would. “Let’s go cauterize this wound.”

And when Korea took flight, he spread his wings with him.

—

1952

Kangwon jumped from the back of the Jeep, Liaoxi and Liaotung following.

“Did you find him?” he called, spotting SH emerging from the woods.

She looked frustrated to see it was just them. “Not yet.”

Chagang had apparently seen Korea walking off towards the bunker in the middle of the day, which wasn’t normal for him, both because he never took breaks, and because he’d taken the keys to the GAZ with him.

“I’ve got the spare key Korea gave me for the bunker padlock, so it’s not like we’re locked out,” SH said, running her hand over her bandaged head. “But we can’t leave the GAZ there all night. And we can’t leave Korea wherever he is.”

Kangwon shoved his hands in his pockets. “Do we know he came here? You don’t think he ran off again, do you?”

“China’s still here, so that’s not likely,” Liaotung said, tossing the tarp across the Jeep.

SH nodded. “And his footprints are here.” She pointed to one of the pairs on the ground, leading off under the trees. “But we lost them in the places where the snow is thin. I'm sorry to pull you away from the hospital, but you’re our best tracker, and I’m worried-“

She cut herself off, wringing her hands. Kangwon dipped his head.

"I'm sure he's fine. Let's go look."

SH scurried off under the trees, followed by Liaoxi.

"I'll stay here in case he comes back," Liaotung volunteered, hopping up on the hood of the Jeep.

Kangwon followed his cousin, catching glimpses of the others off in the woods. He could hear South Pyongan calling for Korea, her voice muffled by her face mask, and once he reached the area SH pointed out as being where the last footprints could be spotted, he could see her and North Pyongan through the trees.

With SH distracted calling, he crouched, examining Korea's bootprints.

They were deep, like he was putting way too much pressure on them, favouring both legs. And they weren't straight. Usually Korea's gait was precise, each foot landing almost directly in front of the other. But on this trail, his toes kept pointing in different directions.

'That doesn't look good.'

Kangwon looked in the direction the toe of the last print was pointing, and saw someone step out from behind a tree deeper in the woods.

It was China.

He looked directly at Kangwon, subtly beckoning him over. The province looked around at his occupied cousins, then trotted towards him.

China disappeared behind the tree, then emerged from behind another one farther away.

'Oookay.'

Deciding to trust the process, Kangwon followed him through the forest this way, passing by North Hamgyong, who was kicking at rocks like he expected to find their Countryhuman hiding under

one. He made a face as Kangwon passed.

He sighed. Out of all his cousins, the green-skinned man had been the most upset over hearing about Hae. Even Hwang had said he understood, just to please never do it again. But North Hamgyong was acting like he hadn't told them she'd died for real, even though he had been the one to make Hwang worry by bringing up the possibility in the first place.

It was like he'd really wanted to be right about something awful having happened to Hae, but learning he had been was some sort of betrayal.

'Maybe that means there's hope for him yet.'

Kangwon passed him by, following China along the curve of Jangsan, farther than he'd thought, occasionally catching glimpses of Korea's footprints in the thin snow under the trees. They meandered back and forth, but the Countryhuman was taking him on a straight path, so he ignored them.

Eventually when the spine of the mountain above started to lower, the edge of the ridge tapering, Kangwon reached the last place he'd seen China to find him waiting.

He had his mask on, but was wearing his ushanka normally, showing his angular white eyes. They squinched up as he held a finger over his hidden lips, then pointed up the mountainside.

Kangwon looked up, scanning the grey rock and brown trees that grew on the slope. He looked back to find China was already gone.

Okay, a hint was better than nothing, he guessed.

He started up the slope, keeping an eye out. There was half a footprint in a dusting of snow, there was a shelf that had been wiped clean, and there was a smear of blood over a sharp spur of rock that made him climb faster, following the little frozen droplets of crimson until he came to a split in the stone that bored into the mountainside at a forty-five degree angle. The snow at the mouth had drag marks leading into the dark.

“Korea?” Kangwon ventured.

No one responded, but he thought he heard something inside. Hoping it was his Countryhuman, and not a fox or some other animal, he shifted closer.

“Korea?”

“Go away,” a voice rasped weakly.

Kangwon sighed in relief, sitting back on his haunches. “Everyone’s looking for you. What are you doing in there?”

“None of your… business.”

There was a wet wheeze, and a short cough that Kangwon had years of identifying as the sound someone made when their lungs were full of mucus, but they didn’t want to have a coughing fit.

“Korea, you’re sick,” he finally declared to his face. Well, to the dark hole in the ground.

“I am *not,”* he growled, then lost the battle against his lungs, starting to cough, a wet hacking sound that rattled in his chest, echoing out of the small hole and across the mountainside.

It just kept going, until Kangwon couldn’t take it anymore, trying to reach in to thump him on the back.

“Don’t… touch… me,” Korea wheezed through his fit, his voice reedy and thin. He finally stopped coughing, struggling for air. “I’m not… *sick.”*

“Korea, please tell me your symptoms,” Kangwon begged. “We were in Balnam-ri. If you have the plague-“

“I don’t,” he snapped. “I’m- I’m-“

He started to cough again, louder, more desperate.

“A cough,” Kangwon said when he stopped. “Mucus in your lungs. A fever. Dizziness, I’d guess.”

Korea's temperature hadn't gone down since their confrontation in the Quarantine Hospital. He'd been burning up on the way to Balnam-ri and back, and his unsteady footsteps said he was having balance trouble. And the fact that he was hiding in a hole said he wasn't thinking straight.

"Those can all be signs of the flu, but they can also be signs of plague," he said, allowing a bit of his genuine concern into his voice. "And we're in the sweet spot for symptoms to show up if we got infected in that village. I need to know any others."

Korea was silent for a long moment. Then, "Sore throat."

"Sudden onset or gradual?"

"Sudden," he said grudgingly.

"Any aches or chills?"

"Yes. Both."

"Exhaustion?"

"Weariness," Korea corrected acidicly. "Just tell me the plague symptoms again. I'll tell you if I have those."

There were three types of plague, all caused by Pasteurella pestis- bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic. They affected the lymph nodes, blood, and lungs respectively. The outbreak killing villagers in Balnam-ri was currently bubonic.

"Swollen lymph nodes, especially around your groin, or skin discoloration?"

"No."

"Have you actually checked your skin?" he asked knowingly.

"I know I don't have swollen lymph nodes," his Countryhuman growled. "And I think I would notice if my skin was necrotizing."

He probably wouldn't. But Kangwon would have to get him out of

the hole before he checked that.

"Any seizures? Vomiting? Stomach issues?"

"No, no, and-" Korea panted, his breath rattling in his lungs, but fought off the fit. *"No."*

The lack of swelling in his lymph nodes was a promising sign against bubonic plague, though Kangwon wouldn't be reassured until he could look at him.

"Stomach pain? Bleeding from anywhere you shouldn't be? Low blood pressure?"

He received a negative for all of them, and a, "High… blood pressure."

Hm. Probably not septicemic then.

"Headaches? Shortness of breath? Chest pain?"

Korea didn't answer.

"Korea."

"…Yes," he finally admitted. "To all three."

Kangwon put the back of his fist to his mouth. "You've got all the symptoms of pneumonic plague."

"I don't have the fucking plague!" Korea snapped. "I checked that hazmat suit twenty times, and there wasn't a single hole. I am *fine."*

"You probably are," Kangwon soothed. "Those are all symptoms of regular pneumonia, too, and the flu. But we can't take any chances here. Pneumonic plague is always fatal if it doesn't get treated. I need to take a sample of sputum- your mucus- for testing."

"I'm fine," Korea repeated. "I just need to rest."

Kangwon hesitated, then nodded to himself. "You do," he said. "That's why I want you to go into a recuperative coma."

"No," his Countryhuman said immediately, shifting in the darkness. "Not happening. I just need a day, that's all."

"Korea." Kangwon leaned forward on his palms, looking into the hole, catching a gleam of light off of his eye. "You've been driving yourself as hard as you can since the war began. That's-"

He'd been going to say 'almost two years now,' but caught himself before he could.

"If you do have the flu, it's no wonder- you don't sleep, you don't eat, you don't let us disinfect your wounds-"

"I clean them."

"But you don't *disinfect* them," Kangwon stressed. "Your immune system can't take all of that."

"It can," Korea growled.

"It clearly can't. You're hiding in a hole in the ground." He patted the mouth of it. "That's not really what a healthy man does."

Let alone Korea. He actually *did have* a strong immune system. The provinces had caught bouts of stomach flu before, and colds had frequently torn through the revolutionary ranks during the war against Japan. Korea had either dodged or tanked them admirably.

Which was why Kangwon *really* didn't like that he was hiding like a wounded animal right now.

"You need rest," he said when his Countryhuman hadn't spoken up. *"Real* rest."

"I can't," Korea rasped. "I have a job to do."

"The talks are at a stalemate right now," Kangwon reminded him.

"And what if that changes?" the man shot back. "What if we finally have a chance to settle the POW issue?"

"Then you trust our comrades to handle it," Kangwon said

patiently. “It’s not like you haven’t already gone over every possibility with them.”

“If it is settled, then Gangwon will be the only issue standing between us and a ceasefire,” Korea argued. “Without me to stop them, someone could decide to hand him over.”

“No one’s going to risk going behind you or the Premier’s backs to do that,” Kangwon soothed. “He’s my brother, but I’m not even worried about that.”

He doubted there was a single person in the halls of power that would want to hand over one of their provinces, let alone go against Korea to do it. And most of them didn’t know the Americans were right, and they did have Gangwon.

Korea shifted, his eye gleaming desperately in the dark. “You *need* me.”

“We need you *healthy,”* Kangwon corrected. “And if you don’t get some proper rest, you’re just going to get worse. If you don’t have the plague, you might be able to muscle through this. But then it’s only a matter of time before you get sick again, and more severely. Where while if you take a month and a half-long recuperative coma, your system will have time to repair itself completely.”

Korea’s voice grew tighter. “I can’t be out for that long.”

“A month.”

“A week.”

“That’s barely anything,” Kangwon pointed out. “If you want to actually heal, and avoid being forced to take more time off, you’ll go for a month. That’s my professional opinion.”

“…Three weeks,” Korea counterproposed.

He exhaled. “Alright. Three weeks.”

“And you wake me up the second something happens with the talks.”

"I wake you up the second something important happens with the talks."

"Everything is important," Korea growled.

"Yeah, but I'm not waking you up just because the Americans promise to hand the list over again." He honestly wouldn't wake him up even if they did. The prisoners would still be in the camps even with the missing names in their hands.

"…Fine," he grudgingly agreed. "But I don't want to be in the hospital."

Kangwon didn't bother arguing. He wanted him to rest, not to wake up every ten seconds convinced someone was coming to kill him.

"Where would you feel safe?"

The hole was silent.

"What about with the Premier?"

The energy coming from the cleft brightened, then darkened again.

"No. I don't want to get him sick."

"The bunker?"

"I don't want to get the others sick."

"You'll be in your room," Kangwon told him. "And when you're better, I'll scrub it with calcium hypochlorite."

That, mixed with a bit of hot water and mercuric chloride, made a good disinfectant. And Kangwon had priority access to the cleaning materials being rapidly churned out.

"How about that?" he prompted when Korea hadn't said anything.

"No."

Trying not to sound impatient when he *really* wanted to test Korea

for the plague, he asked, “Why not?”

His Countryhuman shifted, breath shuddering in his lungs. “No.”

His claustrophobia, maybe? Or just the idea of being in a place with only one exit.

Kangwon could’ve pointed out that Korea had literally slept in a storage closet in the chosonjip, or that he was currently crammed in a dark hole that was barely big enough for a person. But he got that the body was weird. Korea’s comfort didn’t have to follow any logic, he just had to be comfortable.

“If you don’t want to be in a hospital, or around any of our leadership, the air raid shelter’s pretty much all that’s left,” Kangwon pointed out.

“If I’m sleeping here, I could be ambushed.”

“What if we set some of our bodyguards outside?”

“No,” Korea said sharply. “Don’t tell anyone that I’m… sick.”

The word came out reluctantly, and slurred.

“What if one of us stood watch then?” Kangwon suggested.

“You have jobs to do.” Korea’s voice went suddenly tight again. “I can’t do this. Just leave me alone. I’ll be better by tomorrow.”

“No you won’t,” Kangwon said patiently. “You’ll go into the bunker and enter a recuperative coma, and one of the others will stand guard during the day. SH and Hwang both have things they can work on here. That way you’ll be safe, and won’t have to lock your door.”

“I need to,” Korea said, alarmed.

“No,” Kangwon firmly denied. “Korea, please, don’t lock your door, even during the day. We can’t open it from the outside, so if something happens to you, we won’t be able to get in.”

There was a rustle as Korea adjusted himself, thinking. "…Fine," he eventually clipped. "But no one comes in unless it's to wake me up."

"I'll come in to clean your wounds, but no one else will," Kangwon promised.

"No," Korea said. "I don't want you to treat me."

Pain lanced through Kangwon's chest, but he kept his voice steady.

"Then who would you feel comfortable with?"

"No one. No one'ssh… touching me while I'm out."

Kangwon just wanted to get him down the mountain before he *passed* out. "Someone needs to."

"No." Korea's eye narrowed as his dark shape pressed farther back into the crack. "No food, no cleaning my burns. Just get Kim Yong-hwan to give me water."

He'd technically be fine without food, since his body would be running on as few processes as possible (if he actually let it go into a coma), but the burns were an issue.

"You need disinfecting," Kangwon stressed. "And do you really think Kim Yong-hwan is going to agree to come all the way out here just to give you water?"

"I don't want someone touching me while I'm asleep," Korea said tightly, squeezing even farther back, drawing his limbs in.

"What about the Premier?"

"I'm not making him drive out here just to deal with me," his Countryhuman muttered, though he'd hesitated a little.

Kangwon wrapped his arms around his knees. "You know, I took care of you while you slept for two months. And I never hurt you."

The gleam of Korea's eye disappeared as he turned away from the opening. "I don't think you're going to hurt me, Kangwon," he muttered, the new position adding a deeper wheeze to his words. "I told you it's not about you. I just don't want anyone… looking at me."

His shadow shrank in on itself. Kangwon silently exhaled.

"Alright," he gave in. "No cleaning."

Korea also gave in. "You can be the one to give me water. And juk, if you have to. Just don't take advantage and give me more than usual. Half rations."

Kangwon didn't try to argue for full. He knew it wouldn't work. "Okay."

"And don't let anyone take my clothes off," he added, slightly desperately. "I don't want anyone touching me."

"If the Premier is ever in the area…?"

"I don't want him going out of his way."

Kangwon nodded. That was as close as Korea would let himself get to consenting. He'd ask the man to come by once or twice to use his simple field medicine to clean out his burns. He knew Kim Il-sung wouldn't see it as going out of his way.

"I need to put affairs in order before I… sleep," Korea said, shifting back towards the mouth of the hole again.

"You need to get to rest," Kangwon said firmly. "I'll get SH to tell the Premier. He'll make sure everything's sorted."

"I need-"

"Korea, you might have the *plague,"* Kangwon interrupted. "You aren't going anywhere but the bunker so I can take my sample and get it tested. Otherwise you might infect someone else. Do you want that?"

"…No," Korea grumbled.

"Then let's get you down."

"One more thing," he said. "Get some of the blood I donated and give it to Jong-il and Kyong-hui. I don't want them getting sick."

"That's probably not how it works," Kangwon told him.

"I don't care. It's worth a try." Korea peered up at him. "Do it."

"Alright." It couldn't harm the Premier's children at least.

There was a rustling, and Kangwon stepped back, watching as Korea's arms reached up out of the hole, followed by his head, squinting his eye against the light as he squeezed his shoulders out, then his hips, before dragging his legs free. He crouched for a moment, blinking in the sunlight, and Kangwon keenly examined his neck, looking for any sign of swelling in the lymph nodes there.

Gradually, he stood, swaying on the uneven ground. Kangwon went to steady him, but he flinched back.

He looked… rough. Even worse than the last time he'd seen him. His eye was sunken in, but his eyelid was swollen, turning his monolid to a double one. The red over it looked raw and irritated, and the red under it was stained a dark purple. His thin lips had gone from chapped to cracked, and he had blood smeared over his face. Kangwon subtly checked his hands, seeing the blood-soaked bandage his fingers were clutching compulsively around. He'd probably cut it on that rock.

The bandage looked caked into his blue skin. He'd get the Premier to visit almost immediately. He didn't think Korea had even been washing his burns for the past few days.

"See?" Korea said defiantly, tilting his chin up. "I'm fine."

Fever shone in his eye as it roved erratically, like he couldn't focus on any one thing.

"Yeah, and you'll be even better after a rest," Kangwon said,

smiling. He offered his arm, but Korea walked by him, heading down the slope. He didn't make it far before he started visibly shaking, but he kept going.

Kangwon scrubbed a hand over his face. It should've made him relieved he'd finally managed to convince Korea to rest, but…

The fact that he'd agreed honestly worried him even more.

He sighed, and went to make sure he didn't fall down the mountain.

Happy New Year comrades!! I didn't do anything last night because I'm still sort of sick and don't want to give anyone it, so I just made tteokguk with evil tteok. I think they were life-shortening tteok if anything.

I really like egg onigiri but I think people that get it in the morning have something wrong with them. Because they're either just eating cold egg yolk inside cold rice or they're heating it up and risking getting egg yolk on their shirts. Egg onigiri is a night food.

Someone Like You

The bunker door squealed open, and Hwang turned to see the Premier emerging from the darkness, stripping medical gloves from his hands to tuck into a satchel. It was old and worn enough that the province suspected it might be a relic from his 'previous life,' as it were. It clashed with his black suit, despite its militaristic cut.

"Is he well?" Hwang fretted, his eyes darting to the young man the General had left to watch the door with him- Hyon Chol-hae.

As the man's personal bodyguard, he must be trustworthy, yet he still hesitated to discuss Korea's condition in front of him. His own guards were at the treeline, out of audio range.

"Better now," the Premier said, peeling off his face mask to store in a pocket, so it wouldn't touch the bloodstained gloves.

Hwang nervously looked at Hyon Chol-hae, then quietly advised, "While your care for Korea is appreciated, I think it may be safer if you don't interact with him until he's recovered. If you caught something…"

He trailed off, waiting for the man to interrupt him like others would. Kim Il-sung just watched him patiently, waiting.

He cleared his throat. "It wouldn't be beneficial for our country."

"Comrade Hwang's concern for me is also appreciated," the Premier said warmly. "But this arrangement is necessary. And I've risked more for my country. The flu is a far less fiercesome enemy than the Japanese."

It *was* just the flu, thankfully. Kangwon had rushed the sample taken from Korea through the laboratory, and confirmed it. It must have simply been brought on from a poor diet and exhaustion.

Though in their current climate, any illness was dangerous.

“It’s also far more difficult to shoot and kill,” Hwang said worriedly, making the man chuckle.

“That is the truth. But I couldn’t leave Comrade Korea to suffer.”

Hwang didn’t entirely see why Kangwon couldn’t just tend to Korea and tell him the Premier had, considering he’d never know. Perhaps that blurred patient consent a bit, but when the patient's demands were unreasonable (and he was part of your household), surely that wasn’t unforgivable. And Kangwon really didn’t follow the Hippocratic Oath in the first place. And while he followed the Declaration of Geneva in spirit, he’d never officially taken the vow.

Hm. It had always puzzled Hwang that, when asked, Kangwon had specifically clarified that he hadn’t taken it and wouldn’t. He wasn’t the sort to reject it simply because it had been drafted by foreigners after all. But now that it had come out that he’d been lying about Hae’s condition, perhaps *that* was why he wouldn’t take the oath- the article about maintaining the honour and noble traditions of the medical profession could be construed as not lying while practicing.

“While I’m here,” the Premier said, interrupting his suspicious mulling. “I bear good news that I believe our Comrade Korea might have been too preoccupied these past few days to share.”

Hwang perked up. “What is it?”

“The enemy’s operative within our system has been removed.”

Relief spread inside his chest, overwhelming him.

He closed his eyes. “Who was it? If that can be shared.”

“A woman by the name of Pak Um-ja,” he replied. “You have actually encountered her, I believe- she worked at the Telephone Exchange.”

Hwang smacked a fist into his hand. “The older woman that was there the day I took the call?”

After Kangwon had shared his North Pyongan-Maine dialect

theory, Hwang had remembered that one of the women there on the day Choe Jung-nam had died had a more northerly Pyongan dialect, and had seemed to be reluctant to leave the room, and submitted her for investigation. But he hadn't expected it to actually be a hit.

The man nodded. "Her coworkers said they caught her trying to listen in during your call. When questioned, they admitted they'd had suspicions on her for awhile, but as their senior, they were hesitant to report her."

Hwang sighed. *'And still bureaucracy in the workplace.'*

Though he knew it would take decades before there wasn't. As he'd said to North Hamgyong- cultural change took time.

"How did she manage to get so much information on our movements?" he asked, subtly eyeing their bodyguards.

The General seemed to pay them no mind. "As a civilian, she wasn't subject to the same scrutiny those with military positions are. But she still benefitted from military knowledge- her son is in the Signal Corps, stationed at a nearby checkpoint."

'Ah.' That explained it. Even with the repeated reminders to keep military information confidential, many soldiers wouldn't see that as applying to their own parents. They would naïvely assume they were safe to share it with. And being at a checkpoint would not only give the man the chance to witness Korea and the provinces moving around firsthand, but access to any cables about them.

"I hope they're both learning their lesson?" Hwang asked.

It wasn't the soldier's fault that someone that should have been safe, wasn't. Yet his light mouth couldn't go unpunished.

The Premier's lips twisted into a moue. "The son has been discharged. But there's a mild wrinkle- the woman wasn't feeding information out of malice."

"Let me guess," Hwang sighed. "A husband or other child taken prisoner by the enemy?"

The Premier nodded. “Husband. We’ve confirmed he’s one of those on the list of missing names.”

The thirty-eight thousand they knew to be KPA soldiers. Hwang had likely looked at his name with his own eyes just recently.

“She was being threatened with his death if she didn’t do as the Americans wanted,” the man continued. “Yet she didn’t turn herself over willingly, so she can’t take advantage of voluntary surrender.”

“What about her son?”

“He is sharing everything he ever told her so we have a grasp of what the enemy might know. He’ll be dealt with leniently.” The Premier tapped the toe of his black boot on the frozen ground. “And the woman has been offered leniency in the form of a deal. She still has the radio equipment the enemy provided her with. If she can successfully feed them false information, her charges will be lessened.”

If the enemy understood what she was doing, her life would be at risk, as well as the life of her husband in the camps. It was the ultimate form of proving she wasn’t a true traitor, only a manipulated woman.

“Well, I’m glad,” Hwang said quietly. “It seems the efforts of the compatriots that fought to get us this information weren’t for nothing.”

The Premier gave him a smile as his rough hand patted his shoulder. “No. They weren’t.”

Hwang didn’t know how much the man knew about what had happened. He was only the Premier, theoretically he shouldn’t be aware of the identity of every single one of their agents or what was transpiring with leaks and operatives around them.

Yet his smile seemed more empathetic than usual, and he seemed to have sought this information out specifically for Hwang. Perhaps Korea truly did tell him everything.

Not for the first time, the province wondered what exactly it was

about Kim Il-sung that had drawn their Countryhuman to him. Of course he was a great general and tireless patriot, but many in the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army had shared those qualities. Yet not a single other would be trusted to clean Korea's wounds while he slept. He didn't even trust the provinces with that.

There was a chance the Premier was the only person in Korea that knew what the Countryhuman had gone through in those nine years he was imprisoned by Japan (the South excepted, of course). Hwang would never know because every time he asked, the human man just gave him that enigmatic smile and said something to the effect of 'Our country has shared a great many things with me. I would be remiss to pass any of them on.'

It would be nice if Korea could at least have trusted someone with a lighter mouth. Though he supposed light mouths sunk ships, as with Pak Um-ja.

"Thank you for sharing this with me," he said, dipping his head to their Premier. "Is it information the others can hear?"

The man dipped his head back. "Of course. Comrade Korea has his concerns, but I have faith that no more of our provinces will be lost."

Hwang opened his mouth, then closed it.

That was one question even he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to.

The Premier said his goodbyes, and departed with Hyon Chol-hae, Hwang bidding him to drive safe. If the man were to be hit by an enemy bomb while returning from treating Korea, not only would they lose a source of morale and a valued tactician, but Korea would bear that burden for… Well, likely forever.

Hwang was left with his bodyguards, Min Hak-sol and Pak Kong-sun, both of whom had served in Manchuria during the war against Japan. Since they hadn't fought with them directly, they must be recommendations from the Premier. That was the only substitute Korea would accept for personal ties.

Pak Kong-sun was the silent type, but quite useful for bouncing ideas off of, and Min Hak-sol enjoyed a good discussion now and again. Though currently he was scanning the forest with his dark eyes.

Ostensibly, they didn't know Korea was ill. In practice, Hwang thought they might have suspicions about why he'd stood guard over the bunker for half the day two days in a row.

They didn't say anything, sensing his pensive mood as he settled in for the rest of his shift.

The leak was eliminated. Choi Jung-nam had done his job.

There would always be more enemy operatives, of course. But to lose one in such an advantageous position… America would feel this.

And yet not as deeply as Hwang felt the loss of his former student.

The Americans were playing with pawns, a game lacking in emotion. They didn't care about the elimination of their guerrilla squads or their informants, beyond tactical considerations. They didn't care about the woman who now had to risk her life to feed them false information, or her son who had lost his army job and benefits, or her husband in their camps.

But for Hwang and his comrades, every piece on the board was a wife, son, mother, or brother. Every one eliminated was someone that had served their country loyally, or could have with a bit of re-education. Someone that could have done great things for Korea, if only they'd been given the chance.

'Someone we know.'

And Hwang had still chosen to risk Choi Jung-nam's life so swiftly.

He told SH the good news when she came to relieve him, trailed by China.

His cousin let out a sigh, as relieved as he'd been. "That's good." Her hands wrung the sides of her long coat, unable to reach the

hem. “I still wish there was something we could do for Grace.”

“If it helps,” China said from the door. “She *is* still an American. There’s a good chance she deserves to suffer for other misdemeanours.”

“That *doesn’t* help, actually.” SH shot a look at him. “And you had better not be creeping into Korea’s room.” Realizing her tone, she added more sweetly, “It wouldn’t do for our comrade to catch anything.”

“Of course I’m not. I moved all of my things back into the men’s room, didn’t I?” China gave a mock shudder. “I hate sick people almost as much as I hate Yankees. I’m staying far away from your Countryhuman until he stops being infectious.”

With another shiver, he slid inside, the steel door shutting quietly.

SH narrowed her eyes at it. “What are the chances that Korea actually told him about Grace and that mission?”

“Highly unlikely,” Hwang appraised.

In fact, the foreign Countryhuman shouldn’t know who Grace Hartman was at all. The only times they had discussed her were at the criticism session after being reunited, shortly after that when the provinces had been asking each other clarifying questions about aspects of their accounts (sadly no one had asked about his bear encounter), and with Korea in relation to the mission.

The extent of China's knowledge of their private affairs went beyond narrowed eyes. If he gleaned too much of their inner workings, it could be dangerous when the war was over. Knowing how they operated, ingratiating Liaoxi in with North Pyongan, even just being aware of their family dynamic could all be used against them.

Hwang didn’t bring it up with Korea, as it was obvious he would have predicted the same dangers. But knowing that, it was baffling that he hadn’t put his foot down and sent the other Countryhuman home. It was also baffling that China hadn’t *chosen* to go home with

America actively seeking to prove he was here to justify military intervention directly against his country.

It made him suspect he was taking the risk specifically to gather intelligence on them. Though why he would be so dedicated to gaining arrows in his quiver against Korea- a much smaller, friendly nation- while risking the wrath of a far more powerful one that was already seeking war with him, he didn't know.

Or maybe he was being too cynical, and he was simply here to help.

Hwang left SH behind, returning to the city in one of the small GAZ-67's that had been requisitioned for their watches. In case of emergency, they needed to be able to abscond from the area with Korea as fast as possible.

He had half the day left, and had intended to go to Kim Il-sung University to write up reminders for every facet of their society to combat bureaucracy and the old ways of refusing to question seniors, both in the family and workplace. Yet he found himself turning the vehicle before he reached the mountain pass, following another road worn between the fields into the hills.

His boots scuffed the hard ground outside the Quarantine Hospital as he bid his guards to remain outside. Best not to chance all of their well-beings for an emotional indulgence.

"Comrade Hwang." A man standing outside the hospital doors darted towards him. Kim Pong-ju, one of Hae's guards. The other was likely stationed outside her window. "Are you here to visit Comrade Hae?"

Hwang hesitated, then nodded. "Yes."

Foolish, perhaps. But he needed to see her. That subtle 'missing' feeling had been growing more distracting, though whether it was a true physical reaction from not seeing his other half for so long, or simply psychosomatic, he didn't know. Their separation over a year ago didn't provide any conclusions- his fear from the moment she'd left his side eclipsed any meaningful observations.

“Could you give her this?” Kim Pong-ju held out a bracelet made of woven straw. “My sister made it for her.” He quickly added, “Ah didn’ tell her about her condition. She just knows ah’m assigned to her ‘cuz Comrade Hae insisted we went and paid my family a visit, and she’s real worried, what with the germ warfare. She made it to cheer her up. Used her allowance to pay for the delivery fee herself.”

There was a proud tint to the last words.

“Of course I’ll bring it to her.” Hwang took the bracelet. “Has she awoken yet?”

Kim Pong-ju’s face shuttered, looking suddenly like the picture of a bodyguard who was willing to die to protect his charge’s secrets.

“I’m aware she’s in a recuperative coma,” the province clarified, and the serious look dispersed as quickly as it came.

“No, she hasn’ woken up yet,” he said regretfully. “But ah think it’ll do good for her to see we were all thinkin’ about her when she does.”

Should Hwang have done that? Though he didn’t know what he’d make. He wasn’t exactly crafty.

More importantly, was that confirmation that Hae’s bodyguards had been aware of Kangwon’s lie? If so, that made him feel slightly better. Personal objections aside, it would have been more difficult to protect her if they didn’t know she was compromised.

Though Kangwon was playing a dangerous game if he’d instructed the men to lie to Korea. Perhaps he’d only made sure they were scarce when he came around. Hwang would have to ask when he got a chance.

“Thank you for thinking of Comrade Hae,” he said, and Kim Pong-ju saluted.

“Anythin’ for my province.”

His province. It wasn’t exactly a clear delineation that Hwang

wasn't his province. But it came close. Kim Pong-ju was from Changyon County, in the south of Hwanghae.

He didn't feel any jealousy. His own bodyguards referred to him in a similar way. But rather…

Hwang went inside the hospital, using his status as a Provincehuman to defy the quarantine, though promising to abide by the procedures he was given, being as humble and polite as possible to offset the negative image barging in this way could bring.

The nurse at the counter barely noticed, sending him through decontamination before hustling off as an alarm started to ring from deeper in the hospital.

Hwang donned the protective wear he was provided- a long white coat, gloves that went past his elbows, and gauze to wrap around his head, along with a face mask, the cobbled together version of what the bacteriologists in the field wore. The plague victims were being quarantined elsewhere, usually in the homes where they fell ill, to avoid the spread, but he didn't relish the idea of catching typhus, paratyphoid fever, tuberculosis, or any number of rickettsial diseases that the rickettsia bacteria dropped on both South Pyongan and also apparently Liaoxi's capital of Shenyang could cause.

Or the cholera the flies airdropped on Pyongyang's central district three days ago had been infected with.

He shuddered as he walked through the white halls, maintaining proximity to the wall to stay out of the nurses' and doctors' ways, but not touching it, mindful of the teams of workers in white suits methodically scrubbing one corridor with acrid chemicals. Loud moans echoed from behind closed doors, the sounds of men and women with disease eating away at their bodies.

"I want my mom," one man's muffled voice called, sounding far too old to be making the request. "Mom, please, it hurts."

"Hold on, Mr. Ku," a woman begged back. "Your medicine is on its way."

“Mommy,” the old man sobbed, and Hwang picked up his feet.

He would never say he hated the ill as China had. But he didn’t entirely enjoy being around those whose faculties had been ravaged by pain. Or being reminded of how easily it could happen to him.

Hae shouldn’t be here. If she wasn’t contagious anymore, she should be away from all this.

He found the room he’d been directed to, and slipped inside, belatedly realizing he’d forgotten to knock.

Gangwon looked up from a pallet on the floor in surprise, a small tin bowl balanced on his knees. He quickly swallowed the last of his rice, and stood.

“Hwang,” he said, wiping his mouth. “W-What are you doing here?”

“I came to visit Hae.” His eye was drawn to her form, supine on the small cot, relieved to immediately see the rise and fall of her chest under the white cotton sheet.

“She’s getting better.” Gangwon frowned with concentration as he made signs to accompany his words, though he dropped them to chew his nail as he said, “I’m just on a quick break, so I have to get going. B-But I wanted to say I’m sorry we didn’t tell you about her d-d- condition.”

“It’s alright,” Hwang assured him. “I understand why Kangwon did it. I’ll admit that I was a tad miffed to learn he’d lied to me.”

Especially directly to his face with no sign that that’s what he was doing.

“But we’ve settled the matter.”

He had asked his cousin to please never lie about an issue like Hae’s health again, and had received the reply of, ‘Yeah, I don’t really want Korea to kill me.’ Along with the explanation that Hae had been the one to request his secrecy. It felt unfair to blame Kangwon when he’d only been following his patient's request.

And when he looked so exhausted. And guilty.

"And you're blameless in this," he said to Gangwon. "We never had a chance to communicate after you came here."

"Even if we had, I would've lied to you anyways," the man admitted.

Hwang bobbed his head. "Naturally." The Kangwons were different people now, but not entirely different. "But you didn't get the chance. So let's just say you had nothing to do with it."

Gangwon followed his hands with his eyes. "Th-Thanks."

He scurried past him, pausing to put a hand on his shoulder, and give him a comforting smile.

"She really is getting better. I think she's going to wake up soon."

Then he put his face mask on, and whisked off, Hwang already able to hear someone calling for him in the hallway before the door was slid shut, muting the chaos outside.

Ah, he hadn't told him about the leak's capture. He'd do it on his way out, and be extra careful not to mention any names. The Premier had faith that no more of their provinces would fall to the enemy, but Gangwon had technically already fallen. Any information he knew was compromised information.

Perhaps it really was best not to tell him that China was wanted by the United Nations. With his placid demeanour, Kangwon often gave the impression that he didn't think much beyond current events, and Gangwon's nervous disposition only reinforced that on him. *Not* that Hwang was calling either of them unintelligent. They both simply seemed to be focused on the present, not possibilities.

But Kangwon's skillful lying, and Gangwon's admission that he would do the same had reminded him that they were both more clever than they acted. Even telling the latter that China had been taken to trial might be enough for him to start making connections. Korea had no intentions of handing him over to the enemy, but…

War was unpredictable. Knock on a stone bridge before crossing, as they said.

Hwang shook his head, exhaling as he crossed the small room to Hae's bedside, carefully placing the woven straw bracelet on her nightstand. There were several medical textbooks piled on it, likely Gangwon's, alongside his notes on sign language. Next to them was a piece of paper with an explanation that Hae was in the Quarantine Hospital, and that Gangwon would be right back, left to reassure her in case she woke up when he wasn't in the room.

There was another paper next to it, with three figures on it, and the words *'Get well soon, Comrade Hae'* scrawled above them. At first Hwang thought it was another gift from Kim Pong-ju's sister, before realizing it was signed *'Kim Man-won and Kim Pong-ju.'* The drawing was in the same hand as the first signature.

He glanced at the window, only able to see the trees on the hill the hospital was partially built into beyond the taped cross. But he knew the hulking Kim Man-won was out there.

He couldn't help but chuckle a little as he pictured the large man holding charcoal in his thick fingers to sketch the drawing of the bodyguards and Hae. Truly his sister was capable of winning over anyone.

His smile faded as he set the card back down, and placed the back of his hand against her forehead. It was cool, and the moment his skin touched hers, it was like a phantom pain had dissipated.

How had he lived with that absence for eleven years?

Hwang sat on the edge of the cot, then changed his mind. Hae was lying on her side, facing the sunlight coming in the window, so he went around to the other side of the bed, gingerly lying down with his legs awkwardly bent to keep the fabric tied over his boots off the sheets, facing her.

His sister's face wasn't peaceful. There was a line between her small white brows, and her bottom lip was pushed out in a pout, like she knew she was missing the start of sowing season.

Hwang swallowed. “Hae, I don’t know if you can hear me. Coma patients have reported being able to hear voices when they’re unconscious, but I don’t know if recuperative comas differ. I feel… a little silly talking to an empty room.”

He was instinctively speaking in a hushed tone, actually.

“I hope you’re okay,” he said, forcing his voice a little louder. “And that you’ll wake up soon.”

Hae’s face was still, her pink freckles stark against her pallid flag base.

Her brother cleared his throat. “I… lost someone dear to me recently. You’ve met him once before.”

He told her about Choi Jung-nam, and his final call. When she awoke, he wouldn’t be able to share it until the war was over. He had to admit, it felt cathartic to whisper the story to her sleeping form.

When he was finished, he took a shuddering breath. “Kangwon and SH assure me I’m not clinical, and I know logically that we made the right choice by sending him to do what he did. He accomplished his mission. It was necessary. But…”

Hwang gathered his words, more for himself than her.

“I can’t help wishing that I had hesitated to decide,” he murmured, his fingers curling in against the spotless sheets. “Even knowing I’d make the same decision. It’s illogical, but… I know you would have hesitated.”

He lifted his eyes to her sleeping face, tracing over the crisp edges of the bandages.

“I think… I want to be more like you,” he admitted quietly. “You’re right that I have my own good qualities, fields that I’m skilled in that you aren’t. But I’ve always admired how charismatic you are, even when you don’t realize it. You light up a room, and draw everyone in.”

That was the real reason his sister would always be more appealing to the masses, no matter how understandable the language Hwang used was. Her shared suffering let her understand them, and her loveable personality drew them towards her.

"You're so… warm."

It had been the first thing he'd thought when he met her. As emaciated and filthy as she'd been, locked away in a dank hole, when his hand had touched her arm, it had been warm. And as she turned to look at him, as sunken as her cheeks were, as confused and frightened as her expression was, her face had filled with the same warmth.

Hae was like a little piece of sun that had fallen down to Korea, radiating warmth and light, drawing everyone's eyes and affection towards her, not unlike Korea himself.

"I want to be warm like you," he murmured, reaching out to touch her cheek, feeling that same warmth he had then. "But…"

His hand slid away as he drew it close to his chest. This next part was shameful to admit.

"I don't want to be merged with you."

It wasn't as if he didn't know Hae felt similarly. When they'd spoken about it previously, unease always lurked under her expression, and she frequently talked about being made their own separate provinces. But he had always dodged her questions when she asked if that was what he wanted, or if he was looking forward to merging.

He *should* look forward to it. Their unification would be a direct symbolization of Korea's class divide narrowing, bringing together the best parts of the peasant and intellectual classes, creating the perfect province. Or at least an incredibly functional one. One who could thresh an entire rice field *and* grade over a hundred papers in a day, who always knew what words to use, who could lead a class and win hearts. Hwanghae, the way Hwanghae *should* be.

Yet he didn't. Ever since that night on the riverbank, when he had realized that he couldn't lose Hae, he'd lost any sense of neutrality at the idea. He didn't *want* to be Hwanghae. He wanted to be *North* Hwanghae.

He wanted to be Hwang. And he wanted his sister to be Hae.

"I want to be more like you," he repeated. "But I want to become more like you through my own strengths. I don't want to be gifted some miracle fix. I want to rely on myself to change. I want to *learn* how to be warm like you."

He squeezed his eyes shut, his glasses going askew as he buried his face in the cot, guilty at what felt like a betrayal. Not to his sister, who had been honest about wanting to remain herself for far longer than him, and not to their people, who already held their division in their hearts.

But to Korea.

"Ah think…"

Hwang jerked his head up, eyes wide as hurriedly adjusted his glasses, hardly daring to believe his ear slits.

"Hae?"

Her lips moved slowly, her eyes gleaming through the crack in her lids. "Ah think Hwang'shhh… plenny warm already."

Her hand twitched under the covers, trying to move towards him. He reached under, linking their fingers together desperately.

"But ah… don't want…"

She mouthed something, then her eyes rolled back in her head, bloodshot backs exposed under her stubby lashes as her head lolled to the side, lips still parted.

"Hae?" Hwang sat up, grabbing her shoulder. "Hae!"

A string of drool crept from her mouth, puddling on the sheets.

The line between her brows was gone.

Relief flooded through him as he clutched her close, not caring that her saliva was staining his white coat now instead. He squeezed his eyes closed, burying his face in her shoulder.

After his months of practicing with Gangwon as they learned sign language, he'd become adept at reading lips, enough to know what his sister's last sentence had been.

'Ah don't want to lose you either.'

Hwang held Hae close, and feeling like he was betraying Korea wasn't enough to stop him from rejoicing.

'You won't.'

When he left the room, her blush compact remained behind, pinning Gangwon's letter to the side table, the first thing she would see when she awoke for good.

Kangwon: I can't take that vow.

Hwang: You mean the Geneva Declaration? The one where the doctor vows to respect human rights and do no harm?

Kangwon: Yeah. Can't take it.

Hwang: …Why not?

Kangwon: Because I'd do harm.

Hwang: …What?

Kangwon: If a patient gives me permission, I'll do harm. (◜‿◝)

I don't want to misrepresent him, so I'll elaborate here. It's that 'so long as you did everything you could, it's not your fault' mindset. If the only chance of saving a patient was a really risky experimental medical procedure that could kill them, Kangwon would do it so long as they agreed to it (sort of like with Yun Jin-suk- giving a fourteen year-old girl an

abortion with plants at eight months probably doesn't exactly fit in with the Geneva Declaration, but it was what was best for her, so Kangwon was willing to do it). Doctor 'Informed Patient Consent and Literally Nothing Else Is What's Important To Me' Kangwon.
Also his objection to the original Geneva Declaration was partly it saying 'I will have the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception,' because he was like 'Hm, don't like how that can be used in an anti-women's rights context. A life *isn't* a life from conception, and it can't supersede the life of the woman carrying it.'

Him, Maomao, and Dr. House. Questionable medical trio .

Every once and awhile I think about how Americans say Kim Il-sung has a cult of personality because of his statues. You CARVED the heads of SLAVE OWNERS into SACRED INDIGENOUS ROCK. You have MASSIVE HEADS OF YOUR FIRST LEADERS CARVED INTO A ROCK. Maybe you don't have the right to talk.

Philosophy Of A Scalpel

“So you really can cook.”

Kangwon startled slightly as the voice came from *right* behind him, eyes darting to see China leaning over his shoulder, gaze fixed on the juk he was making on the outdoor hearth.

“Were you here the entire time?” he asked.

He and SH’s bodyguards were out on the edge of the forest, watching the road. He thought they’d at least alert if they saw ‘Mao Zhilong.’

The Countryhuman smiled, not moving. “Who knows…? Have you been a chef this entire time?”

Kangwon shifted away, returning his attention to the juk, stirring the rice at the bottom of the heavy pot to keep it from burning.

He'd admit he was pulling out a few more of his cooking skills than usual by making a vegetable stock to simmer the rice in, and toasting the grain before combining it. He’d also admit (to himself, not China) that while he was sticking to using Korea’s rations like he wanted, and not making chicken juk, he had used his own funds to buy some radish, scallions, and garlic, and forgaged some mache greens, a winter namul.

Kangwon wouldn’t take advantage of his country’s sickness to feed him more. But he *would* take advantage of it to get some vegetables into him. He hadn’t said he wouldn’t after all.

“I’m not exactly chef-level,” he said to China, tapping his wooden spoon on the edge of the pan as he left the rice to toast for a final minute. “I just know a few dishes good for sick people.”

“And guests that provide their own ingredients?” China asked hopefully.

Kangwon raised a brow. “Are you sick?”

“Would that get me a free meal?”

The province stared at him placidly.

China sighed. “Very well.” Turning away, he muttered (loud enough to be heard), “Who pretends they can’t cook just to get out of the responsibility? Aiya, the disrespect.”

Kangwon shook his head. He actually wouldn’t mind cooking something simple for their comrade if he wasn’t so busy. But as soon as he was done feeding Korea, he had to go to Balnam-ri.

The bubonic plague usually took around ten days to kill, and they’d just passed that mark. If no one else had gotten infected, then the outbreak should die down soon.

Kangwon winced at his word choice as he lifted the pot of stock. The liquid sent clouds of steam into the early March air as it hit the rice, hissing like a nest of snakes.

Out of the confirmed fifty cases, they’d had thirty deaths so far. He hoped that number wouldn’t go up much higher.

It was too much to hope it wouldn’t go up at all. People were already weak from starvation. For a lot of them, the illness was just the final nail.

And Balnam-ri wasn’t the only place dealing with plague.

“Such a grim face, Little Brother,” China hummed, perching himself on the corner of the hearth, probably able to feel the heat through the brick. “Thinking about something dire?”

“Just the germ warfare,” Kangwon replied, mixing the rice into the stock. “You said you’re not sick. But do you have a sympathetic fever?”

“I’m a large country,” the man said, kicking his heels. “I’m sure more than my northeast would have to be affected for me to feel it.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not a percentage thing.”

There were a fair amount of people in Korea getting sick, hundreds by now. But that was still a small percentage of their population of millions, and Korea had definitely had a sympathetic fever before his real one. Kangwon’s working theory was that the exact number of infected didn’t matter, it was more when an unusual amount of people got hit by illness at once.

“Maybe I’m just too pretty to get a fever then.” China batted his lashes.

Kangwon was too tired to hide his skeptical look.

The Chinese man ignored it. “But if I can ask a favour, keep an eye out for my Little Sisters, in case they start feeling the effects.”

They’d been responding to the germ warfare well here, managing to contain a real epidemic so far. Maybe that was why at the end of February, America had started to bombard China, too. He hadn’t stopped going after Korea, but their neighbour’s northeast had suddenly been hit with an influx of American fighter-bomber sightings and out of season insects, just like them. It was mostly Liaoxi and Liaotung, but Linjiang in Jilin province had been hit by mosquitoes a few days ago, too.

“Sorry your people are suffering for being part of our supply chain,” Kangwon apologized, setting the lid on the pot so the rice could simmer down.

China waved a hand. “No need to take responsibility. I blame the culprit, not the other victim.” His eyes narrowed, his voice cooling to the temperature of the snow around them. “And I’ll make sure they pay for it.”

‘Yikes.’

Kangwon took a seat on the nearby stump, his leg muscles singing at finally being able to rest. Between rushing medicine around the hospital, doing house visits, and running between the laboratories and the Anti-Epidemic Prevention Committee meetings, he barely

even got to sit down nowadays.

Too many people to fix. Too many he'd lost.

China's tone had returned to normal as he said, "You don't have to worry overmuch for us. We've been conducting our own anti-epidemic work ever since we won, culling rats, insects, stray dogs and cats. The only thing spreading disease will be the Yankee's 'gifts.' And my people know how to take care of those."

Kangwon nodded. He'd heard good things about the efforts of the Chinese Party of Communists. A lot of Chinese cities had been cramped and dirty before, way more populated than their own, and none of their cliques had really done anything about it. It was good to know that was changing. Having healthy neighbours meant they'd have a better chance at staying healthy, too.

"By the way," China said idly. "I hear you've been trying to solve a little problem."

Kangwon glanced side to side, then said to him, "Yeah. The plague."

The man hummed in amusement. "I was talking about the delivery methods for it. My Jingjing says you're confused by how some of the payloads don't come with a casing."

Kangwon wasn't responsible for lab work, but he visited them to get results, and to make sure nothing was getting lost in translation between the Korean and Chinese scientists, so he'd shared his confusion about it with them before.

He snapped to attention. "You have an idea?"

Eyewitnesses had found a few bomb casings by now, from fragments of metal to shards of pottery to paper packets, which had delivered the plague-ridden fleas to Chinese soldiers in Chorweon County.

But there were a bunch of cases where the insects were clustered together, unharmed, and clearly not directly sprayed from the planes. Kangwon could dismiss it as people not looking hard

enough, but his mind kept returning to the day him and Korea had investigated that old woman's claim. He *knew* there hadn't been a casing, but she'd heard something burst.

"I have the solution." China slid from the buttumak, slinking over to sit next to him. His smile faded slightly. "Have you ever heard the name 'Ishii Shiro?'"

Kangwon felt a chill run down his spine that had nothing to do with the clinging winter.

"Yeah," he said. "Who hasn't?"

Maybe not peasants or people that didn't pay attention to things that didn't affect them immediately. But he doubted there was a doctor in Korea that hadn't heard about the man. That almost definitely went for China, too.

When Japan had occupied Manchuria, his Kempeitei had set up laboratories across it, all top-secret. Manchu Detachment 731, the Kwantung Army Disease Prevention Shop, and many more. Despite the name of the latter, they'd been set up for the direct opposite- to create diseases and chemical weapons.

And test them.

Ishii Shiro had been the head of Manchu Detachment 731, or Unit 731. He'd been a Surgeon General in the Japanese military.

Koreans and Chinese knew him as a monster.

"Then I'm sure you're aware he didn't attend CCCP's little party for the Japanese involved in the same line of work," China said. "Though he was invited, and his presence was sorely missed."

CCCP's 'party' was the Khabarovsk Trials, held at the end of 1949, where twelve Kwangtung Army officers had been charged for their crimes against humanity, and sent to labour camps in Siberia for them. But plenty of the scientists and doctors were in America's hands in Japan, and there were rumours they weren't being punished the way they should.

“Yeah,” Kangwon said grimly. “I’d heard.”

He’d never met Ishii. But he could safely say he despised him, and every single one of his accomplices. Kangwon hadn’t wanted to become a doctor- he’d had to because he couldn’t just sit back and watch people suffer. So the people that had became doctors specifically to *make* people suffer disgusted him more than anything.

“Then have you heard a little rumour that he’s visited your country recently? Twice?”

Kangwon stiffened. “No.”

“It was in papers from your south.”

That would explain it. He hadn’t exactly had time for newspaper reading lately.

“Nothing confirmable,” China said idly, examining his nails. “But the reports came in January. Interesting timing, don’t you think?”

Right as the germ warfare started.

“You think America’s using his research?” the province asked.

“I’d go so far as to say I know.” China’s fingers curled in, nails piercing into his palm. “A country like him doesn’t ignore a resource. If you ask me, CCCP’s also stored away whatever he got when he made those birds sing. But at least he’s still clipped their wings.”

Hate simmered under his voice like the juk on the stove, a loud emotion for him. Personal, Kangwon thought.

“They said at the trials that the Japanese used biological warfare on you,” Kangwon remembered. “Not just tested weapons, but actually used them.”

It was the same thing really, just with different intentions behind it. Tests were just meant to see the outcome. ‘Use’ was for when you already knew what it would be. Either way, people died.

"En," China said. "They dropped fleas contaminated with the plague on eleven of my cities. We think at least seven hundred fell victim to that alone, not mentioning the glanders, anthrax, and other nasty things. Familiar, don't you think?"

Too familiar. Kangwon had had his suspicions last year, but now he was sure of it- America was using the information Kempeitei units had learned from experimenting on Koreans and Chinese, and infecting China's cities.

He grit his teeth. Medical information was useful no matter where it came from. People shouldn't've been tortured and killed by Unit 731, but they had been, and he didn't see any purpose in ignoring what they'd learned just because of how they'd learned it. Knowing how an illness would spread and affect a population was good. But it should be good because it would help prevent another epidemic from doing the same thing, not because it could be used to *start* their own epidemic.

Kangwon couldn't forgive anyone that looked at the gory information the Japanese had tortured innocent men and women, innocent *children* to get as a tool instead of something to prevent at all costs.

"Of course, it's all 'Communist propaganda,' as America says. For someone who was so eager to bomb the devils into the sea, he's awfully eager now to defend them now." China tipped his head. "I don't think I've seen you get angry before, Little Brother. I like it."

The province took a deep breath. "So Ishii Shiro is involved in this. How does that explain the lack of containers?"

"I suppose you can consider that more of a fun fact than anything," China said. "The important part is that America has the devils' information."

He smiled, reaching into his sleeve and pulling out a paper. Kangwon took it, finding it to be an article clipped from a newspaper.

"Can you read Japanese?"

“Not well,” he admitted. He’d never actually bothered to learn it, relying on his inherent knowledge from the Occupation. After Liberation, he'd pretty much lost all of it. The only words he could still read fluently were medical-related, gleaned from textbooks.

“Turn it over.”

Kangwon flipped the paper to find the words on the other side had been covered in graphite, with Korean characters carefully inked over it. *Mainichi* was the newspaper’s name. ‘Daily,’ a big paper in Japan, he was pretty sure.

“Nice handwriting,” he noted.

“Thank you.” China sounded pleased. “It’s one of mine.”

Kangwon started to read the long article, but the other man reached over to tap a certain section.

“You can read the rest later. This is the part you want now.”

He scanned it, finding that the article had been written by one of the men involved in the biological warfare experiments, Major Sakaki Ryohei, detailing how it had worked, and... the types of containers used.

His eyes landed on a couple lines, devouring the words as they spoke about how a parachute could carry a paper packet down after it was dropped from a plane, before a mechanism would light to burn the paper and impregnated silk away, leaving no trace except for the plague-infected rats it had carried.

“Read it?” China asked, not waiting for an answer. “I think that’s your answer.”

Kangwon nodded. He could picture a paper package being floated down, hitting the ground and opening to let the insects emerge, a slow-burning fuse giving them enough time to move away before it ignited the container. And if it burst in mid-air, as the Japanese Major described they could, then the insects or rodents would still land in a clump, and the remnants could even drift farther away before igniting. That would explain the *‘pop’* the old woman had

heard, too.

"There were also a few cases of eggshell-type bombs being dropped on my country back then," China added. "Earthenware that was nearly paper-thin, and would shatter into little slivers that were almost invisible. None of my people have seen anything like that yet, but it's something to keep in mind."

Kangwon found the paragraph where the Japanese man explained that same thing, then asked, "I can keep this?"

"Go ahead. I have my own copy."

Kangwon carefully tucked it into his satchel to read fully later. But already he felt like he'd slotted a puzzle piece into place.

It wasn't super important in the grand scheme of things. But back on the 25th of February they'd made their appeal to the World Peace Council- a more left-wing organization filled with representatives from around the world- so that their doctors and China's could make their case, and hopefully get them to arrange an international investigation into the biological warfare (because America had been denying their accusations, and the UN had been dragging his heels), and it was scheduled for the 29th of this month. If they were going to get a proper investigation, he knew the topic would come up. A missing vessel for a germ delivery wasn't just something you could overlook. It would already be difficult enough to get the United Nations- or at least the other American-aligned countries- to believe them.

"Thanks for this," he said.

China smiled. "You believe my translation so easily? I could have written anything I wanted."

"You didn't know I can't read Japanese," Kangwon pointed out.

"Mm. As far as *you* know." His smile stretched slyly.

The province shook his head. "I'll get Hwang to translate it for me."

"He'll find it says exactly the same thing," China immediately pivoted. "But a word of advice, Little Brother- don't be so quick to believe the best of foreign nations. They're not all as dedicated to remaining faithful to the original as me."

Another cynic. Not that Kangwon could really blame him, considering his country's history.

"Noted." He got up to make sure the juk wasn't sticking to the sides of the pot, then sat back down on another log across from China. "If I can say, this all sounds really personal for you."

Korea hadn't even said anything about Ishii Shiro visiting the country (though that could just be him being heavy-mouthed), or the *Mainichi* article, even though it was dated January. Either way, it was clear China paid special attention to news about the Japanese scientists.

His voice was light, but his gaze was sharp. "I don't like getting sick."

'Who does?'

Kangwon chewed on the inside of his cheek, then asked, "Did you ever get to see the inside of those laboratories?"

China's smile faded as his eyes slid to him. "Yes."

"I've heard bad things," he said, understating it majorly. "But I've never been able to speak to someone that saw them firsthand."

The other country's face was more serious than he'd ever seen it. "And you don't want to."

"I have comrades that went into them."

It'd just been rumours at the time, that the Japanese took the prisoners of war they captured from the resistance groups fighting in northeast China and northwest Korea into their labs to experiment on. But they'd held enough water to make soldiers slit their own stomachs or force the enemy to shoot them instead of being taken, and to eventually make Korea forbid the provinces

from operating in Manchuria without him, and nowhere near the locations.

And they knew now that the rumours had been true, and worse than they ever could've imagined. And Kangwon knew people that had disappeared, taken by the enemy with no execution ever taking place.

China regarded him with solemn eyes, his voice going flat. "Then you had better hope that they're dead."

Kangwon's heart chilled. For someone like China to say those words like that…

Maybe he was right. Maybe he didn't want to know.

He got up again, going to stir the juk, even though he just had.

China stayed quiet, his eyes fixed on somewhere far out in the woods, and a thousand ri away.

Kangwon looked into the depths of the pot, watching the juk blend into a pale slurry, the greens sticking out like emeralds on cotton, or bottle flies on silk parachutes.

"Do you think people are good?" he asked abruptly.

China stirred from his vigil, his voice light again. "Which ones?"

The spoon scraped against the side of the pot. "In general."

"Hm." Behind him, China tipped his head back. "I think people are stupid."

Kangwon darted a look at him over his shoulder.

"Aiya, don't look at me like that," he chided. "I love all my people, even the stupid ones. And don't think that's limited to peasants, or anything like that. Some of the dumbest people I've ever met have been intellectuals. Most of them, actually."

China shifted, leaning back on the stump. "I think the majority of

people *want* to be good. But they want to be right more. And since most of them are stupid, they're born, taught what's 'right,' then refuse to ever relearn it. Take this war, for example." He swirled his hand in the air. "Anyone with eyes should be able to see that your southern government is a puppet government that wants to sell them out for personal gain. There shouldn't be any good people left on that side. But there are."

Kangwon didn't protest. He knew he was right about that at least.

"They think they're doing the right thing for them, for their country," China said lazily. "Despite all the evidence to the contrary. Because if they let that evidence sway them, then that means they've been on the wrong side the entire time, and *aren't* good people. And that means they were wrong."

"How would you fix people thinking like that?" he asked.

"I'm already trying to fix it," China replied, twisting his neck to look at him. "My people are being re-educated. They're being taught to challenge old ideas and those around them, and to question what's right. I don't think the majority will ever not be stupid. But we can make them a little *less* stupid. If they're inclined to believe the first thing they're told, then we need to make sure the first thing they're told is good for them, so that they'll hold to that."

Kangwon arched a brow. "And you know what's good for them?"

"Of course." China's lips curled in a sly, self-deprecating smile. "I'm right."

The Korean shook his head, looking back down at his juk.

He wouldn't believe most people were stupid. But he could believe most of them wanted to be right. China had said they wanted to be right more than they wanted to be good, but wasn't wanting to be right actually just them wanting to be good?

But some of them had to know they weren't. Ishii Shiro couldn't think he was a good person, not with everything Kangwon had heard about him, and how China had reacted to being asked about

the labs.

And what did it mean for them, if their people did affect their personalities? If most people wanted to be good, but had been taught the wrong things were good? How could some people go on to become doctors to save lives, while others did it to end them cruelly, and wage biological warfare on other countries? Had Japan churned out people like Ishii Shiro, or had people like Ishii Shiro birthed Japan?

"Whatever you're thinking about, you're thinking too hard, Little Brother," China breathed right in his ear slit, making him twitch. "If you want a more simple answer, it's 'everyone is stupid, but some countries have people that are more stupid than others.' I can name them for you, if you want."

"It's alright," Kangwon said, rubbing his shoulder against the side of his head. "I think I know who you'd say."

"Ours, at least, are salvageable." China was still leaning into his space, or maybe the pocket of warmth emanating from the hearth. "Can I ask why the sudden philosophical question?"

Kangwon hesitated, then admitted, "I've just been wondering about how much of us is our people."

The rest was too private to talk about.

"Aiya," China said with what might've been real alarm. "Very little, I hope. I hate to think about what my personality might reflect on them."

That was actually something to think about. Kangwon had mostly been thinking about Korea, Japan, and America before. His country and the Japanese one were monoethnic, with one culture. A few different variations, yeah, but all Korean or Japanese. And while America was multiethnic, he had full control over his nation, and there was a prevailing 'American' culture.

But China had dozens of different cultures and ethnicities, places that had been occupied for years, or governed by splinter factions,

or were so isolated that they didn't fit into the major culture. Did that have anything to do with why he was… the way he was?

When Kangwon thought about it, America was far more boisterous and eccentric than either Korea or Japan, too. Was that a quirk of more diverse countries? Not really a good or bad thing, just proof of influence?

Then again, CCCP was probably one of the most multicultural nations on earth, and if Kangwon was slotting him into 'steady' or 'eccentric,' he definitely wouldn't be going in the second one.

Maybe that was proof they *weren't* affected then. But then where had his personality at formation came from? Where had Japan and America's?

He still didn't have an answer.

"What's your Countryhuman's opinion on that?" China asked curiously.

"I don't know," he said, tearing himself from his thoughts.

Kangwon hadn't asked about any of his ponderings. He knew Korea wouldn't want to think about any part of him being influenced by someone against his will, even their people. And he was also self-aware enough to know his country's answer would influence his own opinion too much.

"Any guesses?" China prodded.

"Nope."

The Chinese man stared at him. Kangwon stared back, not breaking a sweat, knowing full well what he was trying to do.

"Learned that from your Countryhuman, did you?" China asked eventually.

'More like because of him.'

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kangwon said easily.

“Just like I don’t know what Korea thinks.”

China hummed in disappointment.

Thinking of something, Kangwon asked, “Did you change as a person once you got Tibet back?”

“I wouldn’t say I actually ‘lost’ him,” China replied. “Any more than I lost my other regions. They were under different management, but they were still China.”

Kangwon couldn’t tell if he was saying that as a true fact or a pride thing.

“For that reason, I don’t think getting my Taiwan back would answer your question, either,” the man continued. “But when my Hong Kong and Macau are safely in my loving embrace, maybe I’ll let you know if I feel a sudden craving for weak tea and dry crumpets. Or maybe I won’t.”

“Helpful,” Kangwon appraised.

China smiled. “I try. On that note.” He reached out for the juk, several red objects tumbling from his sleeve into the pot.

“Please don’t poison my patient,” Kangwon said mildly.

“Cored jujube and goji,” China explained. “But I’m sure you already knew that, clever little botanist.”

Kangwon had. Though he wasn’t sure how he felt about being called that.

“Thanks,” he said, stirring the fruits in. Both would boil down nicely into a slurry that he could easily tip down Korea’s throat. “To revitalize his gi and help him sleep better, right?”

“I don’t believe in things like that,” China dismissed. “Traditional medicine practitioners are quacks. China follows modern medicine now. I just put them in for taste. And because it worries me that I've only seen your Countryhuman eat a fruit once the entire time I've been here.”

‘Gi’ was really just a fancy way to say ‘energy.’ And jujube and goji actually did do all the things traditional doctors said they did.

“I think our nations have practiced traditional medicine for so long because it works,” Kangwon pointed out. “Modern medicine just works better.”

“Aiya, another Taoist,” China sighed. “In that case, if I ever find a pill of immortality, I’ll give it to you. Just don’t go drinking mercury before then.”

It wasn’t really Kangwon’s place to challenge him on that any further, even though he fully believed in the benefits of traditional medicine. And he was right that a lot of those ‘doctors’ were quacks, not in that they were wrong, but in that they’d been some of the biggest voices against modern medicine and vaccines, not wanting to lose their business. Anyone that put profit over lives didn’t deserve to be called a doctor.

Though that could be said about a lot of modern doctors, too. A couple weren’t happy to hear about the free healthcare plan, still stuck in the mindset that doctors should be as wealthy as possible at the cost of only taking patients that could afford them, instead of making enough to live comfortably while treating everyone.

That would change. The majority didn’t see it that way. And once the new system was firmly established, it would draw less of those that just wanted to be doctors for the money, and more than genuinely wanted to heal people.

“Well.” China finally moved out of his personal space. “I suppose I told you what I needed to. I’ll get going now.” Leaning back in, he said, “Unless you’ve changed your mind about feeding me.”

“Aren’t you just going to hide in the woods and watch the bunker?” Kangwon asked, stirring the juk.

China clicked his tongue. “Slander. I have far more important things to do.”

Kangwon side-eyed him, judging whether or not they were

friendly enough for him to hum skeptically, then decided to go for it.

"You are all audacious little provinces." The Chinese man sniffed. "I'm recommending to your Countryhuman that he starts beating you."

"He already does that on a bad day," Kangwon said, remembering being slammed into the hospital door and thrown onto the floor.

"Clearly not hard enough." China walked away, heading towards the bunker. "Maybe I'll go bother that pretty cousin of yours," he mused, like he hadn't just said he had more important things to do.

Kangwon shook his head as he disappeared inside to annoy SH while she painted.

Eventually the juk was done, all the ingredients cooked into a nice porridge, thinner than usual to make sure Korea wouldn't choke. He plated some of it up in the bowl he was always careful to sterilize, then covered the rest with the lid. The cold would keep it good for a few days, which meant he wouldn't have to spend so much time here.

But he would still have to come, even though it was exhausting to add the bunker to the list of places he needed to visit. Korea was trusting him to feed him, not the others. He couldn't let him down, or he'd lose even that small bit of allowance.

He called in to SH, and she bustled from her room with a canvas under her arm, looking annoyed.

"Where's China?" he asked.

"Sleeping in Liaotung's bed," she said dryly.

"Sounds important."

"Mmmmmm." SH cast a worried look at Korea's door, then went to stand guard.

Kangwon slipped in, getting hit with the smell of sick

immediately. It wasn't vomit or anything, just the thick, warm smell of illness that radiated off of sick people. Some of his cousins said they couldn't smell it, but he knew Korea could. He wished the room had a window to let fresh air in.

'Then again, if it did, he never would've agreed to sleep here.'

Kangwon sighed, kneeling beside his Countryhuman, taking his temperature and pulse as he waited for the juk to cool. Hot and unsteady respectively.

Flashes of his other patients crossed his mind, blood splattering from lips, burst lymph nodes like rocks trying to force their way through blackened skin, pulses beating beating beating then stilling under his fingers, never to beat again. And under it all, that thick, cloying smell.

The province closed his eyes, forcing the sensations away as he took a steadying inhale.

'Never think about another patient when treating your current one. They'd saved more people than they'd lost so far, and none of those that had succumbed to their illnesses had been his fault. Losing them didn't mean he wasn't capable of treating Korea.

When his lungs had just started to ache, he exhaled, his mind clear again as he eyed the bandages peeking out of the man's collar, wishing he could check them. The Premier had been here four days ago, and they definitely needed another clean.

But he'd keep his hands to himself. Korea would know if he hadn't. He was honestly probably going to accuse Kangwon of not listening anyways, just out of paranoia. If he wanted to successfully defend himself, he'd have to be telling the truth. And even if he didn't find out, it would still feel wrong.

When the juk was warm instead of scalding, he carefully sat Korea up in his arms, leaning him against his shoulder. His country stirred, eye fluttering open, gleaming with fever as it stared sightlessly.

‘Damn it.’

The Premier had said he was sleeping soundly when he visited, and Kangwon had seen it himself for the first three days. But when he’d arrived on the fourth, Korea had been restless, tossing and turning, his body rejecting the recuperative coma.

There wasn’t anything he could do for it. Hopefully the jujube would do what they were supposed to.

Kangwon used one arm to hold Korea steady, stopping him from moving, while the other picked up spoonfuls of juk, carefully sliding them between his lips, massaging his throat so they would go down.

He was careful to keep a light touch, but he could still feel blisters bursting under the bandages on his neck. And Korea’s laryngeal prominence stuck out too much. His weight was light in Kangwon’s arms.

This also felt a little too familiar. He could see the walls of the cave, fire flickering against the stone as he held the starving, wounded boy in his arms and tried to make him swallow just one more bit of painstakingly ground meat paste.

‘This isn’t that bad,’ he reminded himself.

Nothing would ever be as bad as those long nights spent by Korea’s side, hoping he’d wake up, that Kangwon hadn’t failed him after they’d just met, that those brief words under the nok tree wouldn’t be the only ones they ever exchanged.

Korea’s head lolled, and a bit of juk dribbled from his mouth as he made a low moaning noise. Kangwon quickly wiped it up with a cloth he’d brought just for this, knowing his country would hate him seeing that.

“Just a bit more,” he soothed, knowing Korea’s body was instinctively rejecting being touched while he wasn’t conscious.

He used the back of the spoon to crush the jujube in the bottom of the bowl, the red skin bursting and melting into the spongy yellow insides with a squelch. He scraped it up with the last of the juk,

gently squeezing Korea's jaw so he'd open his mouth, placing it in and massaging his neck again, doing the same with a few gulps of boiled water.

The lump in Korea's throat bobbed under his hand as he swallowed, and his eyes opened again, one a dark hollow and the other white and feverish.

He rasped a name Kangwon pretended not to hear, knowing he'd hate that even more than him having to wipe his chin.

He placed Korea's head back on his pillow, arranging his bedroll around him, watching him twitch and shudder.

He jerked, eyes opening wide again, looking straight at Kangwon as he said with sudden clarity, "It's March First."

"It's March 11th," Kangwon corrected, gently closing his good eye, and pulling the bedroll back up. "March 1st was over a week ago."

"It's March First," Korea murmured, then called the name again, more desperately this time.

Kangwon's heart twinged as he pulled his legs up, resting his chin on his knees, the way he'd done over those two months, waiting to see if his Countryhuman would live.

His mind wandered to what South had told him about March 1st, 1919.

Two boys, one eager to go support their people, and one that was eager for them to succeed, but not to be a part of it. One that fought, and one that hadn't.

One that had left, and one that had stayed.

Two halves of a country, with the same people, the same life, already so different.

If South was sick, would he let Kangwon treat him? He thought he would. He'd wanted him to look at his burns in the POW camp, even though he'd turned him down. He'd wanted someone to take

care of him, to care *for* him. Not like Korea.

Nine years of the exact same nurture. It sounded like they'd already been different, but since Korea never talked about it, he'd never know for sure.

But even if they'd been the exact same, that day, March First, had changed that. Why? What had Korea experienced that South hadn't? What had made someone that the Southern Korea seemed so sure would never give him up for anything, suddenly become the sort of person that would?

"It's March First," Korea rasped, finding Kangwon's face again, even though it was clear he couldn't see him.

"Korea." Kangwon leaned forward, the question coming out before he could stop it.

"What happened during the March First Movement?"

Korea stared blankly back, his shaking growing stronger as hope filled his eye, and he croaked that name again. His arms spasmed inside the roll as he started to thrash, a low keen leaving his mouth.

Kangwon immediately sat back, flooding with guilt.

It was wrong to take advantage of Korea's illness to get that answer out of him. He knew he'd never tell him if he was thinking right, so he couldn't ask it now.

Whether Korea had changed or he hadn't, whatever had made him and South end up such different people, Kangwon wasn't the sort of person to trick that answer out of him. He just wanted to make sure his country got better.

He softly closed Korea's eye again, murmuring with a reassuring smile, "You need to rest."

He gathered up the bowl and spoon, and stood, his vision fizzling black. He shook it away, gathering his resolve before leaving the room with his oil lamp.

He couldn't rest. He had lives to save.

In the end, it didn't matter why his Korea and South were different. They were, and they'd come to this. They just had to end this war before they became *too* different.

And then they would be Reunified. And Kangwon would help with whatever came with that.

He shut the door to Korea's room, hearing him say the name again, more a cry than a call.

'You'll see him soon,' Kangwon silently hoped at him, then went to go heal his country.

Clarification: China says at least 700 were killed by Japanese plague bacteria during WWII because this was the confirmed number at the time (plague *only)*. It rose in the future as more evidence was uncovered. The total number of people thought to have died from biological warfare is up to 300000.

The chapter title is inspired by the movie Philosophy Of A Knife, which is a movie about Unit 731 that I would not suggest watching. To me I see it more as revelling in violence than portraying the suffering of the victims. And since others agree with me, I don't think I'm just being sensitive. 731 (Chinese film) is a better dramatized version. If you know Mandarin, CCTV has a 5 part series on YouTube called 七三一 (also 731). It seems a lot of people from countries not involved don't know that there were far more units than 731, such as Unit 100 and Unit 516. They all specialized in different fields, like chemical and biological weapons, but they all experimented on humans in awful ways. I feel like I don't have to explain that this is real. America denied it for many years because they didn't want anyone knowing that they pardoned Ishii Shiro and others, but even they've admitted by now that everything the Chinese and Soviets exposed in the Khabarovsk Trials and eyewitness accounts was real. Unit 731 was real, and evil. The only people that don't think that are certain people here. And they know it's real. They just don't care. So I hope mmmmm shouldn't say that. Anyway. Anyway. I

encourage you to look into it and truly understand why it's not unreasonable for China to not want Japan to remilitarize. It wasn't just in the past. Abe Shinzo knew what he was doing with that plane photo. And if he truly didn't, that's almost worse. Denying Unit 731 isn't a fringe view in Japan- it's widespread, especially in the government. The past can't be forgotten when it threatens to be repeated.

In more joyful news, my shuba turned out amazing. Father enjoyed the amount of mayonez I put in it. Unlike certain other people who will not be named. My cooking skills continue to grow stronger.

https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-07-30/Watch-Behind-Unit-731-1FqOsdHNPI4/p.html

https://youtu.be/fqoTolLwsy0?si=QlPwgTAtlJQB1W_g

https://inf.news/en/history/4d88deb2fef391f9e183ded123c5aae4.html

https://www.asahi.com/sp/ajw/articles/14988305

March First

North tossed and turned in a half-waking state, the words 'March First Movement' echoing in his head alongside a high-pitched ringing. Someone else might compare it to the sound you heard when a nearby explosion stole your hearing away, but the Korean Countryhuman knew what it really was. He had heard that noise before.

Who had been here? Who had mentioned March First? His fevered mind told him it had been his brother, the easy smile looking down on him. But that was impossible. If South were here he wouldn't be smiling like that. He would be distressed, distraught to see the effects of America's poison against him.

Or did he know? Would he in fact be smiling, but with sharp, pleased edges as he watched his brother fade in and out of murky consciousness, ravaged by an illness he had brought.

No. He wouldn't. He couldn't. South would stare at him with wide, concerned eyes, like when North had been dragged back from Pyongyang all those years ago. He would try to help.

'잘못했어.' 잘못했어, 잘못했어 *jalmothaesso*

Scenes and sounds flitted through North's brain, memories turned choppy and unreal by the heat in his body. He writhed in half-remembered anguish, dusty black boots meeting his ribs, the flicker of torches in the dark, keening as his people mourned their loved ones, a tachi trailing a hot line of agony down his chest oh-so-slowly over and over again, five thousand cuts for five thousand years of history.

A pair of chestnut eyes staring up at him from the dust, life fading from them as his head rang and rang and rang-

"What's that?"

North had to lean back in his chair as his brother thrust his face close to the papers in his hands, taking a break from attempting to read the characters on his own scrap of newspaper in order to sound out the ones on his other half's. North allowed him a minute to work his way through the first sentence, then pulled it back.

"If you're going to take forever to read it, just let me tell you." He sounded more annoyed at his brother's slow reading than he felt- the bite in his voice came from what he had read. "The Emperor is dead."

South's white eyes widened in excitement. "Japan's Emperor?"

"No, idiot-" North mustered the energy to whack him over the head with the rolled paper. "Don't you think I would sound happy about that? *Our* Emperor."

"Oh no." South ceased his playful attempts to snatch North's paper weapon, sobering. "What happened?"

"That's what I was trying to find out." North examined the newspaper again, reading the characters in his head before saying, "Cerebral anemia."

"A what?" South asked.

North didn't actually know what that was, so he instead deflected, "Does it matter? I bet that's just a lie. The Japanese probably did it."

North was less saddened by the news of 'Emperor' Gojong's passing than he was angered. The man had been weak-willed. Japan was the one who had annexed them personally in 1910, but the former Emperor had been the one to sign the Treaty handing the old Korea over several years prior.

But he had still been Korean, still been theirs.

"So it's over then?" South sighed, leaning back into his own chair in front of the tiny desk they shared. "That's the end of the Korean Empire."

"Don't be ridiculous," North growled. "We're still here."

Here, here, forever here in this tiny, dirty, lightless shack with those thousands of marks carved into the walls, counting days and months and years, a decade worth of *here*.

The overwhelming exhaustion that had gotten harder and harder to fight off rolled back over him, making the black-and-white page blur before his eyes.

"Yeah, I guess," South said, not sounding very reassured as he picked up his page from before.

North shook his head, giving one last look at the headline announcing Gojong's death, noting that it was from several weeks ago, and that the funeral would be taking place soon, on March 3rd.

He wondered if it would be worth sneaking out to attend, then dismissed the idea. Their last attempt to run away had been almost a year ago, when Japan had hunted them down himself and delivered a beating that had left South with a set of broken ribs and North unable to walk for a month. He had left them with the cold warning that the next time they tried to leave he would do 'something worse.' And while North couldn't begin to guess what that 'something' was, he knew that putting South through that kind of pain wasn't worth it for a man that had signed away their freedom.

He had promised, after all.

He sighed tiredly, feeling the numbness he'd tried so hard to push away today creeping back in, draining his will to practice reading.

What was the point when they were trapped in here? What was the point in anything? What was the point in even being-

Then another paper caught his eyes, one that differed from the thin pulp newspaper fragments. It was hidden within the pages of another newspaper, and was printed on sturdier stuff, lacking any identifying marks such as a date or the name of the one who wrote it. He plucked it up, slowly making his way through the words.

The writer used phrases whose meanings sometimes eluded North,

and their tone was decidedly haughty, leading him to guess that they might be a scholar, but both of those things paled before what was being conveyed.

There was to be a protest on the 1st of March, two days before Gojong's funeral. One where the people of Korea would declare independence, following up on 'the measures and proclamations of the students abroad in Japan,' something that North hadn't heard of, imprisoned as he was.

The words got his pulse up. Now *there* was something worth risking a beating 'or worse' for.

For the first time in a long time, North felt... He *felt*.

"Oh come on!" South said, tossing down his paper. "The second sports page is missing again. I never get to know who won! I swear, next time..." He trailed off as he looked over at North. "Why do you look like you're scheming?"

"Because I am. Look." He eagerly shoved the paper towards his brother, who narrowed his eyes, lips moving silently. Impatient, North just dictated it to him instead.

When he was finished, South's eyes were glittering. "A mass protest? All over Korea?"

"I just said that."

"Yeah, but-" His brother laughed gleefully. "That's crazy! We could actually be independent?"

North hushed him, glancing at the door.

South took the hint, lowering his voice. "Just think about it, North- in three days, we could be our own country again."

"I know." North tried to contain his composure, but he couldn't help the excitement that coloured his words. "We should go."

His other self's eyes immediately widened. "Wait, why?"

"Because we should *be* there," North stressed. "It's our independence."

"But what if it doesn't work?" South asked nervously. "You remember what Japan said."

"Who cares about him?" North impatiently dismissed. "If this works, we'll be free."

"North..." His brother had that look on his face, disappointed, hurt. "You said no more escape attempts. You promised me."

North grit his teeth. And he had kept that promise for three-hundred-and-twenty-six days, even when the guards beat them, even when they were starved, even when his skin itched and he had to muffle the pathetic sounds he made as his brother slept.

"This is *big,* South," he insisted. "I bet most of our guards will be focusing on the protests. And you've been sweet-talking that Jap for long enough. This could be our chance."

"And then what?!" South cried. "We run away and live in the woods or the streets? At least we have a roof over our heads here, and we get fed most of the time now. And you know Japan won't just let us go. He'd hunt us and he'd find us and, and-" Tears welled up in his eyes as he gazed desperately at him. "You *promised."*

The fight went out of North, and his shoulders slumped. He had promised. And when South looked at him like that...

"Fine," he said quietly.

His brother sighed, relieved, but sorrowful. "Please don't mope. It doesn't have to be up to us to escape. You said it yourself- if this works, the people will free us."

And if it didn't... North dug his nails into his palms.

"I still think we should go."

His other half's eyes widened in dismay. "North-"

"Not to escape," he interrupted. "Just to see."

His brother still looked hesitant, so he sighed and added, "It's just a protest. We won't be in danger. And Japan will have bigger things to worry about than checking in on us. We can just go for the day and watch. If it succeeds, we'll be independent again, and if it doesn't, we can sneak back without the bastard ever knowing."

Hopefully.

South rubbed his arm, thinking, but North could tell he had won him over by the way his eyes twinkled.

"Alright," he conceded, excitement returning to his voice. "I'm in." His face split in a wide grin. "This is going to be so great!"

They spent the next three days carefully planning their escape and how their day would go.

On March 1st, North awoke at dawn, letting South sleep slightly longer before shaking him awake.

"Huh? What's going on?" his brother mumbled, blearily raising his head.

"It's March 1st," North replied, shrugging the second of his now two shirts on. "Get up."

"Oh, right." South said, a yawn splitting his face. "I'm up, I'm up," he quickly said as his other half glared at him.

When they were both dressed, they stood in front of the door, waiting for their plan to start.

"So," South said, clapping his hands together lightly. "Let me get this straight- I'm going to the Pagoda Park here in Seoul and you're going all the way to Pyongyang?"

North noted that his brother seemed markedly more nervous now that the day had come. "Yes."

It made sense that one of them should attend what had once been

the old capital. And if only one of them should be late returning, it should be him. Let Japan think it had only been him that was responsible, that only he should be punished for it. Just like always.

"I could just come with you."

"One of us needs to be here in Seoul," North repeated as he had several times. He hated the idea of leaving his brother, but once they were out of the walls, he knew South would keep himself hidden. It was safer for him. "You'll be fine."

"But what if you're not?"

"I will be."

"North, you'll..." South rubbed his arm nervously. "You'll come back, right?"

North opened his mouth to say, 'Obviously I'll come back, idiot,' then saw the look on his brother's pale face.

"Of course I'll come back," he said, firmly rather than in annoyance. "I would never leave you here. It doesn't make sense for one of us to be free if the other isn't."

South grinned. "Aw, I love you too, brother." He went in for a side-hug.

"Like you said, Japan would just hunt me down, anyways," North muttered, embarrassed.

They both jerked to attention as a young male voice outside called, "Protestors are gathering en masse at the Pagoda Park! Way more than was expected. Chief wants all hands in attendance."

"What about these two?" one of their guards questioned. "We can't just leave 'em."

"I've been sent to watch them," the newcomer replied. When no one said anything else, he added impatiently, "What do you expect them to do? Break out? Get out of here before it turns into a riot!"

The guards apparently believed his urgency as the sound of heavy boots was heard clomping away into the distance. Soon after, the lock clicked, and a young man slid open their door.

"Pretty convincing, ne?" he asked, smiling nervously.

"I even believed it," South praised in Japanese. "Thanks, Toyama-san."

Toyama Ichiro was the newest of their guards, and the youngest at twenty-five years of age. North gathered that he had obtained the elite position as one of their jailors through some sort of family connection. The cold cruelty of his country had yet to infect his heart, and while loyal to Japan, he had frequently professed sympathy for the Koreas before. South had gradually made friends with him through brief conversations and traded jokes, something North had initially frowned upon before realizing how useful it could be, and then losing the will to care. And it had been- it was the Japanese man that was responsible for smuggling the newspapers and occasional snacks that were favoured by North and South, respectively.

And now he was here to help them sneak out.

"No problem," Toyama replied to his brother. "And I got these for you." He pulled out two long, roughspun brown cloaks. "So no one recognizes you."

"It is appreciated," North said grudgingly, refusing to speak Japanese. Regardless of how much the young guard was helping them, it went against his nature to thank one of his captors.

"Of course. And just to be clear, you're just going to watch, right?" Toyama nervously checked.

"Yep, we just want to go check things out," South soothed him. "And we'll be back before it ends. I promise we won't tell them you helped us."

The Japanese man breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. Because otou-sama would be furious if I lost this job."

North didn't tell him that if Japan knew he had helped them escape, he would lose far more than his job.

"Let's go," he said, pulling his hood up over his face.

Toyama escorted them to a tree far past their chopped down maple. Its branches nearly hung over the wall. In the absence of escape attempts, they had been allowed to grow, just as their jailors' guards had dropped.

North grit his teeth.

The Jap then left to divert the watchguard. When a short whistle was heard, the two Koreas scrambled up and over, reluctantly parting ways shortly after in an alleyway, South heading to the Pagoda Park and North heading for the rail line.

As he left, he cast a glance back at his brother, who was already looking over his shoulder. His other self grinned, waving, and North rolled his eyes, continuing on. Then he took one more look, catching South rounding the corner.

'He'll be fine,' North told himself gruffly. Though he still didn't like being separated from him.

This was the first time he ever had been. It felt like he had just chopped off a limb.

But he needed to be in Pyongyang. He could feel it, some ancestral pull from the times it had been the capital. And he knew that even if someone didn't have to be in the current capital, his brother wouldn't agree to take the risk of travelling so far. The more distance they had, the easier it would be for North to try and convince him to escape. And he couldn't.

He had promised.

As he walked through the streets of Seoul, no one called for him, and North suddenly realized that he was free.

He and South had made it out of the gates before, once, during their last attempt, which had involved stealing a gun during a

beating. But the guards had been close behind them, Japan had unluckily been in the city, and South had been so-

They hadn't made it far.

But right now, North was standing in the capital of Korea without the sound of booted feet pursuing him or shouting in Japanese echoing over the streets. There was only birdsong as the sky lightened, and the sound of a distant gathering crowd. Toyama Ichiro had been useful indeed.

North wished he had been around sooner, before he had made his promise.

Because they weren't free. Not yet. Tonight he would return, crawling back into that run-down shed to carve another tally mark into the splintering walls and lie awake as the emptiness crept back in. And if these protests didn't succeed, then he would do it again and again and again and-

No. The protests *would* succeed. They had to.

Just as the sun was rising, he jumped onto a train that slowed as it passed through Seoul. He hauled himself up, arms burning, to toss himself into a covered cart full of grain.

His heart was pounding as he settled in to wait, but not from fear. No- he was excited. Today the Korean people would gather to announce that they would no longer be tolerating the indignity of belonging to a foreign nation. Once Japan and his officials saw the voices united against them, they would have no choice but to retreat back to their islands with their tails between their legs. Then this grain would be going to the Korean people instead of their Japanese overlords.

North's fists clenched as the train wound its way towards Pyongyang. His insides churned with unease for his brother, and anticipation.

Several hours later, he jumped out as they approached the city, and as he struggled up off the ground, he finally caught his first

glimpse of the old capital of Joseon.

Built on the Taedong River, most of the city was constructed of small tile-roofed houses that spread over the shores. The occasional colonial-style Japanese building sprouted from the neat arrangement like an unsightly wart. But even those blemishes couldn't distract North from the large pavilions that towered over the city.

They were built of sturdy granite and stately wood with double-tiered roofs that curved gracefully over the bases. Taedongmun and Potongmun, the gates of the old walled castle that Pyongyang had once been. They were unmistakably of Korean architecture.

North knew from the knowledge that he had been born with that the city had once been much greater, before the Sino-Japanese War had destroyed much of it. But those gates still stood as a testament to the past and a sign that the city was still Korean. And one day they would build more.

'I'm surprised Japan hasn't had them torn down,' he thought bitterly.

North entered from the east, getting caught up in a flow of people that were streaming down the dusty road towards the city gate. Some of the pilgrims wore worn, but clean traditional clothes, and many even wore pure white in defiance of the Japanese effort to outlaw it. But the majority were clad in threadbare labourer's clothes with patches on the elbows, frayed hems, and straw sandals that had seen better days.

The crowd hummed with excitement as they streamed beneath the gate, shadows momentarily eclipsing them before they were spat back out into the hot sun.

Somewhere, a bell began to toll.

The procession marched through the streets, North getting swept along with them. He could see people in the windows of the houses they passed, watching with wide eyes as even more came from the open doorways, joining the river of people, swelling their ranks. There weren't just men, but women, too, and even children running

amidst the feet of the adults, adding their voices to the chanting of "Japanese get out!" even if they didn't quite understand what was happening.

As the sun rose high above them, the march came to a halt in front of a school. The crowd swirled and eddied, settling into place as several men dressed in suits and one in the garb of a priest mounted a wooden stage. The assembly hushed as they began to speak, reading from a scroll.

The men on the stage launched into a grand speech about enduring oppression, of being treated like barbarians, of an unwanted union and of the desire to be their own nation again. They spoke of independence being the first step on the road to freedom and global peace. They proclaimed that the Japanese officials were chained to old ways and excesses and it had been that which had brought about the injustices that the Korean people had faced. They extolled that the relinquishing of Korea would save Japan from his path of evil and lead to peace and friendship in the East.

The words thrilled the crowd, sweeping through them like waves. They thrilled North alongside them, though when they spoke of blaming not Japan, but themselves, he couldn't agree. In what way had these people here been responsible for their enslavement? They had never signed a treaty or agreed to be Occupied, and neither had North and South. Their Emperor and former Countryhuman had done that for them.

"Behold!" the priest on the stage cried, sweeping an arm forwards. "A new world is before our eyes! The days of force are gone, and the days of morality are here." He made reference to the past being a time of freezing ice, but assured that they were in their spring. "Facing the return of the universal cycle, we set forth on the changing tide of the world. Nothing can make us hesitate or fear!"

Indeed, fear seemed to be the furthest thing from the minds of the gathered. Their eyes were bright, their hands clenched into palms or skirts. North found himself leaning forward, as if it would help him hear the next words sooner.

"We have arisen now!" the priest declared. "Conscience is on our side, and truth guides our way. All of us, men and women, young and old, have firmly left behind the old nest of darkness and gloom and head for joyful resurrection together with the myriad living things. The spirits of thousands of generations of our ancestors protect us; the rising tide of world consciousness shall assist us." His voice rose even louder. "Once started, we shall surely succeed. With this hope *we march forward!"*

His words echoed over the assembly, fading into a brief hush. The air crackled with electricity. Then someone broke it, screaming, *"Long live Korea!"*

The uproar that followed was loud and immediate. Men hollered and woman shouted, throwing their fists in the air, screaming and chanting, some for the independence of Korea and some demanding the removal of the Japanese.

But over time, one chant became dominant, the one that had started it.

"Long live Korean independence! Long live Korea!"

The officers on the edges of the schoolyard slunk away.

As North listened, the truth hit him like a hammer.

This was for him.

All of these people were gathered here demanding he and his brother's freedom. All of those years they had spent locked away, never once doing anything for their people, and yet they were still *here,* fighting for them.

He turned to the crowd and froze. A boy who couldn't be much older than six was staring at him, *seeing* him. He held his straw sandals in his hand, wearing nothing else but rags. His eyes were black as coal and alive with light and a strange, fiery determination. North knew that if he could see himself, he would find the look perfectly mirrored on his own face.

He took an inexplicable step towards the boy, but the crowd

suddenly surged forward, separating them. North was swept away as the human river overflowed its banks, surging through the streets towards the Japanese government building.

The Japanese police were swept before them as they went, retreating from the protest.

North's spirit surged in elation as he joined in the chanting. "Long live Korean independence!"

They were doing it. It was going to work!

Then the shooting started.

At first North couldn't place the popping sound that was loud enough to briefly shush the crowd, but when the first person's screams changed from elation to fear, he knew. There were more gunshots and shouts of pain added to the chorus. Several people scrambled away from the commotion, but even more surged forwards, roaring with rage as they defied the bullets.

North was being shoved to and fro, people knocking against him from all sides and he knew all it would take was a few of those ahead of him retreating in a panic to crush him. He slipped from the crowd, pressing himself against the wall of a ramshackle house to catch his breath.

From here he could see the Japanese police lined up in the road ahead, creating a barrier with their bodies, guns in hand. Men on horses armed with swords rode swiftly towards the protestors, bearing down on them much too fast to flee. North could easily see where this was headed.

It was unfair. These people had been protesting peacefully, they weren't even armed.

A figure stumbled from the mass of people, heading for a sprawl on the ground before North caught them in his arms.

"Are you okay?" he demanded.

The woman raised her face, looking up at him. "Yes, thank-" Her

jaw fell open. "Korea?"

Ssi-bal. She could see under his hood.

"Yes." He righted her.

"You're here?" Her brown eyes lit up, a victorious grin splitting her face. "Then we can't lose!"

As if he alone offset the guns and swords and horses that the Japanese commanded.

"You should get out of here," he said as more shots rang out. "It's not safe."

"What? No way." She shook her head stubbornly, swiping a strand of dark hair out of her face. "We're not leaving until you're free." She wrenched herself away from him, throwing herself back into the throng, screaming, *"Long live Korean independence!"*

North watched numbly as a man on horseback casually swept out an arm, the sword in his hand severing her neck. The young woman tumbled to the ground, head rolling away from her body. The people nearby screamed, scattering away from the grisly sight, some shouting epithets as they threw stones at the horse, but North couldn't hear any of them over the ringing sound in his head.

He couldn't look away from the woman's chestnut eyes. The light of triumph and life hadn't yet left them. She didn't look older than twenty. She had come here to fight for him.

And now she was dead.

He looked up across the street, where the priest who had been sermonizing earlier was standing with several of the suited men. They were watching the chaos with disappointed looks. One said something, lips moving soundlessly at this distance, and the priest shook his head sadly, picking up his briefcase and turning from the riot.

And all of a sudden, an emotion pierced through the thick haze in North's mind for the first time in three hundred and twenty-six

days.

Rage.

Those men had been the ones to rile up the crowd, to make them think that freedom was possible, arming them with hope and nothing else. And now that things had spiralled out of control, they were just *leaving.* Walking away in their clean suits and shining shoes to their sturdy houses to eat a good meal, while the people they had turned loose fought and died in rags. This was all a- a *business venture* to them. And now that it had failed, they were washing their hands to try again another day.

The workers and the peasants and the embroidery girls couldn't wash their hands. Even if they could walk away, this was their life. They would never be free from it. Even if the Japanese were destroyed, as long as men like that priest and his allies or Emperor Gojong replaced them, these people would still be here in the streets, dirt and blood caked under their nails.

The screams of man, woman, and horse suddenly surged back as the high-pitched whine vanished with a pop.

And baring his teeth, North surged into the fray.

Another one I've been waiting eagerly to publish.

There's a story from the March First Movement about a woman who was waving a Korean flag, and her arm got severed by a sword, so she picked the flag up in her other hand and kept waving it. The woman with the chestnut eyes is spiritually inspired by her . If North could learn any name, it would be hers.

If you want to refresh on the events after this, it's A Tale Of Two Brothers in part one. ^^ Of course there is also... more to be revealed.

Also d on't let anyone tell you Japan is the Israel of East Asia. This is not true and I will not take this slander. We are the England of East Asia. Taiwan is Israel.

Sick Over You

The fields of Hwanghae spread out beyond the country road, green stems of winter wheat peeking out of the patches of snow still clinging to the land in some plots, while others were fallow, the earth in the process of being planted with the spring crop. The hour was growing late, and Hwang could see a group of diligent peasants just now leaving the fields, tugging a recalcitrant donkey with them.

The scene was peaceful, ostensibly. But the calm masked the turmoil. Even from this distance, he could see the rote way they looked upward at the clouds. And their own destination was a village of the ill.

Kangwon must have noticed his distraction. “I’m surprised you wanted to come with me.”

“It’s my province,” Hwang said, slowing his pace to match his. “It feels unfair to continue to send you to do the unpleasant work in it.”

The man was constantly ferrying off to their villages and towns to check the condition of the sick, reinforce quarantine, and assist with the sanitation measures. Hwang had started to feel a tad guilty at remaining close to Pyongyang, spending all day writing pamphlets and teaching lessons at the university. It was important work, but he couldn't help but feel that he needed to familiarize himself with his people's suffering more.

And with the leak gone, he could now follow his cousin to his province.

“I thought you’d want to be there when Hae wakes up,” Kangwon said. “From what you said, it'll be soon.”

“Gangwon will take care of her.”

Kangwon appeared pleased at his assessment, his brows relaxing enough that the furrow between them briefly vanished.

"Yeah," he said. "He will."

And North Pyongan would cover Hwang's Korea-guarding shift for the day they'd be away. It might give him time to pick up his poetry again. Out of all of their creatives, poets needed the extra incentive to direct their efforts towards the war.

"We'll keep her in the hospital for a couple days after she wakes up," Kangwon continued. "Just to recuperate."

"I'd prefer she was out of that environment as quickly as possible," Hwang fretted, remembering the sounds of anguish echoing in the sterile halls.

"She will be," his cousin assured. "But she's getting moved into the bunker after, and whoever's on watch won't be able to observe her all the time. I want to make sure her condition's stable before we discharge her."

"Alright," Hwang consented, seeing the wisdom in that. "I just worry about her catching something else while she's there."

"We're scrubbing the place down as good as we can," Kangwon said. "And Gangwon follows protocol. She'll be… fine."

His last words were interrupted by a large yawn. When his mouth closed, he blinked blearily.

"Will *you* be fine?" Hwang worried. He was liking the dark circles under his eyes and the way he was plodding along the road less and less.

"Just tired," Kangwon said through another yawn.

"Perhaps you should follow the advice you gave Korea and get some rest?" the glasses-wearer suggested. "I've heard the hardest patient to cure is yourself."

Kangwon shook his head. "I'm not trying to take up Korea's

hypocrisy here, but this isn't really the time for any doctor to rest." His lips turned down slightly, grim. "We need every hand working full time."

"I suppose that's true." Hwang had been fairly sheltered from the efforts against the germ warfare in Pyongyang, despite receiving all the reports and death tolls. He knew it would be different witnessing it in person.

"And I know my-"

He'd probably been about to say 'limits,' but Sip Yung-su, his slightly high-strung bodyguard, suddenly barked, "Unknown approaching!"

Ri Il grabbed Kangwon, shoving him behind his barrel-chested frame, and Hwang allowed his own men to manhandle him into position, the four guards arranging themselves in a phalanx, firearms half-raised towards the field to their right.

Hwang peered over Min Hak-sol's shoulder to see a figure sprinting down a path between the fields of winter wheat, heels kicking up chunks of mud and snow. The person seemed to spot them, raising an arm as they redoubled their pace, calling out.

Kangwon- normally the first to spot something unusual in their surroundings- appeared to have recovered from his momentary befuddlement, and was scanning their rear, his guns holstered, but at the ready. Hwang slid his pistol into his hand, just in case.

The shouting became audible as the person neared.

"Help!" the man called, his voice raw. "Help, please!"

"Halt!" Ri Il commanded when he was several paces away. "Korean People's Army. State your business."

Hwang could see that the man's eyes were wide and panicked, sunken in their sockets like an American's.

He gasped for breath, choking out, "My pa and ma and- My family, they're not moving."

Kangwon stuck his head between Ri Il and Sip Yung-su, his voice urgent. “Are they sick?”

“It was- It was just the flu, I thought,” the man panted. “We didn’t think it was worth- But they’re- I couldn’t find a pulse, and my wife-“

His eyes gleamed desperately as he lunged forward, but Ri Il met him with his pistol raised.

“Maintain distance!” he barked.

“Please,” the man begged, heedless of the gun barrel pointed at his forehead. “Please, my wife is still breathing. She needs a doctor!”

“It could be a trap,” Hwang said to Kangwon.

“A trap?” The man’s face filled with dismay. “No, no, it isn’t a trap, my wife she-“

“It’s okay,” Kangwon soothed him, lowering his voice to say to Hwang, “I’ve got to go.”

“But-“

“I can’t abandon a patient,” he said firmly. “Especially if she’s in urgent need. Besides, what are the chances they try the same thing twice?”

“High,” Hwang supplied. “When it’s the only option they have, *very* high!”

“Please,” the man begged, tears starting to spill down his hollow cheeks. “I can’t lose her.”

Kangwon raised his voice, sliding from around his bodyguards. “If I can help her, I will.”

“Comrade Kangwon-“ Sip Yung-su protested.

“I’m a doctor,” he said firmly. “This is my job. If you want to run and notify someone for yours, go ahead.”

The man hesitated, then his jaw set, his knuckles tightening on his firearm. “If it’s an ambush, we’ll need a full complement.”

Kangwon nodded. “Once we reach the place, I’ll need one of you to go call for an Anti-Epidemic unit anyways.” Looking to the man, he said, “Take us to your wife.”

The stranger didn't need any more encouragement. He spun, taking off at full speed down the path, forcing the provinces and their bodyguards to charge after him.

Hwang could hear the man sucking down mouthfuls of cold air as he ran, the sound desperate and pained, yet he easily kept ahead of the more well-fed military men. Was it desperation allowing him to push beyond his limits, or was he not the starving peasant he appeared to be? Whatever it was, it encouraged the province to push through his burning lungs and aching legs. The months of being out of combat had allowed him to grow lax in his exercising again.

Kangwon, despite his exhaustion, kept up a steady pace as well, barely lagging behind him as they crossed the fields, heading for the speck of a farmhouse that appeared in the distance. Though it was worrying that he lagged behind at all.

As the building grew closer, Hwang’s anxiety only grew.

He thought the man seemed sincere in his panic, but he’d also believed Kangwon when he had said his sister was well. His cousin was much better at reading people than him, but he was tired, not operating at peak performance.

If this was an ambush, what did that mean? They’d been dropped off in Sariwon, intending to walk to the village to meet with the local authorities monitoring the quarantine. No one had been told where they were going, and those waiting for them didn’t know it was the Provincehumans they were waiting for.

It would mean they had another leak. That Choi Jung-nam’s efforts hadn’t been enough.

The idea almost made him as uneasy as the idea of being ambushed in the first place.

When they reached the small, thatch-roofed farmhouse, the man didn't hesitate to charge directly through the door, calling out, "*Yeobo!* Yeobo?"

Kangwon lurched for the house, then pulled up short, dropping his satchel and rummaging through it. Hwang swiftly did the same, pulling his protective suit out and hurriedly donning it.

From inside, the man's questioning calls turned to a cry of dismay. "Yeobo!"

A moan of agony, far worse than Hwang had heard in the hospital, emanated from the gaping doorway.

Kangwon buttoned up his suit, fumbling with the buttons. With a quick check of his protective gear, he shot inside.

"Stay back!" he ordered his bodyguards as they tried to follow.

Hwang forced his nerves to calm, making sure there weren't any gaps in the one-piece white suit before pulling the hood over his head, putting on his face mask, and adjusting his glasses. Then, cautiously, he approached the open door.

The house was a choga, of the sort they intended to phase out, long and low, one of those that was only a single room, the kitchen in a different building. The rays of sun had slid away from the small windows, leaving the place dark.

The space felt claustrophobic, the air inside uncomfortably warm, despite there being no ondol floor, and filled with the stale stench of blood and excrement, and something sickly sweet. Unlike the smell of fear, this was a very real scent.

Death.

The moaning was coming from the far end of the house. Hwang pulled his flashlight, switching it on.

The bright light hit those inside, casting enormous flickering shadows on the walls. He was relieved to see none of them came from armed reactionaries, though his heart sank at what he did see.

The moaning wasn't coming from the man's ill wife, but from him. He was crouched over a form on a futon, Kangwon kneeling with him, his fingers on a woman's slim wrist.

Making sure to give the 'all clear' to their guards, Hwang cautiously approached.

The man had his head in his hands. The woman looked several years younger than him, her hair lank and her face sallow. Yet despite her unwell pallor, there was an almost healthy flush to her cheeks. Her expression was infinitely peaceful, looking as if her eyes could flutter open at any second.

"I'm sorry," Kangwon said after a moment, softly laying her hand back on her chest. "She's gone."

The man's moaning ceased as abruptly as if his heart had stopped too. He raised his head, his eyes bloodshot under the flashlight beam.

"She can't be."

"She's starting to go cold," Kangwon told him gently, and Hwang caught the way he subtly shifted back, away from the man and his corpse. "It's too late to restart her heart."

The man looked lost. "What- What about them? Are they okay? Maybe I just… I didn't know what to look for. Maybe I was…"

His eyes slid to the girls tucked under each of the woman's arms. One was older, perhaps in her middling teens, her head resting on her mother's shoulder. The other was young, her dark hair still cut in the mushroom cut many girls received, and her limbs almost too stubby to reach around her mother's waist.

Kangwon pressed his fingers to each of the girls' necks in turn, then to their wrists. Hwang already knew what he would find before he repeated, "I'm sorry. You were right." The stiffness of

their bodies had made it clear.

The man was no longer crying. He sat back on his haunches, devoid of all emotion as he gazed down at his wife and children.

"I thought it was just the flu," he said dully.

"We'll give you a moment." Kangwon stood, leading Hwang from the house.

Their bodyguards quickly swivelled, tense.

"Situation?" Min Hak-sol asked.

"It isn't an ambush," Hwang reported quietly.

He almost wished it was.

"Keep your distance from us," Kangwon advised, taking a step back that Hwang imitated. "These people definitely didn't have the flu. You don't want to catch it."

The men had already put on their face masks.

"Orders, comrades?" Min Hak-sol clipped.

Hwang looked to Kangwon.

"I'm going to need the fastest runner to head back to Sariwon," he said, keeping his voice low. "Contact the Epidemic Prevention Committee and get a full medical and sanitation team out here right away."

"I'm fastest," Pak Kong-sun immediately volunteered. None of the others protested. On the way here, he'd been covering the provinces' fronts with ease.

"I'm not comfortable with you not having a full contingent," Sip Yung-su protested, looking uneasily at the dark fields around them.

"Someone needs to maintain quarantine," Kangwon said, a tinge of reluctance in his voice.

Ah. Hwang knew what he was intending. It was regretful, but necessary.

"One of us could stay here, and everyone else goes," the anxious guard suggested.

"I'll be fine, Comrade Sip," Kangwon said firmly. "And I've got to stay here to find out what happened. Run fast, Comrade Pak. And tell them we don't know what it is, but it might be typhoid fever."

Typhoid fever. Hwang searched his mental files to find the one he was looking for. It was easy, as that was what they were heading to the village for.

Caused by the bacteria *Salmonella typhi* entering the body through infected waste, it sparked a high fever with symptoms that could easily be mistaken for the flu, before rising higher, causing delirium, internal bleeding, and, in some cases, rashes.

Hwang thought of the healthy flush on the woman's skin.

Pak Kong-sun saluted, sprinting off without another word.

"The rest of you should take up your posts," Hwang said, glancing at Kangwon to confirm.

The man nodded. "We'll be here for awhile."

They were an hour and a half's walk outside Sariwon, plus the time it would take for the units to mobilize. It was also unsure if they'd be able to commission a vehicle.

The two provinces loitered outside the door. No sounds came from within. The silence spoke volumes that no tears could.

After a long while, the man appeared in the doorway, as pale and gaunt as if he'd joined his wife while they waited.

"What do I do?" he rasped.

"This is going to sound cruel," Kangwon said apologetically, unobtrusively placing himself between him and the outside. "But

until the medical team gets here, I'm going to need you to stay in there."

Hwang winced. He understood the necessity. They didn't know for certain what he had. They couldn't risk transporting him without proper precautions when he could be shedding bacteria into the fields around them, or onto their bodyguards.

But it did sound cruel.

He eyed the man, hoping they wouldn't have to resort to force to keep him inside.

But he just stared at Kangwon with dead eyes. "She's stayed with me all this time. I can stay with her a little longer."

"Thank you," Kangwon said, and Hwang echoed it, then asked, "Would you like my flashlight?"

The man's eyes dipped wearily. "I don't… want to see."

Hwang awkwardly lowered the light. Of course he didn't.

The man retreated inside, into the warm darkness with the corpses of his family.

"Can I ask you a few questions?" Kangwon asked, keeping his voice low. "If you're okay with it. It could help us figure out what happened."

"What's the point?" the man asked dully. "They're already dead."

"Anything we learn here could help us save more lives."

He didn't say 'your life.' If he had, Hwang suspected he might've received a similar answer.

There was a sigh from behind the door, and the rustle of clothing as the man lowered himself to the ground, leaning against it.

"What do you want to know?"

“What’s your name?”

“Choi Ki-tak.”

The name made Hwang’s heart twinge. This man could very well be some distant offshoot of the Hwanghae Choi clan, the same clan as Choi Jung-nam.

“And your wife?” Kangwon asked.

“Kim Kum-hyang.” The man said the name like it was an extraordinary flavour that he knew he would never taste again.

They received the names of the rest of his family- his father, mother, and two daughters.

“You have a nice farm going here,” Kangwon said, though Hwang was itching to learn whether this was really typhoid or not.

“We tried,” Choi Ki-tak said quietly. “We even managed to grow enough to donate sometimes.”

Kangwon had settled down a few feet away from the farmstead’s stoop, cross-legged. “When did you first start noticing symptoms?”

“Four weeks ago,” the man told him. “My father came down with a fever.”

“You’re supposed to report any illness to your local authorities,” Hwang reminded him, gingerly joining Kangwon on the ground.

His cousin placed a hand on his knee, and he realized that could sound like he was blaming him.

“I know,” Choi Ki-tak rasped. “But he’s always got sick easy, so we… didn’t think anything of it. Ma didn’t want to bother anyone for nothing. She was always like that.”

And it had killed almost her entire family.

“Ku- My wife was worried it might be whatever laid low the village,” he continued, tongue flinching away from the name. “But I

was the one that was always making trips there, not him. And I was just fine."

Kangwon closed his eyes.

"A few days later, ma got sick, too," he said, his voice mechanical. "Then our girls. Then my wife. By the second week, I knew something was wrong. Everyone was blocked up, 'cept pa, and he was shitting everywhere. Couldn't stop. Everyone's bellies was all swoled up. 'Cept for me."

Putting aside his use of 'swoled,' Hwang reviewed that file again. Distended stomachs. That was from the spleen and liver swelling.

"When my wife took me aside to show me all those spots on her skin, I told her I'd set out to the village right away." He fell silent for a moment. "Kum-jin-" Their youngest. "Caught sight of 'em, said they were pretty. Like roses blooming all over her." His voice tripped for a second, before continuing on, numb. "But that night, I woke up with my wife shoving her away from her, shrieking fit to burst. The girl had been… *picking* at her skin while she slept. Tore her arm right open. Said she was trying to 'pick the roses.'"

"Delirium," Kangwon supplied. "The fever starts to affect the brain."

"Is that it?" the man asked listlessly. "I stayed the next day to help with Kum-jin. She'd stopped responding to us, and was just babbling to herself. I was just about to pick her up and carry her with me when pa started to do the same thing, but worse. He almost killed ma, shouting at her that she were a Jap spy, and she was making us all sick. I told him it was the Yanks, but he wouldn't listen. I tried to strap him down in the shed, but he was spraying his guts out, and I- I couldn't do it to him."

His voice was tight. "So I stayed to make sure they didn't tear each other apart. I was… I was hoping they'd get better. But… Ssi-bal. The only thing that happened was ma, Kum-hwan, and my wife got worse."

"The delirium?" Kangwon asked.

“Aye,” he said. “Kum-hwan and my wife never got violent. The girl just slept all the time, and my wife…” He let out a shaky breath. “She’d just sit there and hum, picking at her clothes like there was bugs in ‘em. But we never saw a bug. The Yanks never dropped a bomb anywhere near here.”

There was a dull thud, the sound of his fist hitting his wooden floor.

“So what was it?” he demanded, suddenly incensed enough to make Hwang eye the door warily. “If it wasn’t the damn flu, then *what killed my family?”*

A line in Hwang’s file caught his attention, a piece of knowledge he’d picked up from the medical text Kangwon had lent him. He scanned it, then quickly replaced it.

He couldn't suggest that. Even he knew it was far too insensitive.

“I can’t know for sure without tests, but it sounds like they had typhoid fever,” Kangwon said, a calm counterpoint to the man’s raw emotion.

“That’s what the village has, isn’t it?” Choi Ki-tak sounded no less angry. “But I *told* you *I* was the only one that went there. And I never got sick. I never got a *single* symptom, not the fever, not the shits, not the screwed up stomach or roses. If it was typhoid then *why* was I the only one that didn’t I get sick? *Why am I the only one still here?”*

Hwang removed his glasses, rubbing his hand over his face, forgetting he wasn’t supposed to.

What could Kangwon even say to that? If the situation was what he thought it was…

His cousin’s voice remained steady as he said, “Typhoid has an incubation period of a couple weeks. There would’ve been a period of time when you were visiting the village before it was quarantined when people were infected, but didn’t know. The Americans dropped a bomb near there, right?”

“Right,” he said bitterly. “Flies ended up in a well. But we have our own, and I’ve been keeping it covered since the *second* those Party fellers told me about this whole damn thing.”

“Typhoid isn’t just caught directly,” Kangwon explained, still in that calm tone. “If someone didn’t wash their hands correctly after using the toilet, then sold you something, or handed you money, that bacteria could end up on your hands, then in your mouth, however it happens.”

“Then *I* would get sick, not my family!”

“There’s something called an asymptomatic carrier,” Kangwon continued, making Hwang’s eyes widen. “Do you know what that is?”

Choi Ki-tak growled, “The only damn thing I know is that my family is *dead."*

“It’s when someone is infected with an illness, but doesn’t display any symptoms.”

Kangwon caught Hwang’s furrowed brows as he silently asked him if he should tell him this. His cousin gave a reassuring, but tired, smile.

“They have the disease, but it doesn’t affect them,” he continued. “It won’t kill them. But they can still spread it to others.”

Choi Ki-tak was silent for a long moment as the reality set in.

If he was asymptomatic, he would carry the *Salmonella typhus* bacteria inside of him, packed in his intestines, his blood, his internal organs. And even if you took the utmost precautions, when living with an entire family in one small household, using one toilet, one kitchen, one sitting room, that bacteria would spread. In their own chosonjip, every cold had been a shared affair.

And even if that had never happened, he had picked the bacteria up from the villagers in the first place. He was likely the one that worked the fields, harvesting winter crops like radishes and carrots with his hands, not thinking about cleaning them when his wife

would wash the vegetables when preparing them anyways. But if she missed even a single speck of bacteria…

And by the time the father had started having diarrhea that his wife had likely been the one to clean, the family's fate was sealed.

All except for Choi Ki-tak.

"I killed them," he said, every drop of emotion wrung from him once more. "I killed my family."

"No, you didn't," Kangwon soothed. "You caught the disease that killed your family. You couldn't've known."

That was true, yet Hwang felt guilty enough over Choi Jung-nam's death solely because he'd given his consent to the mission without hesitation. To be told you were likely the one that had carried the thing responsible for the death of your entire family…

Frankly, it seemed like the sort of thing Hwang would divulge without thinking, not Kangwon using that relaxed, deliberate tone.

"But that's what happened, isn't it?" the man rasped. "I'm the one that infected them. I killed them. I killed my wife and she died alone in the dark."

"No," the province said firmly. "The Americans killed them. And I know that isn't comforting. I know it doesn't bring them back, and it doesn't make you feel any less like it's your fault."

Kangwon leaned towards the door. "But it's true. It *isn't* your fault, Choi Ki-tak. You did everything you could for your family. Even the mistakes you made were made because you were trying to protect them. You can't blame yourself for that."

There was another long silence, then the man whispered, "I need… some time to myself."

"Okay," Kangwon said easily. "We'll stop talking. But stay near the door. If I'm wrong, I don't want you getting too close to the bodies, in case you've just gotten lucky so far."

Hwang didn’t think he would have told him what he had if he wasn’t sure.

Kangwon scooched closer to the house, leaning back against the stones that surrounded the lower wall, and Hwang joined him, flanking the door. Neither of them said anything, staring out at the night. Hwang turned off his flashlight to preserve the battery.

Their guards were a safe distance away, stationed around the dusty farmyard like jangseung, watching the fields. Though this hadn’t been a trap, they were still vulnerable out here in the dark.

'Alone in the dark.' Crushed by that heavy air and surrounded by the stench of death, her mind slipping away from her.

Hwang didn't believe in an afterlife, but he still thought the words in his mind.

'Hope for the bliss of the dead.'

After a half hour, Kangwon started asking Choi Ki-tak questions, mundane things such as whether he’d fulfilled his harvest last year, and what sorts of crops he grew. Hwang nervously waited for the man to snap at him, but he interspersed them over fifteen minutes or so, and the farmer kept replying, his answers short and emotionless.

Even when his cousin was clearly swallowing a yawn, he asked whether the farmer had gotten to try the tractor-lending station.

He had. His daughters had been enamoured with the machine.

Hwang tilted his head at Kangwon, silently asking what he was doing.

It was hard to see his expression in the dark, but he thought his brows drew in. He had no difficulty seeing the way he patted the knife at his hip, then pointed inside.

Ah. This was a suicide watch. Though Hwang couldn’t help but think that would be less necessary if Kangwon hadn’t put the thought that the man was responsible for his family’s death into his

head.

After an hour and a half had passed, his cousin had started to slump, his head nodding to his chest as his eyes grew even more heavy-lidded.

Hwang reached over to tap him on the shoulder, and he startled, before giving him an exhausted look, glancing between the spectacled man and the door.

'Can't do it anymore. Keep going for me.'

Hwang's eyes widened. ***'Me?** I don't know what to say!'*

Kangwon's lids slid closed. *'Sorry…'*

His head slumped to the side, and he was out.

Hwang wrung his hands together. It was good his cousin was getting some rest, but he didn't know what to say to the man! What if he asked some question he thought was innocuous, and ended up making him spiral? Kangwon's question about the tractor had seemed innocent enough after all, but had still led to him speaking of the dead daughters he was currently trapped with.

Luckily, his cousin had asked about soil quality in the area just before he'd passed out, giving Hwang plenty of time to formulate a question.

Yet when fifteen minutes had ticked down, he found he'd been more preoccupied with counting the seconds, and no matter how he wracked his brain, he couldn't think of anything to ask Choi Ki-tak.

The usual questions of philosophy and religion could bring up too many unpleasant thoughts for a grieving man, and as useful as Kangwon's questions had been for sounding off and distracting the farmer, part of their success came from his solid, warm voice. It sounded like he truly cared about the answers. Hwang *did* care about them, but his more… clinical tone didn't lend itself to that. He knew the mundane questions would come off as unimportant nuisances in the face of the man's loss.

There was one question he wanted to ask. Would Hae ask it?

Thinking of Sincheon, of her careful questions, always posed with such a sincere expression, he thought she would.

But he knew with her innocent charm, she'd be able to. Even when she asked something that could be considered overly invasive, no one ever protested because she asked with such earnesty. Hwang simply didn't have that charisma.

But he knew what his sister *wouldn't* do. With Yang Jeong-nyeo, Ko Kuil-hwa, Dan Yeon-hwa, and many more, she had been, for once in her life, reluctant to ask them questions. Yet she had.

Hae wouldn't leave him alone with his grief.

So Hwang softly called, "Mr. Choi Ki-tak?"

The man didn't answer immediately, allowing him to shamefully hope that maybe he'd fallen asleep.

But after a minute, he asked, "What?"

"Could you tell me about your wife?"

Another silence.

Hwang quickly said, "Only if it wouldn't be aggravating a fresh wound."

"Why do you want to know?" he asked bluntly.

"I…" Reminding himself to keep his fingers away from his eyes, Hwang fiddled with the button on his protective suit. "It might make you feel better."

When he didn't respond, he used a Korea-ism. "And I'm your Provincehuman. I need to know what was done to my people so I can avenge it."

Losing his courage at the continued silence, he backtracked. "I'm sorry, it's obviously too soon to be asking that. It just seems like she

must have been an impressive woman."

Underneath his grief, Choi Ki-tak had a gruff bearing. If Hwang had seen him on the street, and was pressed to make an assumption, he would have said he was a similar man to North Hamgyong-cantankerous and rough, not the sort to shed tears. Your typical stoic farmer. Those flashes of his personality seemed altogether different from the breathless man that had pleaded with tears in his eyes to save his wife.

For another long moment, the farmer still didn't answer, leaving Hwang time to curse himself. Had he just asked a question sure to hurt the man just to try and make himself seem less cold?

But then Choi Ki-tak said, "Aye, she was."

There was a shifting sound as he adjusted himself against the door. "I wouldn't ever say she was a warm person. But she was kind. Diligent. She loved our girls and wanted to raise 'em right. Wouldn't ever let me make them kneel on a rice sack when they got into the kimchi or broke a dish, how my pa did to me." He gave a snort. "Wouldn't let him do it either. And weren't those staredowns a sight to see."

"She does sound like a good woman." Beyond mere smacks on the wrist, Hwang found physical punishments for children abhorrent.

"She trained me right. Even got me standing up to pa." With an actual chuckle, he said, "Only took thirty-two years."

Relieved at the sound, Hwang asked, "How did you two meet?"

"Arranged marriage, believe it or not," he replied. "I'd spent too long screwing around trying to find my way, so pa handed over the family land, saddled me with a sixteen-year old wife, and ordered me to settle down. One of those things I couldn't stand up to him on."

Judging by his appearance, Hwang suspected he'd at least been in his late twenties when they were wed. It was how things had been before the Law on Sex Equality. He knew now wasn't the time to

make judgements.

"I'm glad I didn't," he said quietly. "She was the best damn thing that ever happened to me."

He sank into silent reminiscence for awhile, as Hwang watched their guards perform light exercises to keep awake. Ri Il looked over his shoulder, spotting Kangwon slumped against the wall, and the Hwanghae raised his hand in an 'all good' gesture.

"You know, I thought she might divorce me when all those new laws were passed," Choi Ki-tak continued. "She was never the most affectionate. And I can't really blame her. I didn't see anything wrong with us getting hitched when we did, beyond being annoyed my pa had finally got me. But now that my Kum-hwan is…"

His voice faltered. Hwang was certain the weight of the corpses across the room from him had broken it.

"She was so young," he choked. "Too young."

Hwang reached to adjust his glasses, then stopped himself. "But your wife didn't divorce you."

"No," he managed after a shuddering breath. "I was pussyfooting around, waiting for her to do it. It's not like she couldn't have left. It would've been hard with the kids, but… She was always the type to power through. I'd tell her not to harvest the last field with the storm coming, that getting those last few potatoes wasn't worth her getting- getting sick. But I'd get back from town and there she'd be, peeling a dozen of 'em while the rest sat in the pantry."

"A model peasant," Hwang approved. Her name likely would've came across his desk someday.

"She was." The swallow from behind the door was audible. "I eventually got so paranoid that one day I'd come home to find her gone that I asked outright- 'Are you going to divorce me?' And you know what she said?"

"What did she say?"

“Looked at me cool as you please, and said, ‘Why should I?’ Then she handed me a chicken to pluck.” The sound he made was too grieved to be a chuckle, but too filled with love to be a sob. “God. Kum-hyang was a good woman alright.”

The next sound out of him was unmistakably a sob. “I’m going to miss her.”

Unable to clean his glasses, Hwang inhaled, mustering his next question.

“What were your daughters like?”

For the next two long hours, Choi Ki-tak told him about his family. How despite his father’s flaws, he’d done his best to get their household through the Japanese Occupation, and he could never bring himself to resent him for everything he'd done wrong. How his mother was a gentle woman who was always the first to offer travellers a place to stay in their woodshed. About how even at six years of age, it was clear Choi Kum-jin was just like him in all the worst ways, and was likely going to grow up to cause him the same headaches he’d caused his father, how Choi Kum-hwan had inherited her mother’s spine, but preferred softer pursuits to farming, such as poetry and mathematics, and how she’d dreamed of attending Kim Il-sung University.

Hwang’s chest squeezed. “She could’ve been one of my students.”

“Aye,” Choi Ki-tak said quietly. “It was one of the selling points for her. Getting to be taught maths by our province himself.” His words tightened in his throat. “She could’ve made it, too. She was sharp as a sickle, nothing like her pa. I spent so long worrying about how even if they’d take a Korean woman, I’d never be able to afford sending her to Seoul. When we heard peasant kids could attend the Pyongyang one for free, Jesus could’ve wept. She was so excited.”

His voice splintered, and Hwang could hear his clothes rustle as he drew in on himself.

“God, I wish I could have seen ‘em grow up.”

Hwang looked helplessly at Kangwon, but he was still fast asleep, face covered by his mask.

There wasn't anything he could say to that. But he had to try.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." His hand strayed to the edge of the door between them. "May I ask what you would have studied if you'd ever had the chance to enroll in school? From what you said of your youth, it doesn't sound as if being a farmer was your first choice."

Choi Ki-tak paused, as if the thought had never occurred to him.

Then he gave another teary chuckle. "I'm not sure if there's a class for it, but damn if I didn't fancy myself a poet, too. Spent all day travelling around the countryside, writing about streams and flowers. Even got myself a horsehair hat, too."

Hwang blinked. "That's unexpected."

"I'm not sure if I was any good at it, mind," the man demurred. "But maybe Kum-hwan picked up a little more of me than I thought."

He was quiet, and Hwang wondered if he was gazing into the dark corner where her body lay.

"She was a smart girl," he said, almost too soft to be heard.

Hwang coaxed more stories from him, about his father and his wife facing off over the children, of how his mother never protested when he was being punished as a child, but she did sneak him gangjeong as he kneeled on the bag of rice, of how Kum-hwan had been the one to figure out how the loaned tractor worked, and how Kum-jin had ran alongside as her father plowed the fields, not having to help with the work for the first time in their lives as the machine made it easy. Of how Kim Kum-hyang had still insisted on working a corner of the land by hand, but had written a letter of gratitude to the Party for the existence of the tractor-lending station despite it. And how she'd smiled after, leaning against her hoe as she watched her husband and children marvel over how quickly

they'd gotten the work done.

By the time lights flashed in the distance, the man was speaking enthusiastically about his deceased family, chuckling more frequently and slapping his palm on his thigh as he recalled the way his father had fumed after young Kum-jin put salt in his tea. His words were still heavy and wounded, but the raw, bleeding edge had gone out of them.

Hwang didn't notify him of the approachers, letting him finish his story about how when they had first been married, he had thought Kim Kum-hyang was shy, until he had turned his nose up at the chicken juk she'd made and asked for jjigae instead, and she had coldly told him he would eat what she made or starve.

By the time he was done, the medical unit was hailing their bodyguards, the lights of their flashlights and lanterns illuminating the stone and clay walls of the farmhouse as they climbed from the flatbed truck they'd been packed into.

Hwang reached over, nudging Kangwon awake. It took long enough that he was starting to get worried. But then his cousin stirred, wincing as the light hit his eyes.

"Everything okay?" he asked through a yawn, blinking hard in lieu of rubbing his eyes.

"Yes," Hwang ventured, hoping. "I think so."

Choi Ki-tak didn't speak as the sanitation team moved in, all clad in white suits like the provinces, entering his home while Kangwon told the lead of the medical team what the situation was. One pulled an olive tarp from the back of the truck, exposing several corpse cloths, and it was these that the bodies of Choi Ki-tak's family were swaddled in.

Hwang watched the pale faces of his daughters pass, the mischievous Kum-jin cradled delicately in a woman's arms, frozen in a fetal position, the quiet Kum-hwan, the girl that could have been his student one day, carried between two men, her corpse too stiff to be held, and the kind and diligent Kim Kum-hyang, whom

had loved her family, despite being forced into it.

Choi Ki-tak's eyes followed her, anguish etched into his face, raising a hand like he wanted to touch her.

Her face was serene, the red roses on her skin invisible in the silver moonlight, her eyes still appearing as if they could flutter open at any time.

But they remained closed, and she was wrapped in a cloth alongside her daughters.

Choi Ki-tak's hand fell, and he quietly directed the team to the outside door to the side room. In a few minutes, they emerged with two more bodies, and Hwang got his first glimpses of the stern Choi Ki-gun and timid Pak Ril-suk.

For all his fierceness in his stories, the man was thin and withered, his pate nearly as bald as Hwang's. The woman was rounder, her head still full of curly dark locks. Both of them wore tired expressions frozen on their worn faces. They, too, were tucked into body bags, and arranged in the back of the truck.

The medical team moved in, taking samples of straw, clothing, a carafe of water, and jellied bowls of simple juk that Choi Ki-tak had evidently been trying to feed his sick family, gathering everything they would test.

"If it's typhoid, I don't think we have to demolish the place," a member of the sanitation unit noted. "Just burn everything inside and douse it."

"Let's put a layer of straw down and burn that, too," another suggested. "Just in case there's any bugs."

Hwang thought to protest about the way they were talking about burning everything Choi Ki-tak had left so casually in front of him, but didn't. The men both sounded exhausted. This doubtless wasn't the first group of corpses they'd seen this week, or the first home they'd had to incinerate.

As the tarp was pulled over the shrouds, Choi Ki-tak suddenly

cried, *“Wait!”* as he lunged forward. “Am I- Am I going to get her back?”

“They’ll need to be cremated,” Kangwon said gently. “For safety.”

He left out the other detail. The victims of germ warfare had to be autopsied, thoroughly dissected to find out what had killed them, to get the proof they needed to show the rest of the world what was being done to them.

Choi Ki-tak’s square jaw feathered. “Then can I see her, one last time?”

One of the medical team went to protest, but Kangwon said, “Go ahead.” Lowering his voice, he told the woman, “He’s already sick.”

The team shuffled back as Choi Ki-tak approached the truck, using a shaking hand to unwind the coarse cloth from his wife's face.

The hardworking farm woman he had described shouldn’t have a complexion so pale. The typhoid had leeched everything from her, staining her skin, hollowing out her cheeks, even robbing her of her mind.

But Choi Ki-tak stared at her like he didn’t see any of that, reaching out a trembling hand to cup her cheek, his thumb caressing across it. He leaned down, whispering something into her ear that didn’t belong to the rest of them, before pressing a kiss to her cold forehead. Then with a final long look at her face, he covered it once more.

When he straightened, his breath created a cloud of steam that jittered in the frosty air.

“You can ride in the back with her, comrade,” one of the medical unit said gently.

“’Ppreciate it,” the man rasped.

He was given a face mask to wear, and long gloves.

As he put them on, Kangwon said, “You’re going to want to keep

blaming yourself. But you have to fight that. None of this is your fault. We can't blame ourselves for things that are beyond our power."

Choi Ki-tak gazed at the lumps under the tarp. "It's hard not to."

"I know." Kangwon's eyes dipped. "But you have to overcome that. Whether it's to live for your family or avenge them. You have to keep going. I'm sure your wife would've wanted that."

He hesitated, then placed a hand on Choi Ki-tak's shoulder. "And you didn't leave her to die. You went to try and save her. You did everything you could. That's what matters."

The man didn't answer, staring long and hard at the bodies of his loved ones.

Just as he climbed into the truck bed with the them, Hwang called, "Hold a moment!" his voice almost cracking.

Choi Ki-tak looked over his shoulder.

Forcing himself not to touch his glasses or buttons, Hwang said, "There are classes for poetry. Literature at Kim Il-sung University, and ones held by the Federation of Literature and Arts. If…" He gave in to the urge to adjust his eyewear. "If after you're released from quarantine you find the farm too lonely, you could consider that."

The man stared at him, then slowly nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

Hwang hoped he would. If he truly was an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid, he could no longer make his living growing food.

As the medical team moved out in their truck, and the sanitation team moved in with their chemicals and straw, Hwang turned to Kangwon.

"Why did you tell him he might be a carrier?" he asked, having found no answer over the hours. "He wouldn't be in that state if you hadn't."

Kangwon looked back tiredly. “They’re going to tell him once they run his labs. He’d find out eventually, and think it was his fault anyways. And no one there has the time to tell him it’s not.”

Hwang was slightly humbled. His cousin truly wasn’t just focused on the present. He thought ahead that far to make it even slightly more likely that the man wouldn’t give in to grief.

“Come on,” Kangwon said, moving by him. “We’ve still got to get to that village.”

Work didn’t end, even after it felt like it should.

Hwang cast one last glance over his shoulder, the lights of the unit glowing from the windows of the farmhouse, harsher and colder than any of the oil lamps that had likely been lit there previously. He could almost see Kim Kum-hyang watching from the window as her daughters ran towards the open door.

‘Foolish thought.’

He turned to jog after Kangwon, leaving the farmhouse behind, as all those that had once lived in it had, too.

More people voted for keeping one long chapter, but the more I thought about it the more I feel like two is right. The break is natural. I’ll just hope really hard we don’t hit two hundred chapters on this one (she said, foolishly).

Choi Ki-tak and Kim Kum-hyang’s age gap- eleven years- is concerning because she was 16 and he was 27 when they were married (technically 17 and 26 because the New Year just hadn’t set their ages forward yet, but that’s literally no difference), but it’s not abnormal for back then (I personally think it's never been okay for a man to marry a teenage girl, or a woman to marry a boy. But that's just me). Just so you’re aware that I am not supporting that gap at all. I just like to explore different dynamics.

It seems like a good chunk of Americans are schizophrenic. But not in the way where they’re just mentally ill people deserving

of respect. There seems to be something very, very wrong with a very large number of them. Lead poisoning, maybe.

Slipping Up

For the next day, Kangwon visited the small Hwanghae village, distributing precious antibiotics to the people hit by the typhoid the hardest, alongside rations, comforting the delirious, exhausted patients, and bringing the village People's Committee- down to four members with the others in quarantine- the news about Choi Ki-tak's family.

It upset a few of them. Apparently it wasn't just the State the Choi farmstead had donated their extra harvest to. They'd brought surplus in to give to families during hard winters even before Liberation.

The village had reacted well to the outbreak. When the nightwatch had heard the plane, and realized the bomb hadn't exploded the way it should, the villagers had immediately mobilized, combing the fields for insects, collecting the flies spread across the village by the handful, burning straw on their floors to destroy any fleas that could've made it inside, moving the livestock to different pastures, and killing every cat and rat they could find before willingly imposing quarantine on themselves, only leaving their houses when absolutely necessary.

But someone had left a well lid open. There wasn't any way to tell if it was malice or forgetfulness, but either way, flies infected with typhoid had made it into a main water supply. And like with the family from the night before, it'd spread from there.

Out of fifty households and just under three hundred people, more than sixty were sick. Typhoid had a fairly low fatality rate when the infection was caught right away, and the moment the first villager came down with a fever, the People's Committee had contacted the Epidemic Prevention Committee to handle it. Eighteen had been the casualty count Kangwon was given before he'd arrived.

He left with it at nineteen. When a young mother went to get her

daughter so he could examine her, she wouldn't wake up.

She was still warm, so Kangwon flipped her over and started to press on her lower thorax with his hands, trying to force her heart to pump again, and when that didn't work, as a desperate last resort he pinched her nose, trying to breathe air back into her lungs and not think about bacteria.

But she remained still.

Kangwon pulled back, gently closing the girl's mouth. The woman knew even before he shook his head. He left her crying into her husband's arms, his eyes bleary and confused, not comprehending that the body on the futon was his daughter. Not comprehending anything.

He gestured for Hwang to stay with them, hoping he'd be able to offer some comfort the way he had last night, while he sprinted to the People's Committee headquarters, grabbing several bottles of chemical disinfectants from their supply, ordering the startled secretary inside to get him water as he mixed them together. It wasn't smart, but he couldn't stop imagining Salmonella typhi squirming across his lips and inside his mouth.

Despite his profession, Kangwon had never actually been a germophobe. But this was different.

He couldn't afford to get sick.

With his jar of water in hand, he poured the mixture of hydrogen peroxide, benzalkonium chloride, and ethanol into it, more drops than he'd even use for cleaning, making sure it was diluted before he raised it to his lips. Bracing himself and trying to tighten his throat as much as he could, he took a mouthful of the water, filling his cheeks with it, swishing it around to get every inch of his mouth and trying not to think about the fact he was using poison as mouthwash.

It burned, but he steeled himself, tipping his head back and relaxing his larynx enough to gargle the solution, getting it as far down his throat as he could before running outside to spit it in the

snow. He repeated this two more times, then a third for safety's sake, before getting a cloth and rubbing the liquid on his lips, scrubbing until they were stinging and raw. Then he did the same to the area around his mouth, scourging any part of him that had touched the infected girl.

Only when the non-burnt parts of his skin were hurting as much as the burnt parts (and one of his burns was burning all over again with the disinfectants rubbed into it), did he stop.

He sighed, his mouth tingling as he returned the jar to the secretary, advising him to add stronger chemicals before using it to clean, so it wouldn't go to waste.

His mouth tasted bitter enough to be distracting, so he made it known that despite the restrictions on using grain to make alcohol right now, he'd *really* appreciate it if someone could get him something strong. Water wouldn't work, it would just spread the taste around even more.

In a half hour, a sealed jar of what looked and smelled like plain soju was delivered anonymously to the headquarters. Kangwon wasn't looking to find out who was illegally brewing. As a doctor, it was better if he didn't poke at things like that, in case it made people hesitant to let him treat them in the future. As long as the crime they were committing wasn't malicious, they were still his patients. Plus he liked being able to ask for disinfectant in a pinch.

The homebrew was strong enough that just the smell made his eyes water. He really hoped it was brewed correctly. The last thing he needed was going blind.

He deliberated until the stinging in his gums got unbearable, then took a swig, wincing.

'More ethanol.'

He used the first few mouthfuls to rinse, then took a few just to drink (inside, where no one could see him). He didn't have to worry about getting drunk- he'd had alcohol a few times during the Occupation, and unlike Korea, even strong stuff like this took more

to affect him.

Kangwon sighed, going to wipe his mouth with the arm of his suit before remembering he'd have to scrub it again. He just put his face mask on, the mix of chemicals and alcohol on his breath making his eyes water more.

At least he felt clean again.

Hwang found him leaning against the desk inside the headquarters. The secretary had retreated to a back room.

"I assisted in transporting the body," he said, subdued.

Kangwon wordlessly held the jar of soju out.

Hwang looked around the empty room nervously. "It's not entirely good optics to be seen drinking illegal alcohol while on the job."

Kangwon didn't lower the jar, and after a second his cousin snatched it, taking several long gulps. After he lowered it, he realized the same 'wiping mouth' predicament his cousin had, but solved it with a handkerchief from his bag.

"There really wasn't anything you could have done," he said, refolding the cotton cloth.

"Yeah." Kangwon took another swig of soju, letting it irritate the chemical burns in his mouth. "I know."

After the jar was half empty, he sighed, pushing off the desk.

"Come on." He ignored the black spots fuzzing his vision. The couple hours' sleep last night hadn't refreshed him, just left him with a kink in his neck. "Let's go visit the other villages around here."

"We're not done?" Hwang asked.

"Nope. We've got to make sure the typhoid didn't spread."

This'd been supposed to be a one-day trip. But Kangwon couldn't

leave without investigating first. There hadn't been any reports, but after Choi Ki-tak, he wanted to make sure no cases had cropped up from another asymptomatic carrier.

They went door to door in all the surrounding villages, checking temperatures, searching for any illness, isolating anyone they found. Kangwon thought the few cases were just the flu, but so had Choi Ki-tak. Knock on the bridge before crossing.

After, they commandeered a vehicle from Sariwon and drove out to all the isolated farmhouses, looking for anyone in the same situation as the other farming family. Kangwon performed check-up after check-up on dozens of people, reminding them to report the first sign of illness, no matter how small, and to clean, and never eat anything raw or not washed properly, and to close their wells tight, and cull any farm animals that didn't seem right, no matter how hungry they were.

Meanwhile, Hwang took the opportunity to ask if there was anything the peasants needed, any government decision they were dissatisfied with, or soldiers mistreating them. He also asked more personal questions, to Kangwon's satisfaction, like if they had any relatives in the army, and if they did, telling them they should send them a letter. And even if they didn't, that they should write one to a unit anyways.

He was still clearly going for the 'remind the soldiers what they're fighting for, and remind the civilians the army's fighting for them' angle. But it was progress.

Kangwon had been tentatively hopeful that they'd finish the survey without any more major cases. But it died at the final house.

It was large, with a tile roof and several outbuildings. But it looked lonely in a way he couldn't explain. It was the same way checking for a pulse was only rote for him. Just a glance was usually enough for him to tell when someone was dead. They looked…

'Empty.'

Kangwon didn't bother going inside. He went out to the edge of the fields, where several mounds rose, rocks stacked in elaborate cairns on top of them. There were fresher lumps of earth at the base, five of them, small, simple stacks of stone piled carefully on top.

There was only one hole. At the bottom rested a wizened old man in a white jeogori and pants, his hands folded across his thin chest. They were covered in lentigo spots, some darker than others where the skin had necrotized. One pockmarked his cheek, looking similar to Kangwon's burns.

'Scrub typhus,' his head diagnosed as his heart clenched. Caused by mites infected with Theileria tsutsugamushi.

Unlike a couple of the other diseases, this one was endemic to Korea. He'd seen it before. It worked fast, shutting down a range of organs in days, fast enough to wipe out a family before they could get help.

And unlike Choi Ki-tak's, no one had survived this.

"Should we… bury him?" Hwang asked, his eyes straying to the shovel with its blade stuck into the ground, like it'd been left there for that exact purpose.

'Probably was.'

The man's clothes were clean, not like he'd dug a grave in them. They were good clothes, the kind you'd pull out on Chuseok or Seollal.

He'd buried his family, then got dressed in his best outfit and laid down in his own grave, waiting for someone to do the same for him.

"We can't," Kangwon said regretfully. "His body needs to be tested so we know for sure what killed them."

And if it was safe to leave the rest of the family buried.

"Ah. Of course." Hwang looked uneasy at the idea. "But seeing as

this is my province, may I make a request?"

"Go ahead."

"Could he be returned here after?" His eyes lingered on the frail old man. "If it's safe, of course."

"Yeah," Kangwon said with a small smile. "I'll tell the unit. But they'll be too busy to do it. If we get permission, you should come back and lay him to rest."

"Yes," Hwang agreed, his gaze still fixed on the man. "Quite so."

After four long days of surveying, they finally returned to Pyongyang, Hwang free to return to his writing and editing, and Kangwon back to the sterile halls of the Quarantine Hospital after he handed in his report.

Next trip would be to his province to check on the plague cases there. He wanted to visit the areas around Wonsan, too. Korea had ordered him to stay away from the city since it was such a target, but because it was such a target there were tons of cases in the villages and army units around it that he wanted to check up on.

But right now he just wanted to take a long nap so he'd be back in top condition.

Despite his aching body and still-raw mouth, concern drove him to head out of the city first, all the way to the bunker to check on Korea.

Before he'd gone to sleep, his province had made sure to ask who should feed him if he had to leave the city, and since absolutely zero of his cousins had received permission, it'd been left up to the Premier. But he was a busy man, and Kangwon wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't been able to make it every day.

Countryhumans didn't actually *need* food or water when they were in a recuperative coma. But it helped. Especially when you knew the person wouldn't be eating when they woke up.

SH was on watch, and thankfully told him that the Premier

actually had been by every day with simple soups and jjigaes prepared by Kim Song-ae. She also told him, to huge relief, that Hae had woken up the day after he left, and Gangwon had had her transferred to the bunker to rest two days ago.

Kangwon poked his head into the women's bedroom. His cousin was sleeping, curled up on her cot with her blush compact clutched in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. He breathed out, the knot of tension that'd been coiled in his stomach for the past two months dissolving.

He didn't disturb her, going to Korea's room instead, feeding him the last of the plain sundubu jjigae left by the Premier, soothing his feverish muttering and trying not to think about the little girl picking roses in her delirium as he did.

His bandages looked fresh. Kangwon had to wonder what the Premier thought about the name his Countryhuman called out in his sleep.

He pretended he didn't hear him calling it again as he left.

It'd be another week and a day before Kangwon woke him up, unless something big happened with the peace talks (seemed unlikely). He wasn't looking forward to having to tell him about the spreading outbreaks, and what they'd taken from them.

He forced his feet to carry him to the isolated hospital, aware that Ri Il and Sip Yung-su were watching him like hawks, hovering close in case he collapsed. But he wasn't that tired.

'Yet.'

He was almost there when a militia member came out of nowhere, telling him a woman was looking for him outside the Military Hospital and at City Hospital One, frantically asking for a house call. Her name was Kim Sang-suk.

Kangwon's heart sank.

Sip Tal-sun's wife.

He hurried to the small house they lived in, built by the militia because a loyal veteran and his dependents couldn't be left in a cave. It was far beyond the city limits, hidden at the base of a hill across the Taedong, since if the Americans decided to bomb it, Sip Tal-sun's disability would make it too difficult to escape.

The older woman was waiting, wringing her hands in her apron, tears coursing down her face.

"Oh Comrade Kangwon!" she cried when she saw him. "Thank goodness you're here! It's- It's-"

"Was there a complication with his leg?" Kangwon asked, hoping that was it.

Kim Sang-suk shook her head, bound hair quivering, then pushed open the door to the two-room hut. The curtain that separated them was pushed aside.

Sip Tal-sun lay on a pallet in the corner. Blood stained the raised floorboards around him, and the rolled-up cuffs of his workshirt. Long ribbons of it ran from the gashes on his wrists, just starting to flake. A shaving blade gleamed next to him, the blade spotless, like it'd been wiped clean and neatly set aside after its purpose was served.

Kangwon took a long blink.

"I don't know how it happened," Kim Sang-suk moaned, clutching at her hair. "I knew he was unhappy, I *knew* he was- But I always did his shaving for him and hid the razor after. I've been burying it outside with the knives when I'm not using them! I don't know how he- I don't-"

"Eomma," a small boy appeared beside her. Her son. "Please don't cry. Appa was unhappy."

Kangwon helped the hyperventilating woman into a chair, coaching her to take deep slow breaths. Noticing the boy staring at his dad's body with wide, dark eyes, he swished the curtain shut, hiding it.

“It’s alright,” he soothed, even though it wasn’t. “It wasn’t your fault. If someone doesn’t want to live, they’ll find a way to die somehow.”

“I just…” Kim Sang-suk looked up, tears pooled in the corners of her brown eyes. *“Why* didn’t he want to live? I know he couldn’t walk or- or anything. But he was *alive.* He came home. My father didn’t, my brother didn’t, but he *did.* He had us.”

That wasn’t really something Kangwon could answer. He didn’t know why a man that had lost everything like Choi Ki-tak could seem like he was going to be okay, while a man that still had a house, had benefits and a family that loved him, had caved in to despair.

No one wanted to be told they weren’t enough. So Kangwon didn’t.

“He was sick,” he said instead, able to place a hand on her shoulder without worry now that he was disinfected and out of his suit. “And not with the kind of illness we could’ve treated. It’s called melancholia, or a depressive reaction. It can happen to people when they go through something traumatic.”

He didn't actually know if Sip Tal-sun had developed it, but he could’ve. Even as his body healed, becoming strong enough to let him leave his house with his wife’s assistance, he’d only seemed to be retreating deeper into his head, and that mindset Kangwon had feared.

He'd brought him books, valuable pencils and paper, sewing supplies, trying to suggest hobbies for him. But the man hadn’t even wanted to try. The idea of the needle and thread had only seemed to make him sink deeper. The head of the household, the breadwinner, a decorated soldier, reduced to a grandmother sitting in bed, sewing. He hadn’t listened to Kangwon’s assurances that he could use the skills learned in the army to bring in money, or mend clothes for other soldiers. He wanted to wear the uniform, not fix it.

He didn't want to move on.

“Your husband wasn’t thinking clearly,” Kangwon said to his wife. “There wasn’t anything you could’ve done.”

She wasn’t Korea. The lie comforted her.

It was a lie, Kangwon thought. He could still see the look in Sip Tal-sun’s eyes as he sat in that hospital bed, staring at the space where his leg had used to be.

Whether he’d fallen into a depressive reaction or not, Kangwon thought Sip Tal-sun had chosen to end his life. He thought he’d been thinking about it even before he left the hospital. It was why the province had sent Korea to him, despite his country not wanting to.

He shouldn't have. Now the burden would be on him, weighing even heavier than on Kangwon.

But he'd had to try. He'd had to try everything he could. Even when he knew it wouldn't be enough.

Now that she’d recovered slightly, Kim Sang-suk got to her feet, shakily crossing the room to push the curtain aside again. Kangwon followed, kneeling beside the dead man.

“He hated not being able to walk,” the woman whispered, brushing her worn hand across his short hair. “I always had to stop him from trying to stand on his own, and I kept coming back to find him sprawled outside from trying to chop firewood.”

Her eyes shimmered, the tears streaming down her cheeks again.

“He kept saying he felt useless,” she said softly. “But I never cared about that. I would’ve been glad to take care of him for the rest of our lives. I was just glad he hadn’t left me.”

Her voice broke as she suddenly pounded on the dead man’s chest.

“So why did you leave me?!” she cried, smacking her fist onto him. “Why did you *leave* me, you bastard?! You *know* I hate being alone! You know I-!“

Kangwon put a hand on her back, and she collapsed forward, burying her face in her husband's neck as she sobbed, clutching at his collar like she could drag him back across the border between life and death.

A shadow fell across them, and the province looked up, seeing the boy peering past the curtain. His eyes were fixed on the razor at his father's side, before they moved to meet Kangwon's.

There was something old in their black depths. Older than the last time he'd been here.

Kangwon looked away, rubbing Kim Sang-suk's back as she keened over her husband.

Had Sip Tal-sun asked? Or had the boy just been unable to stand seeing his once-proud father waste away?

It wasn't Kangwon's job to judge what was filial. His job had been to heal Sip Tal-sun.

And he had failed.

'There wasn't anything you could've done.'

He knew that. He had healed his body. Healing his mind had been something only the man himself could do.

It still ached.

Kangwon comforted the widow as much as he could, then left to arrange a pick up for the body. They couldn't afford to conduct the three-day funeral rites. Not when sanitation was already an issue.

He didn't share his suspicion with her. He didn't know if he was right, and it wasn't his place.

And he didn't want her to end up alone.

By the time he finally, *finally* reached the Quarantine Hospital, the sun was setting, and he'd almost reached his limit. His vision was bleary as he pushed through the doors. It took every last scrap of

willpower he had to make sure he disinfected and wore his coat and gloves properly.

He staggered through the halls, denying the requests he was immediately flooded with. Too much work, too few hands.

But he knew he couldn't even be trusted to administer medication until he'd gotten some sleep. He wouldn't compromise his patients' safety just so he could try to prove something.

Stopping at the break room, he got one of the nurses, whose name he usually knew, to take a blood sample to test, like he did every day, making sure nothing was forming inside him, that he wasn't sick and wouldn't pass it on to his patients. He made sure to check with the woman that Hwang had been by earlier to get his tested like he'd told him, while she drew blood into her needle from his heavily-bruised forearm.

It was only a few dozen millilitres, but it left him feeling even more drained. When he stumbled back into the hall, he didn't know where he was going at first.

"Kangwon?"

The voice reached through his haze, and he turned to see a green and white smear hurrying towards him.

"Gang…"

He'd just slumped over when his brother caught him, yelping in alarm.

"Are you ok-kay?" he stuttered.

"Just… tired," Kangwon slurred, like usual.

"I'll get you to the room." Gangwon hustled him along, telling him that Hae had been discharged. "I hope th-that's okay. She doesn't like the hospital and-"

"'Ss'okay," Kangwon assured. "SH… told me. I trust you."

Gangwon flushed, leading him to Hae's old room.

"It's been cleaned," he assured him. "So you can sleep on the bed. Here, I'll help get your shoes off."

Kangwon slumped onto the cot as his brother unwrapped the gauze around his boots to replace them with hospital slippers.

"Sip Tal-sun's... dead," he wearily told him. "He killed himshelf."

Gangwon's fingers stilled on his laces, his eyes squeezing shut.

"Th-That's awful," he said after a second, subdued. "But you did everything you could, Kang."

Kangwon closed his own eyes. "I know."

Remembering something important he hadn't had the chance to tell him, he gathered all his will to move his tongue.

"Y'know… There's a good chance Ishii Shiro'sssh… involved in this. The germ warfare, not... Ship Tal-shun."

Gangwon looked up in shock. "W-W-What?"

"Mm." Kangwon blinked, trying to remember what he'd been going to say. "America has him. And he wassh… in the south last month. No, two… months. Yeah."

His brother's face flooded with anxiety as he put an arm around his ribs, guiding him into laying down. "Th-That's really not g-good. Where'd you hear that?"

"China… told me," Kangwon muttered just as he hit his limit, and his consciousness finally gave out.

He felt his brother stiffen against him, but he was already sinking into darkness.

—

Gangwon's heart pounded, familiar anxiety flooding his veins hard

enough to make him tremble. He pushed away the thoughts that crowded in, the things that started to make sense. It wasn't his place to think about that. He was a m-medic. He just had to keep helping people.

He tucked his brother in, removing his face mask.

Kangwon hadn't said that, he decided. He was exhausted and half-delirious. That was all.

Gangwon hurried from the room, gratefully rushing over as a nurse called for help with a seizing patient, already trying to forget what he'd just heard.

Kangwon is the type of person to be transgender-accepting even in his early years not even because of his understanding of how people work, but because he Does Not Care about anything but health. You could tear out of your skin and reveal you were a biblically-accurate Ophanim, and he'd be like, 'Okay, but do you have flu symptoms?' If a werewolf came into his clinic, he would give them a rabies vaccine.

Did you know CPR wasn't invented until the late 1950s? I found this out when I was trying to see if it would be historically accurate for Liaoxi or Pak Ga-ram to use it on North Pyongan when he drowned. Breathing air is an old technique that fell out of practice in a lot of places, and there were several other resuscitation methods, such as putting a person facedown and stimulating their thorax, but the classic 'pinch nose, breath air, chest compressions' didn't exist until later.

A Change You Can't Stop

"Careful, we're almost there."

"Ah'm not made'a rice straw," Hae complained as North Pyongan guided her through the trees towards the bunker.

"I know," her cousin soothed. "But you are still recovering."

He was bein' all gentle with her, making sure the arm he had around her didn't press on her ribs or anything, even though she was all better.

Well, maybe she was a *li'l* to blame for that. She *had* made him carry her though all the cut down trees as soon as one of his guards had taken their borrowed truck to hide. But it wasn't 'cuz she was tired or anything. She just liked bein' carried, and no one but Korea had done it for a long time.

Remembering how he'd carried her out of the Southern One's awful camp made her skip a li'l, making Pyobu give her a disapprovin' look.

Oops, right. 'Take it easy,' Gang had said. That was the one thing she'd had to promise to get him to let her leave the hospital.

Thinking about Korea made her nervous and upset and mad. She was a li'l worried he might be disappointed in her for dyin', or for making Kang lie for her. Gang had told her he'd found out (of course he had, he was real smart), and even though her cousin said he wasn't *that* mad, Hae thought he might'a been doing that thing him and Kangwon did when they made things smaller than they were.

Despite that, she'd really been looking forward to seeing him. It'd been two months, the longest she'd gone without seeing him *ever* (after being kidnapped last last year). She had promised herself she'd never be apart from him that long again.

But now the stupid Southern One had gone and made him sick, too. Hae couldn't even hug him for another week and three days, accordin' to Gang.

'Bastard.'

She didn't say it out loud. SH was the only one that hated cussin' more than Pyobu, even though he almost never scolded her for it.

As they reached the clearing around the bunker, someone called, "Hae!"

Hae lit up, slipping out of North Pyogan's arm to charge forward.

"SH!"

Her cousin stopped running, bracing her heels in the mud, and Hae slammed into her. She'd lost a lot'a weight in her coma, so she didn't manage to knock the taller woman over, just make her stagger back.

She wrapped her arms around her ribs, squeezing, then squeaked as SH hugged her back even harder. Determined, Hae put all her strength into it, making her ribs creak, before she remembered she was all burned like her, and quickly loosened her grip.

She buried her face in her cousin's chest instead, nuzzling her happily.

"I'm so glad you're okay," SH murmured into the bandages on top of her head. "When I heard you died-"

Her long nails suddenly sank into Hae's shoulder blades.

"If you hadn't came back, I would have murdered America myself," she half-growled in a real scary voice that made Hae beam.

"Korea wouldn't approve," Hae told her, squirming under her claws. Her nails were always breaking, but SH somehow kept hers nice and sharp. They hurt, but not enough to escape the hug. "We're only supposed to kill him if he's about to kill us, not if we're already dead."

“Korea would fight me for the killing blow,” her cousin said confidently.

The idea made Hae happy, even though she knew if Korea and SH did something like that, it would get their country in trouble.

“I think you’re impaling Hae,” Pyobu said politely, and SH quickly pried her nails out of her back, apologizin’.

“It’s okay,” Hae chirped, just happy to actually be able to touch her family again. She’d hugged Gang real tight when he came in to find her awake, but then he’d been really busy for the two days she was in the hospital, so she’d only got to hug him again when she left.

She’d given Pong-ju and Man-won big hugs, too. Korea would probably tell her not to hug her guards, but he hadn’t, so it was okay. And they’d made her that card, and Pong-ju’s sister had sent her a cute bracelet. She’d hug her too the next time she visited.

“You should get inside,” SH fretted, looking around. “It’s too cold out here. And have you eaten today?”

“Gang got me breakfast.” It was her ration rice with a dried persimmon that he'd got Kang to buy with his allow- salary.

It’d been tasty, especially since she knew her cousins must have worked real hard to find one, but Hae’s belly was still empty. It made her a li'l ashamed, since she knew Kangwon would have gone through with feeding her while she slept. But even with all the rice and stuff he’d wasted on her, she was still so *hungry*.

Gang had told her she would be, since everything she ate while asleep just went towards her regen’ration, so she knew it wasn’t really her body’s fault. And Kang had said nothing he gave her was a waste. But…

Hae shook her head vigorously.

Nope! No more unhappy thoughts. She was all fixed up, she was out’a the hospital, and in a few days she could start helpin’ with sowing to make up for everything she’d ate. And then in a week,

two days, and twenty to twenty-eight hours (dependin' on when Kang came to wake him up) she'd get to see Korea again.

She used the happy thoughts to drown out the achin' in her belly. She wasn't going to let it make her do something stupid again.

SH and Pyobu gave each other… bemused looks as she shook herself.

"Come on," North Pyongan said, putting a hand on her back, still all gentle-like. "Let's get you inside."

"You know," Hae said, lookin' at him with the biggest eyes she could. "Ah really *am* all better. Gang's all cooped up in the hospital, and Kang's out fixin' people, so they wouldn't even know if you just let me go help in the fields."

She didn't feel even a li'l bit sick anymore. Ayuh, she was all skinny and weak, but sitting around wasn't going to solve that. She tried that to tell Gang, but he'd been real insistent that she stayed in the hospital for that extra time, and that she took a day or two to rest now that she was out.

But Hae didn't *want* to rest. She wanted to get to work as soon as possible so she could get enough done that Korea would be impressed once he woke up, and maybe even praise her, even after she'd made Kang lie, and got sick in the first place.

But her cousins were givin' her that look, so she knew she was still getting banished to the bunker.

"Ah know," she sighed glumly before they could respond. "Ah'll go inside."

She looked up from under her lashes, giving one last hopeful look.

They both raised their eyebrows at her, unimpressed.

Hae sighed again, going to open the door. SH and Pyobu beat her to it, though, haulin' it open.

With Korea so busy, he'd had a spare set of keys made so the

provinces could always get into the bunker, even without him. SH got to keep them. She didn't have to use them right now, but Hae still enviously eyed the pocket she knew she kept them in.

She could take care of the keys. Not when she was sick, obviously. But Korea had handed 'em over before she'd got cho-le-ra. Ayuh, sometimes she'd get distracted and forgot she'd put something down, or that she had meat over the fire. But if Korea told her not to lose the keys, she would guard them with her life.

"You're still not getting them, Hae," SH said, not looking over as she dusted her hands off.

Hae pouted. "Not even as a 'Yay, ah'm so happy you came back to life' present?"

"No." But SH didn't say it sternly, and before Hae went inside, she folded her in another hug, murmurin' in her 'ear,' "But I am *so* happy you came back to life."

Hae beamed. "Me too."

Head spinning, stomach cramping, tongue withering away in her mouth like dead wheat. Her body smacked into the floor, refusing to listen to her as she tried to make it move for the door that was so close and so so far away, like the hatch with the sky beyond it. 'Kang, got'a get to Kang so he can fix…'

Hae held tighter to SH, squeezing the memory away.

It wasn't the hole. She din't have to remember it. She just had to remember that 'Merica and the Southern One had made her sick, made their people sick, so she could revenge it.

She reluctantly let go of her cousin and let North Pyongan walk her inside. He didn't shut the door, but she still hunched, feelin' the mountain press in on her from above.

Maybe she wished Gang had kept her for a li'l longer. Even if the hospital had been full of that weird chemical smell she didn't like, and she'd been able to hear people in pain but hadn't been able to go make 'em feel better. At least it had a window.

“Kang always says fresh air is good for people,” she informed her cousin as he opened the door to her and the other women’s room.

He gave her a sympathetic look. “You can come stand watch with me in a few hours.”

“Is Comrade Liao Shī goin’ to be there?” Hae batted her eyes innocently.

His cheeks turned purple and pink, but he ignored her. “Just get some rest to recuperate from the drive first.”

Hae puffed out her cheeks. The drive here had been around twenty minutes. She hadn’t even been out of the hospital for an hour.

Their room looked the same as when she’d left it to go stand watch. Liao Juān and Liao Shī’s beds were made nice and neat, with lumps under the sheets where their spare uniforms were bein’ kept as warm as possible. SH’s was even neater, her bedroll and blanket folded instead of set up, but the bottom bunk was covered in paintbrushes, canvases, and papers that looked messy, but Hae knew she would notice immediately if something was moved (like her pink paint). Pyo’s bunk wasn’t made up at all, the blanket tossed over the edge, which Korea would scold her for if he saw, and the spare cot at the back had their summer uniforms, casual clothes, and others things they’d been given by people, like straw baskets and extra socks.

Hae’s bed was tidy, since she’d made it up before she left, in case she was out looking for Ppang until muster. But it wasn’t as tidy as she’d left it. The corner of her sheet was tucked under her bedroll, which she made sure never to do.

Maybe Liao Shī or Liao Juān had remembered her offer to let them use her blanket whenever she was away in her province for the night, and had finally taken it. The idea made her happy. They were livin’ with them, so they were sort of like family, which meant they should share.

Pyobu went into the room, but she remained as rooted as a rye stalk in the doorway. He looked at her, and she held out her hands,

flexing her fingers.

He looked between her and her bunk, three feet away. “Really?”

“If you’re goin’ to act like ah’m a grandma, you’re goin’ to treat me like one.”

Her cousin shook his head, but turned around, crouchin’ to offer his back. Hae eagerly scampered onto him, locking her arms around his neck while he held her legs in place.

“How old are you?” he asked.

Hae *‘hmph’*ed. “An old lady, accordin’ to you an’ SH an’ Gang.”

Pyobu carried her to her cot (in two steps), and turned, crouching again so she was sitting on it.

“You know, if I was South Pyongan I would fall backwards onto the bed and crush you,” he pointed out.

“’Cuz *Pyo* doesn’t think ah’m a grandma,” Hae muttered, unloopin’ her arms from around his neck to cross them. “Or a kid.”

She usually liked her ‘little sister’ privilege, but *not* when it got in the way of farming.

“We aren’t trying to treat you like a child, Hae,” North Pyongan said. He crouched, looking up at her all earnestly. “We were just incredibly worried for you, so we want to make sure you recover fully.”

Hmmm. Hae guessed she *had* died. She’d been really worried when Pyobu died, and even though she hadn’t tried to keep him from doing his job, she had been careful when she hugged him after. And Kang had told him to take it easy for a few days after he was out of the hospital, too.

“Okay,” she chirped, patting him on the head. “You’re forgiven.”

Pyobu smiled, pushing his army cap out of his eyes. Then his lips turned down.

“Hae,” he said, then went quiet.

“Ayuh?” Hae prompted after a few seconds.

“Did you… see anything when you passed?” North Pyongan’s thumb rubbed across the back of his other hand. “Did you have any dreams or… anything?”

Hae tipped her head, considering. She had lots of dreams, and was pretty good at remembering them. She’d forgotten about it until she’d told Yang Jeong-nyeo about the hole, but she used to spend hours searching through the dark dreams to find one that wasn’t, like rummagin’ through piles of windfalls to find an apple that wasn’t rotten.

Once she did, she’d try and remember every detail about it to make her less bored when she ran out of common sense stories, trying to pretend the tasty food and sunshine that wasn’t just a sliver and the family her head made up were real. She’d stopped doing it after Korea had saved her, since all those things had became real, and better than she could’ve ever dreamed.

But she was still good at recallin’ them, and she felt like she hadn’t dreamed when she was dead. The last thing she remembered was the thing she didn’t want to remember, and the first thing she remembered was Hwang’s voice, and a bleary glimpse of his face, all teary-eyed and guilty. Between that… She had a few fuzzy impressions. But she felt like they came from later, not when she’d first passed out.

“Nope,” she said, shaking her head. “Ah think it was all just black.”

Not comforting black either, like the one behind her eyes, or the one with Korea in it. Just… nothing.

‘Not thinkin’ about that anymore!’ She’d never die again. She knew Korea and Kangwon were already going to be upset with themselves, even after what she’d told Kang in the hospital about not blaming himself.

“I see.” Pyobu looked sort of relieved by her words, but also sort of not relieved.

“Why?” Hae asked curiously.

He stood, brushing at his black pants. “I was just wondering.”

Oh. It was probably ‘cuz he’d died, too.

“Did you dream when you drowned?”

“No,” he said quietly. “But I wasn’t dead for long.”

“You know, we both died,” Hae ventured. “That sort’a makes us a club.”

North Pyongan shook his head like a horse shakin’ flies. “I suppose it does.”

“And club members share things.”

He eyed her. “Yes. They do.”

She blinked up at him. “So you’ll share your steamed fish with me when the war is over.”

A smile peeked out from the corners of his lips. “Is that a request?”

“Please?”

Her cousin sighed, but it was a good sigh. “Of course. Perhaps the next time I have a chance, I’ll go fishing and find a fish to steam before the war is over.”

Hae shook her head immediately. “Anythin’ you catch has to go to our people.”

“One fish wouldn’t harm anyone,” he said, then went far away for a second. “But you’re right. Our people are our stream, and we aren’t the only fish they need.”

She bobbed her head, pleased. Even though her mouth was waterin' at the idea of steamed fish.

North Pyongan went to the door, lookin' back. "Come outside once you've rested awhile. At least two hours," he added when she brightened.

Hae pouted again.

"And just so you are aware, Korea forbid any of us from going in his room while he's unconscious." He said it pointedly.

Hae crossed her arms. "Ah wouldn't."

His eyebrow lifted just a li'l bit, and she protested indignantly, "Ah wouldn't!"

Even though the thing she wanted most right now, even over sowing, was to wriggle into his bedroll and let him feel that her heart was beatin' again, she knew she couldn't.

Durin' the war against Japan, she could get away with inching closer to Korea as he slept, or sidling in between him and Kangwon (on the nights they were squished together and he couldn't sleep ten feet away). Even when he did sleep ten feet away, she could flop down next to him when she got off watch and only get a li'l scoldin' in the morning. So long as she didn't touch him, he wouldn't wake up. Even when she got clingy in her sleep (completely by accident), he never woke her up, so that meant he was okay with it.

But she'd crept into his room after they'd moved to the chosonjip and the lure of Korea had overcame her not wantin' to sleep in his windowless room, and curled up on the edge of his futon, even though he wasn't awake to tell her she could. And at some point in the night she'd woken up with him half on top of her, breathin' real heavy. Before she could say anything, he'd grabbed her face in the dark, squeezin' it all over like he didn't know who she was, before he got off, shoving her away and telling her to get out and never come into his room when he was asleep again, in the voice he used when he *meant* it.

Hae thought she'd probably got a li'l too close to him, and when he'd felt someone touching him when there wasn't supposed to be

anyone else in the room, he'd woken up and attacked right away, like he would with an enemy.

She hadn't been scared, 'cuz it was Korea. But she thought he might've been. Not *scared* scared. But scared that he might have hurt her before he realized it was her.

So now Hae made sure to never snuggle with him without permission, and to always knock before she entered his room. She was workin' on that second one, but the first one was a serious order, so she never forgot.

Which meant she wouldn't get to see Korea at all until he woke up, thanks to the stupid Southern One and his puppet master.

"Alright," North Pyongan soothed her. "Rest well. I will see you later."

As soon as he left, she flopped back on her bunk, starin' up at the bottom of Pyo's.

She was bored already, just like she'd been in the hospital. Bored bored *bored.*

At least there she'd had the notes Hwang, Gang, and Kang had been workin' on about 'sign language' to keep her busy for a li'l bit.

Sign language was real easy. Hae didn't know why they hadn't taught her that back when she couldn't speak right. She'd picked up on it way faster than Choson'mal, Choson'gul, or Hanja. Then she wouldn't have had to speak Japanese at all.

Mm. Then again, she needed to know Korean characters to make the signs. Unless she could learn the signs without then, then learn the characters from the signs. That was confusin' to think about. She'd have to ask Kangwon or Gangwon about it. Or Hwang, once he got back.

She hoped it was soon. She wanted to thank him for bringin' her her blush, and tell him she loved him.

Anyway, she'd finished learning all the gestures they'd written down on the day she woke up, and gone right back to bein' bored. Gangwon couldn't even stay to talk after. Every time he came in, it was to gobble down his meal or take a quick nap.

As bored as she was, Hae had been real careful not to wake him up since she knew he was working hard to keep everyone healthy. He'd taken a few minutes after she woke up to tell her about all the nasty germ warfare the Southern One and 'Merica had used after they'd killed her, and even though he didn't have time to tell her everything, what he had told her she didn't like one bit.

Hae reached into the pocket of her uniform (which Gang had washed up for her while she was out), and pulled out a piece of paper, holding it over her face, warmin' up as she read the words (not that she was cold).

It was the message Gang had left for her, telling her she was in the hospital, and that he'd be back soon. There'd also been a milk candy on it that he said was from Kang (definitely him, no one else).

Hae hugged it to her chest, along with the card her guards had given her.

She liked Gangwon a lot, even if he was different than Kangwon. Kang was different than Kangwon, too, even if it was harder to remember sometimes 'cuz he looked more like him with his red-brown skin and his magnolia bein' green like his province shape had used to be.

She wondered why Gang was green and gold now. It wasn't 'cuz of the Southern One. He'd had those colours since that first day, when Korea had signed that stupid paper that 'Merica had made him sign, and Kang had *'poof'*ed into pretty gold dust.

Hae had been real nervous that the Division had killed him, or that it had made Kangwon not Kangwon. But after the dust had formed into North Kangwon and South Kangwon, and even Gang had looked sort of like Kangwon with his droopy eyelids and… Kangwon look, she'd been relieved. But she hadn't even got to hug

him before those stupid reaction'ries 'Merica had sent swept him away.

But she'd got to hug him now, and eat with him, and be treated by him. He might be a li'l shaky, but his hands were still gentle like Kangwon's had been as he took her temperature and pulse.

Hae frowned. 'Were.' 'Had been' made it sound like the old Kangwon was gone. He wasn't. He was just two people now.

Anyway, she liked Gang. She loved him. And she loved Kangwon. She was glad Korea was keepin' them separate. Even if it was just for administrative purposes. Anything that made their family bigger made her happy.

She hoped it *was* just for administrative purposes, and not because he was worried about recombinin' them in case Gang made it so they couldn't operate anymore. That he wasn't just keeping them as two people 'cuz they worked better that way.

Hae reached back into her pocket, pulling out her blush compact, running her thumb over the tiger on it, hearing those words Hwang had said to her, comin' from what sounded like fields away, but sounding so small she'd fought through the fuzz in her head to respond.

'I want to be more like you. But I don't want to be merged with you.'

She was glad he'd finally said it, the one thought he'd never said out loud.

Hae opened the compact, lookin' in the li'l mirror at her face, picturing her features through the bandages and medical tape that covered them. She tried to imagine Hwang's mixed with hers. Her double lids and charming fat flanking his squinty eyes. Her crooked, twisty teeth behind his thin lips. Her pink freckles dotting his narrow cheeks. All laid out on their mountain magnolia, sunshine yellow or ice blue.

She wanted to be more like him, too, in a way. She wanted to be respectable like him, to be able to hold debates with people, and be

smart enough not to do stuff like scarf down poisoned clams, and cynical enough that she never fell for an enemy trick ever again.

But she also wanted to keep her make-up and her farmin' and her hairstylin' and pink clothes. She wanted to keep the way she was able to listen to their people, and know when not to say somethin', and make them feel better. She wanted to keep her little sister privilege and the one that let her cuddle with Korea.

She wanted to keep her brother. She wanted to keep…

Hae snapped the compact closed, clutching it to her chest, her heart beatin' under it.

She knew she didn't have to worry about anythin'. Korea had said he'd think about it. And he always made the right decision.

But what if putting her and her brother back together *was* the right decision?

'Ah don't want to disappear.'

'You wouldn't disappear.' He'd sounded almost mad when he'd said it. No, not mad. Not exactly. *'You would be becoming who you were supposed to be.'*

She wasn't trying to think about it, but the image still flickered in her mind. Korea, with his angled eyebrows and the groove between them, but long lashes that fluttered like hers as he talked. With his high cheekbones on round cheeks, his charmin'ly thin lips hiding teeth that were mostly even. With two eyes, big, round, and nervous.

Hae squeezed her eyes shut, even though the picture was inside her head, rolling onto her side.

Merging her and Hwang *wasn't* the right decision. Their province was too big, and Korea needed their skills. He needed Hwang's information work and teaching, and he needed her farmin' and her people work, and it was way more useful if they could do those things at the same time. Even if they worked better as one person, even if they were meant to be Hwanghae, it was the wrong

decision. And Korea always made *right* decisions.

But Hae wasn't a kid. She knew some decisions weren't right because they were right- they were right because they were necessary. Like sacrificing Hye-sun or signing a ceasefire with 'Merica. Some decisions had to be made.

Even if they were wrong.

—

North Hamgyong trudged towards the air raid shelter, the stench of gunpowder and scorched earth choking his 'nose.'

North Pyongan was the one on duty, thank fuck. He couldn't take South Hamgyong today, even less than he could on a normal day.

"What are you doing here?" his cousin asked, surprised to see him so early.

"Yanks bombed the stretch of track we were working on," he clipped, not slowing. "Guy died. Foreman gave us a break since the miguk-nom aren't letting up."

North Pyongan's eyes flickered. "Who was it?"

"No one you know."

North Hamgyong wished *he* hadn't known him. Fucking Oh. The bastard had never shut up, always yammering away even six hours into repairing the rail lines, going on and on about his wife, and how his son was in school to be an engineer, too, and how he was studying to join the Worker's Party, and handing out the steamed buns and gaetteok his perfect wife made like they grew on trees and they weren't at fucking war.

He'd tried to drag him for one of the dug-outs strategically dug along the tracks as the planes soared in, but the stupid fucking idiot had torn away from him, sprinting back for the tools someone else had dropped when they ran. Then North Hamgyong's fucking bodyguards had damn near tackled him into the foxhole, pinning him down until there was a break in the strikes.

Oh'd barely looked like a person when the bombs were done with him. And he'd only been able to save a single hammer, hidden under his body. The rest had been turned to ash and warped metal they'd have to smelt down if it was going to be useful again.

'So what was the point?' What was the damn *point?*

North Hamgyong wasn't going to be the one to tell his wife or mother what'd happened to him. He'd already had to be the one to carry the corpse out of there since he couldn't trust anyone else not to drop it and run if the mi-chin-nom Yanks came their way again.

"Pray for the bliss of the dead," North Pyongan murmured, dipping his head.

"A lot of fucking good that'll do." North Hamgyong barged past him, heaving the door open.

"Try not to stomp around," his cousin said, clearly trying to sound polite but still pissing him off. "Hae has been discharged. She should be sleeping."

"Whatever." North Hamgyong left the door open for him to shut, knowing he'd just slam it.

Hae. He couldn't believe that bastard Kangwon had seriously fucking lied about her dying. Just to spare their fucking feelings, Korea's feelings, like if he didn't know, it meant it hadn't happened. And if she actually had died, would he have kept his mouth shut then, too?

He didn't get how the others could just move on from that, even Hae's own damn brother.

The province stormed into the room he shared with the other men and China, grimacing at the pile of electronics on one of the lower bunks as he tore his blood-stained jacket off. It was dog-cold in the bunker, but he didn't give a damn.

He rubbed at his mouth, swiping his tongue around his jaws as he tried to get rid of the taste of gaetteok.

‘Idiot.’

He should take a nap until Pyongyang wasn’t getting bombed-

‘I’d never fucking wake up.’

-but instead he stared at the door for a long minute, his hands clenched into fists.

Then he stalked out of the room and across the hall, slamming open the door.

Hae leaped up from the bed, already with that idiotic smile on her face, like she hadn’t just recovered from being fucking killed.

“Hambu!”

He stuck out a hand, and she smacked into it before she could get her crushing grip around his aching spine and ribs. He was pretty sure Ro had broken one in his struggle to keep him in the dug-out. The woman strained against his palm, but he shoved her away, making her stagger back onto the cot, pouting.

“Don’t call me that,” he ordered, even though she was never going to listen.

“You’re visitin’ me, but you aren’t goin’ to let me hug you?” she whined, widening her eyes in distress like the manipulative little creature she was.

“I’m not here to visit you,” he grunted, crossing his arms. “I’m on break.”

“And you came to torture me on it,” Hae said glumly.

“I can go.”

He turned around, but she jumped up, grabbing the sleeve of his grease-stained undershirt.

“No! Don’t leave,” she demanded. “Ah’m bored.”

North Hamgyong batted her away. Hae eyed him warily, but when he didn't try to escape, she nodded in satisfaction, jumping back onto her cot.

He glared at her. She smiled back, kicking her heels, seeming like she'd be fine to just sit in silence and stare at each other.

It'd taken long enough, but it looked like all her extra fat had been stripped away. One of her cheeks was hidden under medical tape, but the other was even hollower than when she'd been skipping meals to feed that damn dog. She looked smaller than usual, brittle like improperly tempered steel, like the first time he'd ever seen her, the malformed, malnourished little sack of bones and skin held together by grime that Korea had carried up out of the cellar with ease, even though he was barely bigger than her.

They shouldn't be keeping her in here. If she was healthy enough to irritate him, she was healthy enough to get back to work. Locking her up underground was just going to make her sick again.

"What do you want to talk about?" Hae asked eventually, still swinging her heels.

"I don't want to talk to you," he grunted.

"Okay," she chirped. "Ah'll talk to you then. Has anythin' happened with the talks yet?"

He guessed she already knew Korea was out, or she'd be asking about him first.

"That's still me talking to you."

"But ah'm askin' general to general," Hae said. "So you have to answer. Gang told me some stuff, but ah know he's not allowed to know everythin'."

Because he was a walking time-bomb. One that was getting in the way of the war ending.

Not that North Hamgyong thought they should hand him over. The Yank wouldn't sign the armistice anyway. They'd just be giving

him information for his puppet to Command out for him.

"Yanks and Rhee's bastards massacred more of our POWs on Geoje Island a few days ago," he grunted.

It'd leaked into the news. It was the second mass shooting there in under a month. But nowhere near the second overall.

"They're trying to cover their asses in the negotiations."

It would work. The other countries were making a fuss over it, but only because they didn't have a finger in the labour camp pot. They could lay everything on the Yanks and act like that wasn't what this entire war *was*- nation-traitors handed guns by foreign bastards and using them to murder patriots- and that they wouldn't do the exact same damn thing if they were given the chance.

They would. The only thing stopping them was not having the wheel in their bloody hands.

The foreigners would cause a moral outcry about this, they'd pay lip service to an investigation, and might even conduct it, unlike the one for the biological warfare. Either 'nothing would be found,' or something would be, and then it would be swept under the damn carpet alongside the rest of America's corpses.

And then it would fade away, the war would go on, and the Yanks would murder a hundred thousand more people that the foreign nations didn't give a damn about because they didn't have to hear about it.

"Bastids," Hae swore, her brows drawing in.

"And the Yank is finally demanding Gangwon back," he added.

Hae's brows sprang up in alarm. "What?"

He ran told her about the Yankee's demands for the province to be turned over if they wanted a ceasefire, and her eyes widened.

"Korea's still not givin' him up, right?"

"No."

It pissed him off that the decision came from the bleeding heart part of their Countryhuman, but the decision itself didn't. Gangwon was a Korean province. They didn't have to hand him over to a damn Yank or a nation-traitor. It'd make them look weak and probably get the nervous wreck even more screwed up than he already was.

It didn't matter if he was a ticking time-bomb. He was one of theirs.

Hae relaxed. "Good. Ah don't want 'Merica and the Southern One to lock him up again."

She instinctively put a hand over her mouth, glancing towards Korea's room. She lowered it, but didn't correct herself.

At least *one* of his cousins understood that the Southern bastard was a problem.

'But not as much as she should.'

"Anythin' else?" she asked.

"No." He didn't want to talk about all the germ warfare shit. He heard about it enough, and had his own fake fever to put up with. And he didn't want to talk about the bombings, either.

Nodding to herself like she'd just checked something off a list, she asked, "How's Korea?"

North Hamgyong grit his teeth. "What was the first question you asked Gangwon when you woke up?"

"Um." She thought for a moment. "It wasn't the first thing ah said, but the first question ah asked was if he was okay."

Of course she fucking had. Even though she was the one that'd been unconscious for two months. Because she'd fucking *died.*

"Second thing?"

“Ah asked if Korea was okay,” she confidently announced. “But Gang doesn’t get to see him much, and Korea says we should always seek out as much information about a situation as possible, so askin’ Pyobu and SH wasn’t enough, so now ah’m askin’ you.”

She beamed, proud, for some fucking reason.

Lips thin, he asked, “What would you say to him if he was awake?”

“Ah’d ask if he was okay,” she answered immediately.

“And what do you think would be the first thing *he'd* say to *you?”*

“He’d probably ask if ah was fit for duty,” Hae chirped. “And then ah’d say yes, and ah’d get to go plow fields instead’a bein’ cooped up in here.”

She pursed her lips mutinously.

Losing the little patience he’d had, North Hamgyong snapped, “And you don’t give a damn that after he jammed his fingers in your mouth and made you throw up without even a damn apology, he wouldn’t even ask if you’re okay?”

Hae side-eyed him in a way that he’d call shrewd if he didn’t know better.

“You called me an idiot,” she reminded him. “And *you* never said sorry.”

“Because you *were* an idiot,” he shot back. “You ate a damn raw clam you found outside. Who the fuck does that?”

Someone who was starving like the rest of them, and had always had to be watched out for so she wouldn’t eat random shit.

Hae *‘hmph’*ed, not answering. “You *also* haven’t asked if ah’m okay.”

“It’s different,” North Hamgyong growled. “You don’t worship *me* like I’m a damn god.”

Hae scrunched her face. “Ah don’t ‘worship’ Korea. Ah love him. And he’d be mad if he heard ya say that.”

“He told you to make yourself throw up and you *did,”* he growled, frustrated. “You shoved your fucking fingers down your throat without a second damn thought.”

Korea hadn’t Commanded her, but for one moment, North Hamgyong genuinely thought he had. When he’d barked at her to 'throw up *now,'* her face had dropped into a mask of resolve, and she’d turned and plunged her hand into her mouth before anyone could even react. And then the first thing she’d done when she was finished upchucking was defend his fucking honour.

“Ah had second thoughts,” Hae sniffed. “But if Korea wanted me to do it, it had to be important. And it was. He din’t want me getting’ sick.” Her shoulders slumped. “Ah still did, though. Ah threw up my rice for nothin’. But that wasn’t Korea’s fault.”

She was always fucking like this, prioritizing their Countryhuman’s feelings when he acted like he didn’t give a damn about hers, doing whatever he told her, not even questioning it, justifying everything he did.

North Hamgyong bared his teeth. “And what if he ordered you to do something worse? You’d just go ahead and do it because you think as long as he wants you to, you should.”

Hae let out a sigh that was almost patient, and made his blood boil. “For the last time- Korea wouldn’t make me jump off a cliff. He wouldn’t throw me off a cliff. He wouldn’t boil me in a pot like a frog (not that you should boil frogs), and he wouldn’t make me kill anyone that din’t deserve it. Korea wouldn’t do *anythin’* to hurt me, *ever.”*

“And what if he did?” North Hamgyong demanded furiously. “What if he locked you up or made you hurt yourself or hit you and told you it was right? You’d go and make an excuse for him, and tell yourself you fucking *deserved it!”*

Hae tipped her head, unbothered by him shouting in her idiot face.

“If he did somethin’ like that, then he wouldn’t be Korea.”

North Hamgyong grit his teeth, bloodied, broken nails digging into his work-worn palms.

Not even she fucking got it.

Hae looked down at her lap. Suddenly she asked, “Hambu. Would you still love me an’ Hwang if we were one person?”

Changing the damn subject so he’d stop talking about shit she didn’t want to think about. Whatever. Not as if he wasn’t fucking used to it.

“I don’t love you,” he scorned, teeth still grinding. “I *tolerate* you, and I despise your scrawny four-eyes of a brother.”

Hae didn’t flinch, looking up at him. “Would you still tolerate us if we were Hwanghae?”

He sank his teeth into the side of his cheek. “I wouldn’t tolerate *you.* I would tolerate Hwanghae.”

He glowered down at her, willing her to see past her refusal to believe things could ever change and *understand.*

She gazed back, then looked down at her hands. “Oh. Right.”

He knew she wasn’t as stupid as she pretended. She just wanted to bury her head in the sand like all the others.

North Hamgyong spun away without another word.

“Wait!” Hae called as he left. “Did Ppang ever come back when ah was in the hospital?”

He didn’t answer, slamming her door and storming across the hall, grabbing his blood-stained jacket as he left to find something to do to try and get rid of the tension in his chest.

He knew she was right. Korea was a merciless bastard, but he would never order Hae to do something that wasn’t in the best

interest of their country. He'd never hurt her outside of combat training, never hit her harder than a smack over the head or with a shoe, or do anything screwed up to her, the way Joseon and the old Koreas had to their provinces. Korea wouldn't do any of that shit.

Their Korea wouldn't.

He knew he'd never get the chance to remove his Countryhuman's burden for him, and he knew none of his stupid, naïve cousins would do it if they had the chance, not even Hae, who hadn't been there for the vote and saw the damn truth of the eye-stealing Southern bastard. If the Yanks ever gave in, if they ever got an end to this damn war, *if* they ever got the chance to be Reunified, the decision on what to do with his burden was with *Korea,* and Korea alone.

And North Hamgyong knew the one he made could destroy everything they had ever worked for. He knew it could destroy *them.*

I love conversations that aren't about what they're about.

Also I think it's clear if you've read this far and understand how Hae works, but in Warring Pyongyang when that one certain thing that happens really upsets her, when she starts acting cheerful again, she hasn't actually recovered, and hasn't even at the end of the book. The fact that Korea stays in the bunker at the end when she runs off actually makes her worse. She just sets it aside because they have work to do. (Hae one-shot in future)(after promised North Hamgyong one-shot)

It is so static this winter. Every time I pet my cat, I end up shocking him and it upsets me so much. He doesn't understand why I have electricity powers that I only use to hurt him when we're cuddling. I'm so sorry son. Sometimes you understand why people used to slit their stomachs from shame so often.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

South Pyongan was starting to feel useless. Which after her whole thing with Korea where he'd told her she wasn't (not that she needed to be told that), was *not* making her feel great.

Yeah, it was sort of, kind of, *maybe* her fault for refusing to do anything that involved touching, standing too close, or talking too long to someone. But come on! She didn't want yellow fever or scarlet fever or fucking azure fever.

Actually if there was something like that last one, she'd be screwed. She wouldn't even be able to see the spots on her skin.

'Not that I could see the other ones.'

She glanced around, making sure she was alone in the sparse Anju woods before squinting critically at the hand mirror she'd got from Completely Reasonable Prices Kim (the merchant her and her brother had good-copped-bad-copped awhile ago) the last time she was here.

Carefully, she pried the edge of the medical tape over the side of her jaw up, revealing the gross, scabby burns. They looked normal. Well, for bloody, glistening holes and bumps all over her face.

General, she looked disgusting. She'd kill the Yank for that alone, let alone the fact that she despised the way the bandages clung to her skin, and her face mask chafed against the blisters.

She used a twig to scratch the edge of the burn, patting the medical tape back into place.

Safe for now. Probably. But how was she supposed to know when every single symptom of something was literally just the crap she had to deal with every day?

Rash for scarlet fever or typhus? She barely had any skin left for a

rash to show up on. Muscle pain for yellow fever? Yeah she had muscle pain- the only thing she could do right now that kept her away from people was plowing fields and building houses for refugees. Itchy skin and blisters for smallpox? Her burns itched constantly, and once again- no skin. Swollen lymph nodes for the fucking bubonic plague? She didn't even know what a lymph node was! And forget about the hundred million diseases Kangwon had said the flu could be a sign of- the stupid sympathetic fever felt the exact same as the real thing. She wouldn't know if she actually had it until she face-planted into a rice paddy and drowned. Her one consolation that she wasn't dying right now was that she hadn't gone squirrelly like Korea had.

Gah, she missed when the only damn she'd given about being sick had been faked. Like 'Oh no, I'm tired and I keep sneezing and I get to take a rest day and have my brother/cousin feed me juk.' Yeah it sucked to have a leaky 'nose' when you didn't actually have one, and couldn't snot rocket it clear, and it'd been worse back during the Occupation when she couldn't afford to rest. But even then South Gyeongsang would always do her best to make hot soup.

Obviously if she caught something, she'd recover. Hae had taken one for the team (and the Yank was *reeeeally* going to pay for *that* one), so they knew for sure the germ warfare couldn't kill them. And South Pyongan was way too awesome to get taken out by something you couldn't even see without one of those microscope things.

But even if she recovered in a day, she could get stuck with some messed-up side effects. Smallpox left you with tons of scars, and *not* sexy ones. She'd seen survivors from the epidemic last year and no offense, but with the hundreds of pits and lumps in their skin, they looked gross. Which was fine for them, but if she wanted to be a politician she had to give speeches in front of people. And who would be able to focus on a lecture about economics or patriotism or working hard when she looked like a gnawed on corn cob? And *tons* of the diseases they were getting hit with left skin marks.

On top of that, dysentery could leave her with joint pain, encephalitis could screw her brain up, and the anthrax the Chinese had just had dropped on them could give her permanent lung

issues. Even though it'd killed Hae, cholera wasn't even that bad, and it could *still* leave her with chronic diarrhea, which would lead to her dying because she would literally kill herself if that happened. Malaria could make her organs swell up permanently and leave her with fatigue, which would make her tired all the time and make it easier for her to catch more sicknesses in the future.

The idea that all it took was one speck of the wrong bacteria, something too small for her to even see, let alone stop, making it past her mask or gloves to cripple her permanently made her feel squirmy, like she needed to take a bath *right now* in water that'd been boiled for at least ten hours.

She blamed South for this. He'd been the one to force her to shoot herself, and if she hadn't done that, Kangwon wouldn't have told her about how hitting her xiphoid process could've screwed her over for good, which wouldn't have put the idea that she *could* be screwed over for good in her head.

But since she couldn't annihilate Korea's brother (well, she *could,* buuuut), she'd settle for smashing that Yankee's lame shades into his lamer face.

She blamed Hwang, too, for babbling on about all the medical textbooks he'd been reading lately. The bastard had came back and immediately started going on about 'asymptomatic carriers.' Apparently even if she didn't think she'd caught something, she still could've, and she'd carry it *forever.* Which meant she would literally have to be segregated from the others and probably never let back into the chosonjip again.

The idea of never being able to snatch food from her brother's chopsticks or steal his drink, or let Hae sleep in her bed at night, or put that bastard North Hamgyong in his place just in case she made them sick…

A shudder ran though her as she shoved the mirror back into her bag, crossing her arms as she looked out at the slope that led down to Anju.

Whatever. Her blood got tested every time she donated some to

make sure it was safe to give out. She wasn't sick. She'd get tested again when she went back to Pyongyang tonight, and she *still* wouldn't be sick. South Pyongan province *wasn't* letting these epidemics get to her.

She could easily sprint back down the hillside in a half-minute without even losing breath, but she still meandered, weaving around the tree trunks in the most unbothered way possible as she returned to the people waiting for her at the bottom.

"Sorry about that," she said casually to the chairman of her Provincial People's Committee and the rep from the local Epidemic Prevention Committee. "Thought I saw someone creeping on us from up there. False alarm."

She hadn't, but she couldn't just tell them she'd sprinted away in the middle of their conversation because she couldn't stop picturing the itching under her medical tape as bacteria squirming into her open burns.

The chairman's eyes went wide as he glanced up the deforested slope. "We should make sure. I'll send out a militia unit later."

'Oops.' Right. The guerrilla trouble had died down a little after the raid on their headquarters, but hadn't died out. Even her false alarms would get taken seriously.

She nodded, not backing down. "Knock on the bridge, right?"

The exercise would keep the militia sharp anyways. And if they did catch a reactionary lurking in the northern hills, she'd get a bit of the credit for it.

"Anyway," she said, steering the conversation back into territory that she hated. "You were saying?"

Her chairman pulled his eyes back to her as the Anti-Epidemic guy- Yun Yong-il- reported, "There haven't been any further deaths in Balnam-ri, and the infected seem to be making a steady recovery. The quarantine needs to stay in place for now, but I think- fortune forbid otherwise- that the death toll's reached a plateau."

The news was good. But South Pyongan pressed her lips together.

"Give it to me."

The man's professional face didn't waver, but she could see the way his jaw tightened. "Thirty-one, comrade."

Thirty-one. Thirty-one people out of a village of six hundred taken out by something smaller than a grain of rice. And that wasn't even a quarter of everyone dead in her province.

"We'll make the Yanks pay for every single one," she vowed darkly, even as her fists clenched.

Not if the peace talks had their way.

She shoved the dark thought away. That was the soldier talking. What the Yanks had proposed yesterday didn't sit right with her, and neither did what Kangwon had said about the General wanting to keep Korea asleep despite it. But she couldn't do anything about that here.

When she went back to Pyongyang, on the other hand…

"And we'll make sure they have to pay for as few lives as possible," Yun swore. "The team around Sunchon did well in their clean up. There haven't been any cases there yet, which means we're in the clear for a couple diseases."

The town had flies dropped on them over a week ago. A Yank plane had circled overhead in the early morning and dropped four bombs. Only one of them had exploded, and since it'd been a weak detonation, everyone that heard it knew what it meant. Some of the Chinese army clerks in the area had even managed to recover the bomb- a four-chambered thing that had split into two halves. She'd stopped to see it on her way here, along with a few of the flies they'd collected.

She'd just have to believe them that there'd apparently been literally thirty per every under square metre because she was *not* watching the film they'd taken. It was Kangwon's job to investigate hordes of infected bugs, not hers. And it also wasn't her job to be

told about those investigations, beyond what she needed to avenge.

"Keep monitoring the situation," she ordered the Anti-Epidemic guy. "First person that gets sick, isolate 'em."

Kangwon's crash course once he'd came back from Hwanghae had stressed that every single person in the north of Korea needed to know it was on both their Countryhuman's and Provincehumans' authority that even a cough or one single bug they thought was odd needed to be reported.

South Pyongan hadn't needed to be told that. She hated going anywhere near the outbreaks, but she'd been taking day trips to her province every few days to make sure everyone knew not to touch or eat weird shit, hand out Hwang and the Health Ministry's pamphlets personally, and remind people to either head to the nearest clinic or contact someone important in the area if they so much as sneezed.

She wanted this sympathetic fever *gone,* and she wanted her people healthy. They didn't deserve to get stuck with permanent skin conditions or lung problems just because the Yankee was a demented bastard following in the Jap's footsteps.

Ishii Shiro had deserved to fucking *bite* it, just like every single other one of those freaks. But instead he'd gotten away, just like they were going to let the Yankees get away.

She bared her teeth, not caring that the other two could tell she was even through the mask. They didn't know what she was thinking about. They'd just think it was the germ warfare.

"And shoot me a telegram if anyone gets pissy over quarantine," she added, a little too enthusiastically.

Okay, maybe it wasn't the most politicianly thing to want to beat up one of your people. But they were giving the quarantined food and antibiotics, so it wasn't like they were just locking them up to starve. Which meant anyone that wanted to break quarantine was doing it just because they didn't like to be told what to do. South Pyongan also didn't like to be told what to do, but even she'd lock

herself up in a cave if being free could get people sick. So really, anyone against quarantine was sort of halfway to being a reactionary. Their Provincehuman beating sense into them could save them from going all the way.

No one had actually protested against the measures yet, because obviously most people didn't want to get their whole village sick. But she could hope for at least one.

Then again, she'd have to get close to beat them up, and risk her suit tearing. And just throwing rocks wouldn't release her tension the way a real fight would.

'Ugh.' Maybe she shouldn't have offered.

But her chairman and Epidemic guy were already nodding. She guessed she was committed. She'd have to make sure her throwing arm was sharp.

Yun left them on the edge of town (South Pyongan wasn't heading into civilization if she could help it) after he'd handed her the report to give to Kangwon.

She glared at it, pinched between her gloved fingers, not wanting to put it in her bag. Paper was one of the things you couldn't disinfect. After a second, she folded it up, tucking it into her ammo pouch. Magazines and clips she could put chemicals on, and then she could wash the pouch along with the clothes under her suit.

"Comrade South Pyongan," her chairman said as she adjusted her belts. "I wanted to thank you for diligence ever since the enemy unleashed their newest evil on us."

"I'm not really doing much," she pointed out. "Just popping in to tell people to wash their hands and food, and wear masks and gloves."

It was barely anything. *'Politics is just another battle,'* Korea had said. *'Learn new tactics.'* But there weren't any tactics she could use as a politician *or* soldier to fight *this* battle.

"Your visits still mean a great deal to us," the chairman told her.

“Especially when I’m sure you have to go through hardship to come so often.”

He eyed her full-body white protective suit, gloves, gauze-wrapped boots and hood, and face mask pointedly.

South Pyongan sheepishly winced. Hwang had told her it didn’t look good to always be wrapped up like she was going into the grave, since it’d make people nervous if she was wearing protective gear even when there hadn’t been any attacks or outbreaks in the area. But there was no way she was prioritizing image over not getting the plague. People *should* be nervous.

She wasn’t. Obviously. But *they* should be.

“No, no hardship,” she assured, totally convincingly.

Maybe she had to talk herself into leaving the safety of working in open fields and isolated ravines to head into areas with tons of people for just a *little* too long every time. Maybe.

“Regardless, I assure you all of our comrades are reassured to see you so often.” Her Provincial Chairman’s smile was warm. “I’m glad to see you’re keeping your vow. I knew you would.”

The man had gotten lucky. Not only had he survived the Yankee occupation, but he’d survived unscathed. Which meant he still remembered the conversation while they hid in the church shelter.

South Pyongan suddenly became very interested in the woman heading up the hill with a bucket of water in her arms.

“Yeah, obviously,” she definitely didn’t mutter. “I was already the best province, after all.”

The chairman dipped his head, hiding his widening grin. “I’m thankful I was born here, at least.”

‘Bleh.’ She’d changed her mind. The face mask and bandages were actually great and she was never taking them off, even when the war was over.

When the war was over.

Her mood darkened as her chairman left, and she kicked at one of the clods of mud that the snow not up on the mountains had mostly turned into by now.

She *wanted* the war to be over. She wanted their people to stop dying. She wanted…

South Pyongan couldn't want peace. Not yet. But maybe she wanted to *learn* how to want peace, how to be more than a soldier. And she couldn't do that when the Yankees were still turning their rubble into ashes, infecting their people, and demanding Gangwon back like he was theirs and not his own person, not Kangwon's brother.

When she looked around at the ruins of Anju, when she glimpsed those numbers on the biowarfare report, their people, *her* people, turned into casualties by fucking bugs, by germs bred in a lab by Yanks that had learned how from Japs, like Japan getting one last blow in, all she wanted was to *destroy* them, to make them regret ever turning their eyes on her country.

She knew it wasn't responsible. She knew there were more important things than revenge. But it was what she wanted, even when she knew they couldn't give America what *he* wanted.

*'They **want** this war to continue, they want Korea to be torn apart.'*

They couldn't let the Yank or his toadies do that. They had to make nice, they had to make concessions, they had to let them get away with their crimes so that they couldn't commit anymore of them, so they'd stop poisoning their people and burning their country alive.

And it was so damn *frustrating.*

South Pyongan looked out at her wreck of a capital, the urge to *act* bubbling in her. She couldn't stop whatever decision was made, she couldn't punch the germs targeting her people, but she had to be able to do *something.*

The closer to the river, the more ruined the city was from the Yanks striking their mills and bridges. Even Paeksang Pavilion, the old command post of the fort Anju had used to be, had been ruined. From where she was at the foot of the eastern hills, she could see the splintered pillars and shattered tiles cresting the artillery-scarred, bomb crater-pocked hill all the way over on the western edge.

She could still remember the first time she'd seen it, fleeing from North Pyongan province when she'd first met her brother. After they'd fled his province and made it to the coast in hers, the Japs had forced them to head inland, into her northern mountains. She'd looked back, trying to find the losers hunting them, and spotted the distant red-painted wood and curved roof, like the graceful wings of a hawk perched on the hill, guarding Anju (her brother's words when she'd mentioned it, not hers).

That had been her first real glimpse of Korean architecture (since she'd been a *little* preoccupied in Pyongyang, and missed out on the gates), and it'd stirred her common sense on the rest of it- open-air pavilions, arched gates, vaulted ceilings covered in carved murals painted with more colours than she'd seen in her short life, towering pagodas made of wood and stone. She'd been struck by how *cool* it all was.

And how she could totally make it cooler. Like what if the pagoda levels didn't get smaller as they went up, but alternated, or maybe even got bigger? Or what if they were shaped like spirals? Or what if instead of just using stone and clay for roof tiles, leaving them dark and boring, they found ways to colour them brighter?

She'd wanted to see Gyeongbokgung Palace so bad. A few years into the Occupation, she'd finally decided it was safe enough to take her brother near Seoul, just to Bugak Mountain so she could peer down at the complex, only to find out that out of the hundreds of buildings her common sense told her should be there, there were less than a hundred left, and work crews down below were in the middle of demolishing more.

They found out later that the Japs had been dismantling them and selling them off, building newer, uglier halls for the 'Chosen

Industrial Exhibition,' showing off stolen Korean artifacts and stolen Korean architecture to wealthy foreigners. Rich Japanese had literally bought entire buildings and had them shipped to Japan to be reassembled in their own homes.

South Pyongan's blood had boiled so fiercely that she'd almost headed down the hill to teach the bastards what happened when you touched shit that wasn't yours. She would've, if her brother hadn't talked her out of it.

It had felt like soy sauce being poured right into the wound. Not only were they not allowed to have a house at all because of Japan, not only could she not build her brother a place to live or give him a comfortable life, but they weren't even allowed to have the empty buildings that they *could* have lived in if things were different.

Now South Pyongan dragged her eyes away from the pavilion, down to her city, to the clay and straw walls on the hastily-built huts pressed up against the hill like they were leaning away from the river, cowering from the Yankee's bombs, to the ropes hung between eaves to dry threadbare shirts, and the crude coverings some people had set up to try and keep their firewood dry outside, so it wouldn't take up more space in their already cramped shelters, and to the square holes dug into the face of the hill, where tunnels led down into damp, freezing dens with too many people crammed into them.

The Paeksang Pavilion was just the soy sauce. *That* was the wound, her people's ancestral tile-roofed chosonjips and newer concrete dwellings that they'd worked so hard to build getting decimated, driving them into caves like rats or shitty little huts like before Liberation. They'd finally been able to have the homes they deserved, and then everything had been taken away again, leaving them with scraps.

As her jaw worked, teeth grinding, her fingers dug into her pack, feeling the hard surface of her mirror inside.

South Pyongan paused, remembering what she'd done with the first thing she'd bullied off of the merchant- the perfume bottle she'd claimed.

As she looked between her bag and the worn clothes hanging on a wooden frame outside the gaping mouth of a dug-out, an idea started to come to her.

They'd be handing out more summer clothes now that it was going to start warming up soon. But it wasn't like the government could afford to get fancy. They were trying to improve living quality with local factories and crap, but right now, 'improving people's living quality' had to be about stuff they needed to survive without wanting to kill themselves out of sheer misery.

A tired-looking woman emerged from the dug-out at the base of the hill, checking the clothes she'd left to dry, making sure they weren't frosting over in the cold.

The chick she'd handed off the stolen perfume to as thanks for feeding a few of the guerrillas when they were hamstringing the Yankees had lit up like a firework, immediately testing it on her wrist. She'd acted like out of a week's worth of food and the shiny bottle of rose-scented spray, she'd gotten the better deal.

South Pyongan strolled toward the cave. "Hey."

The lady startled, eyes widening when she saw the white protective suit, but rubbed her chest when she saw the blue skin above the mask.

"Comrade South Pyongan," she said, bowing. "It's an honour. What can I do for you?"

"I picked something up recently that I don't really need." She dug around in her pack, pulling out the mirror. "I figured I'd hand it off to one of my people. Want it?"

It wasn't anything special. The handle and frame were made of cheap copper, and there were a couple moisture spots on the glass. She was pretty sure the merchant had looted it from someone's house (abandoned house, he knew she'd kick his ass otherwise). She hadn't even spent much on it, coercing him into a discount.

But the woman's eyes lit up when she saw it, just like the one

she'd given the perfume to.

"Oh! I feel like I haven't seen a mirror in forever. We've been using some of the bronzeware we saved from our house." She laughed sheepishly, fluffing her puffy hair. "As I'm sure you can tell."

"Nah, you're looking great, comrade," her province assured her. "But with this, you can *keep* looking great."

She held out the mirror, and the woman half-raised her hand for it, pausing.

"How much do you want for it?"

Hm. That *had* sort of sounded like a sales pitch.

"Free," she told her. "I don't need it. No hair to check, y'know? And I already know I look good."

And she could bully the merchant into getting her another one.

The woman hesitated. "Well… It *is* my daughter's birthday at the end of the month. I suppose…"

"You know you want to." South Pyongan shook the mirror temptingly, and she laughed, giving in and taking it from her.

"Thank you," she said, admiring her reflection as she fixed a few stray hairs on top of her head. "I'll make sure my daughter knows where her gift came from."

"I won't be too mad if the credit gets stolen." The province winked, making the woman giggle, then sauntered off, glancing back to see her scurrying inside the dug-out with her shiny new mirror, forgetting about the clothes she'd came out for.

It was just a cheap mirror, but it'd made her day, and would probably thrill her daughter, too.

'Hmmmmm.'

Korea wouldn't *approve* of her plan, exactly. But he *had* said that

thing about how she played fast and loose with the rules, and he admired that about her (that was totally what he'd said, direct quote).

Plus it would stimulate the economy, and make people feel a little more at home in their war-time suites. She'd seen for herself that the cane and wooden tiger North Pyongan had given to those boys had gone a long way towards helping them stop sulking about being exiled from their home. And while she couldn't take credit for it, with a little wheedling, she could also make sure it resulted in good publicity for the Party.

Not that she cared about that. But it might save what was left of her skin if Korea ever found out.

She'd have to go into the city, and- *ugh*- get within coughing distance of more people, buuuuut…

She weighed the pros and cons (and chances of being put up against the wall if discovered) then nodded decisively.

'Worth it.'

South Pyongan marched confidently into Anju, feeling her bodyguards- still as stone-faced and unable to take a joke as ever- following her. She knew the streets like the back of her hand (pre-ever-spreading burns) from the time spent playing cat-and-mouse with the Yanks and traitors in them. Even with all the piles of rubble and missing landmarks, she still had the basic outline in her head.

Ssi-bal. She'd probably seen more of her capital in those couple weeks than she had before the war.

But she was here now. And she was keeping her vow.

The province led the men into the middle of the ruined market district, stopping to pretend to examine a fragment of a bomb casing. She glanced over at them, standing near the old producer's co-operative front in the full-body suits she'd forced them to wear. They were scanning the crumbling buildings around them for

threats. While they did, she slowly started to inch away, eyeing them the entire time.

Keuda (as she'd named the shorter one since they still refused to tell her their real names) suddenly met her eyes.

She froze, keeping eye contact as she slooowly kept shuffling away.

He didn't say anything. Neither did Jakda (the bigger one) as he looked over. They both just watched her inch to the edge of the square, then around the frame of a still half-standing building.

Out of sight, South Pyongan immediately turned to run. Then she pursed her lips, poking her head back around the crumbling stone wall.

The men were still standing there.

"I'm escaping," she notified them.

"Yes," Jakda agreed.

"Running away," she explained, arching a brow. "Vanishing into the streets, never to be seen again. Or until an hour later."

Keuda was scratching his ear. "Alright."

South Pyongan came back around the building, crossing her arms as she squinted warily at them. "You're not gonna stop me?"

Yeah, yeah, don't question free cold noodles. But if her guards had gotten so sick of her that they didn't even fear Korea's wrath if she almost got kidnapped on their watch, that was probably a bad thing. And she knew she could outrun them. *Those* muscles were back in top condition, at least.

She was still working on that other one.

"Is this because I said that thing about your mother?" she demanded. "Because that was me just trying to figure out if you were actually related."

They were. They'd both glowered at her.

Jakda glowered now at the reminder, but still said, "You're permitted privacy when you need it," and Keuda nodded.

South Pyongan blinked. "Since when?"

They didn't answer.

"Does that come from like, up top?"

"If you aren't back here in an hour, we come looking for you," Jakda replied seriously.

"Maybe an hour and a half," Keuda muttered. "On account of our mother."

South Pyongan smacked her fist into her palm. "I knew you had a sense of humour! Back in an hour and a half, promise Korea won't have to execute you."

She seized her cold noodles and took off, a little glow of (disgusting) warmth inside her chest like a taste of the summer to come.

She wondered when he'd given the order.

That almost made her pause. If it was to show he- Urrgh, she *wasn't* going to say it. But if it was, she didn't want to turn around and prove she wasn't worthy of that trust.

But she kept going. Korea had said he didn't mind if she skirted the law, so long as it was for their people, not her. And it was.

She couldn't build them manors with coloured tile roofs or spiralling pagodas, not yet. All she could do was keep building the bare minimum, enough so they'd have a roof over their heads, or at least so their caves would be more comfortable.

'You are aggressive, willing to skirt the law, and usually know how to get what you want.'

Well, what she really wanted wasn't going to happen right now. But at least she could get a little soy sauce out of her people's wounds and onto their shelves.

Or something. Look, she wasn't the poet in the family, she barely knew what a metaphor was.

So South Pyongan confidently set off to find Completely Reasonable Prices Kim. After hearing people weren't allowed back into Pyongyang unless they were essential, he'd set up shop outside Anju. He'd been complaining about not being able to travel for his business every time she'd seen him, so she knew he'd be an easy sell on the premise. It'd just take a little finesse to get him to agree to some of the finer details.

Negotiations, trade, supplying goods. Yeah, that felt politicianly.

She'd hammer this in, then head back to Pyongyang. She'd heard the news from the liaison, same as everyone else. If they were really going to make a compromise with the Yanks on this without even asking Korea, she wanted to hear why from the General, no one else.

And if she didn't like his answer, then she was waking their Countryhuman up herself.

Keuda 크다 and Jakda 작다 are the unconjugated forms of big and small. So South Pyongan is calling her shorter comrade Big and her taller comrade Small. Never wise to not tell her your name.

Clarification: In real life, thirty-six out of six hundred people died of the bubonic plague in Balnam-ri, with more being sick. I lowered this number slightly here for a reason that will become clear in the next chapter (long-awaited reveal coming!). And also because it makes me really upset to think about because I'm remembering this article about a North Korean man watching his father die of typhoid during the war. Once again, there will be one big author's note about the biological warfare in general later on, with sources.

They say South Pyongan is still masking from covid to this day (as we all should be). She is a firm long covid believer (as we all should be). She also threatened many people with violence during the height of the pandemic (six feet isn't far enough).

Someone once asked if any of the provinces were afraid of bugs, and I said South Pyongan wasn't. I'm revising my opinion slightly. She does love kabutomushi, as I said, but while she isn't *afraid* of bugs, she is disturbed by large amounts of them (she's also very anti-fly). She was the most affected mentally by the biological warfare (on a personal level; Kangwon was affected more on a societal level), and while if she sees a spider or an isolated insect, she can easily kill or ignore it (or toss it down your shirt), if she sees too many it freaks her out. As in 'needs to strip naked, scratch her skin, wash her clothes, and have a scalding hot shower.' Bug bites are also immediately taken to Kangwon. So it's not so much bugs she's afraid of, but the diseases they could carry. She, of course, pretends that she isn't freaked out by bugs or sickness at all, because that is entirely uncool and- SIX FUCKING FEET BUDDY I'LL SHOOT I MEAN IT.

My sink broke and someone had to come fix it. My cat was not thrilled to see a man that isn't Father (my father, my son has no father, I am a hard-working single mother).

Shared Blood

Kangwon didn't get up right away after removing his IV. He stayed on the break room chair, head in his hands, trying to stop the room from spinning.

'Shouldn't've given blood today.'

But he had to. He'd said it was their best line of defense against illness, but it was also their last line. So long as his test results kept coming back negative for any of the germs he was around, he had to keep giving. Especially since at any point they could come back positive, and he'd have to quarantine himself, stuck unable to help at all.

He opened his eyes and carefully climbed to his feet, vision going black at the edges as the floor suddenly seemed a lot less stable beneath his gauze-wrapped boots.

***'Definitely** shouldn't've given blood today.'*

He plucked the full bag from the IV pole, thankful as usual that their blood replenished fast enough for him to give every day, if he was careful. Though he should still probably be doing it every other day.

But he knew he and his cousins' blood, and China and the Chinese provinces', had already saved probably dozens of people. He didn't know where most of it went, but he'd performed transfusions himself in the first stages of the war that'd pulled soldiers with severed limbs and white phosphorus injuries back from the brink. And now that a lot of their blood was going to the Quarantine Hospital, he and Gangwon had both witnessed its effects on the sick.

With so many diseases not having real cures or any way to treat them, and their shortage in antibiotics and food, sometimes the difference between life and death could be one transfusion.

Kangwon hadn’t got the death toll back from Balnam-ri yet, but he knew whatever it was, it would be higher if South Pyongan’s blood hadn’t been being shipped out to it.

He didn't put his blood into storage. He went straight to the patient wing, deliberating as he joined the constant stream of nurses hustling along the halls.

Oh Tu-hun was elderly, and he was worse off. The encephalitis had swollen his brain, and kept giving him seizures. At his age, it’d rapidly weakened him. He wasn’t doing well. Kim Do-bom was healthier, his malaria didn't seem like the severe type, and it was also in the earlier stages, not wreaking havoc on his body yet.

But he was a kid.

Kangwon had a feeling if he explained things and asked the old man, he’d tell him to choose the boy. But that felt like trying to shift the responsibility.

After a long moment, he turned and headed for the ‘malaria wing,’ leaving Oh Tu-hun’s room behind.

It came down to prognosis. Encephalitis had no real cure. And both it and malaria could both have lifelong effects. And when it came down to it...

Do-bom had more of a life to live.

And he had to be treated early to prevent those effects. The sooner he got the province’s blood, the better.

Kangwon knocked on his door, rushing in when he didn’t answer, heart swooping into his stomach.

The boy was curled up on the cot, the sheets wrapped around him like a caterpillar’s cocoon. A cocoon with sides that expanded and contracted with his sleeping breaths.

Kangwon let out a breath, shutting the door. He worked quietly so he wouldn’t wake Do-bom up as he set up the IV, his hands steady even though his pulse was still racing from the scare.

He never thought he'd miss his field medic days. The aftermath of a battle- soldiers scattered around on dirt or their own jackets, the air soaked with the sharp tang of blood and gunpowder, or rot if they hadn't been able to regroup and rest right away, moans of anguish and grief echoing in his skull as he had to make lightning judgements on who needed treatment right away, who could wait, who was the worst injured that could still realistically be saved, having to calm the pleading of those that couldn't be as he walked by them to someone else, knowing he was leaving them to die, but also knowing that if he tried to save them, he could lose someone he might not otherwise- had always been the worst. Korea's Army hadn't been too bad, but that first major fight at Pochonbo...

But there'd been a simplicity to it, too. He'd liked being able to see everyone he needed to fix spread out before him, their need levels easily accessible. Even if he hadn't liked making the choice on who got his treatment first, it had still needed to be made. And he'd liked the medical barracks at the Secret Camp. It was comforting to be able to sit sentinel on a chair and know the second even one of his patients' conditions worsened, he'd be able to respond.

With real hospitals, you wouldn't know if a patient was suffering until a routine check, or if they managed to ring the bell in their room. And if they were seizing like Oh Tu-hun, they couldn't do that. It unnerved Kangwon sometimes, walking by the rows of shut doors, knowing that any one of his patients could be in the middle of a struggle he could help them win only if he joined it *now*.

Or that they could already be growing cold. Like Hae.

Kangwon shook his head as he straightened, his equipment set up.

The privacy of the hospitals was better for the well-being of patients, physical and mental. In the big Quarantine Hospital, they had the luxury of being able to separate patients roughly by disease type, and in separate rooms, and the villages were able to quarantine inside their houses. But in the field hospitals for sick soldiers and the clinics they'd set up to segregate the ill outside towns and cities, sometimes all they could rely on was fabric partitions. It was less sanitary, and the last thing a sick or injured person needed to hear was someone else dying of the same thing.

No one in there would choose that over a quiet, sterile hospital room.

He'd just have to keep opening every door he passed by on his rounds.

Gently, he shook Do-bom awake, and the boy blinked blearily.

"Dad?"

"Sorry, comrade," he said gently. "He's still off fighting for our country."

His voice was steady, like he hadn't just possibly chosen the boy to live over someone else. He was used to this, after all. He no longer made the choice in front of the dying, but he still did it every day.

"But I'll make sure to tell your mom you're doing well."

The boy didn't look well. His brown skin had taken on the yellowish tinge of jaundice, and he shook with the effort of sitting up in bed.

Malaria wasn't as common as other diseases, since it required an infected mosquito to pass it. And early March in Korea (when he'd gotten bitten) wasn't the best environment for mosquitoes. They shouldn't even be seen until May.

Do-bom had gotten unlucky, stumbling across a drop zone with mosquitoes still clinging to life in the snow. Being a kid with a interest in bugs, he'd picked some up to take them home.

And now he had malaria.

Luckily, unlike Choi Ki-tak's mother, his had brought him in as soon as she'd heard, and sent for the Epidemic Prevention Committee right away when the symptoms she'd been told to watch for had shown up.

"I'm going to give you what's called a blood transfusion," Kangwon explained to the boy when he was ready. "I'm going to

put this tube in your arm, and put some new good blood into you to try and get rid of some of the bad blood. Is that okay?"

Do-bom eyed the needle on the end of the tubing nervously. “Th-The other medicine goes in my mouth. Can we do that?”

They had him on antimalarials, and a drug for fever. The pills and serums should work at killing the parasites inside him, but it would take some time.

Kangwon debated for a second whether he should tell a patient this, then asked, “You like bugs, right?”

The boy’s tired eyes lit up. “Yep!” Then he slumped. “Mom’s always telling me not to touch ‘em, though. She was really mad when she heard the mosquito bit me. But it didn’t do it to be mean,” he said defiantly. "It didn't know it was sick.”

Kangwon nodded. “But it was. And now you’ve got parasites in your blood.”

Do-bom’s eyes widened, thankfully looking more intrigued than upset. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

Kangwon briefly explained how malaria worked in terms a kid could understand- the mosquito had injected him with parasites that swam through his blood into his liver, where they grew until they released more parasites back into his blood, where they infected red blood cells and would continue to grow and reproduce.

“Whoaaaa,” Do-bom breathed, eyes glowing with morbid fascination. “Ew.”

“Ew,” Kangwon agreed.

He was never going to explain malaria to South Pyongan. She’d leave the country.

“And since those parasites are in your blood, flushing them out a little should make you heal faster.”

He didn’t have enough blood to flush his system out completely. But similar lies worked on adult patients, and after a second of hesitation, this one worked on the boy.

“Okay,” he said, still watching the needle like it might bite.

“Think of it like a mosquito proboscis,” Kangwon advised, showing it to him so he could get a little more familiar with it. “Did it hurt when it bit you?”

He shook his head of dark head. “Just stung.”

“Exactly.” Kangwon sat on the edge of the cot, making sure the boy was comfortable propped up on his pillow, before taking his arm.

He offered to let him look away, but the kid watched as he disinfected his antecubital fossa and inserted the needle into his median cupital. The idea of the mosquito proboscis had seemed to work.

Do-bom flinched when it went in, then flexed his fingers wonderingly. “It didn’t hurt.”

“Just pinched.” Kangwon clipped the tubing into place, and sat back. “This’ll take a few minutes.”

“Okay.” Do-bom snuggled back into the pillows. “Doctor, my head still really hurts. Is that normal?”

“It is,” he assured. “Headaches are common for malaria.”

And so was children infected with it developing permanent developmental disabilities.

“You can go back to sleep if you want,” Kangwon told the boy. “Get some rest.”

Do-bom didn't fight at all, closing his eyes, falling asleep in a way that was more passing out than drifting off. Kangwon monitored his blood as it drained from the bag, sliding through the tube until it reached the boy's vein.

He wondered if running a full flush of his system could get rid of all the parasites in his blood. It wasn't entirely viable when the infected blood would have to be ran through Kangwon's veins in exchange, and wasn't worth risking since the boy's liver would still house parasites, but it was something to think about. When they'd restocked their stores after the war, maybe he'd try treating any blood disease they had to deal with by draining the patient's blood from one arm, while running province blood through the other.

Would it be dangerous to completely replace a human's blood with theirs? He'd have to make sure it was a last resort, and that the patient knew exactly what they were agreeing with.

And maybe not tell Hwang about the idea.

As his blood seeped into Do-bom's veins, mingling with his, a bit of colour returned to his sleeping face, a flush spreading across his cheeks, making them look a little less yellow.

The boy woke up when the IV was being removed, blinking in the soft hospital light. There was a gleam in his eyes that hadn't been there before, like everyone else Kangwon had ever done this for.

"My headache's gone," the boy marvelled, more lucid than before as he put a hand on his temple. "Doctor, I think it worked! You cured me!"

"I'm afraid not," Kangwon told him regretfully. "You've still got parasites, and the headache will come back eventually. But this should help."

He hoped it would.

"Aw." Do-bom pouted.

"But enjoy being headache-free for now," the province advised, knowing he had around an hour's high before he'd want to cocoon himself again.

"Okay!" Do-bom reached for a sedge container by his cot, and Kangwon passed it to him, watching as he pulled out a pulpy notebook, flipping it open and starting to draw a mosquito with a

charcoal stick.

The Provincehuman shook his head as he left, taking a last look back.

Do-bom looked like a normal kid again, smiling as he sketched, free of pain for a brief while.

Kangwon checked on Oh Tu-hun before he left, finding out from a nurse that he'd had another seizure. He was still alive, but clearly not doing well.

Maybe he should draw more of his blood.

No. He had to be careful. He knew he'd reached his limit on it for today, and he was more useful awake. And his brother had already given his amount for the day.

Kangwon peeked in on him before he left, finding him facedown on the pallet they'd set up in a storage room. He smiled, pulling the sheet over him, before going to get some air.

As soon as he stepped outside, Sip Yung-su shouted, "Comrade, incoming!"

Someone clicked their tongue from just behind him. "No fun."

Kangwon raised an eyebrow as China- who'd somehow slid in behind his back without being noticed- slunk around to his front. Sip must've seen him from his post on the hill beyond the corner of the hospital. It was comforting to know the Chinese country couldn't actually go invisible or anything.

"Can I help you?" the Korean asked, giving a grateful look over the man's shoulder.

His bodyguard gave him a thumbs up, pleased with himself.

"It's time for my ritual bloodletting," China informed him, which was an interesting way to say he was donating. "I came to get my favourite doctor to do it." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Between you and me, I'm not sure that mean nurse of yours likes

me very much."

Yeah, Kim Yong-hwan definitely didn't. She had it out for smooth-talkers.

Kangwon had perked up at what he'd said, and China shrank back dramatically.

"What a scary reaction to my blood, Little Brother," he said, rubbing his arms. "I'm a little worried now."

"Sorry." Kangwon settled himself. "Just good timing. We should go to the Military Hospital, though."

They definitely didn't need him getting sick.

"Aiya, you Koreans love moving me to secondary locations," China remarked. "But luckily for you, I have a naïve and trusting heart, so I will follow."

Kangwon raised a brow. "Right."

"And also luckily for you, with your Countryhuman comatose-" China pulled something from his pocket, eyes squinching up above his mask. "I have the Jeep."

That actually was lucky for Kangwon. It felt great to have Ri Il drive while he caught a brief nap in the back seat, instead of having to trek all the way into the city.

They left his guards at the entrance, heading into the underground part of the hospital, using the outside entrance to access the tunnels behind the still-standing parts of the building. The tremors from the planes bombing the rail line to the south could be felt through the earth, and Kangwon would also prefer Korea didn't wake up to find out he'd gotten China bombed somehow.

Especially because he already wasn't going to be happy.

"Any news from your country?" he asked China as they made their way through the busy halls.

“I assume you mean biological warfarewise,” China said, sliding between two nurses. “More feathers dropped on Liaotung's Antung, and leaves. Eyewitnesses saw the bombs burst.”

Leaves. Kangwon felt a chill run through him.

China must’ve seen him shiver, since he said, “En. Now that spring is more or less here, I expect we’ll see more of those. My scientists haven’t identified what they’re infected with, or the corn. But I doubt it’s anything pleasant.”

Yeah. The corn kernels dropped on the same Chinese city a few days ago had apparently been visibly infected with fungus. They hadn’t gotten the results back yet, but they were pretty sure it was a corn smut they weren’t familiar with in China.

They’d had leaves dropped on them here, too, by Mount Taedok in Hwanghae last month, and just a few days ago near Chongju in North Pyongan. They were still testing them, but the leaf fragments found in Hwanghae seemed to be infected with anthracnose, a fungal disease that could either target cotton or a huge host of other plants, including fruit trees.

It wasn't too bad in February. But now that sowing season was here…

Kangwon had been so focused on the human cost of biological warfare that he hadn’t put much thought into the *other* things that could be infected.

His fingertips itched, and he shoved his gloved hands into the pockets of his medical coat.

“Any more anthrax?” he asked, trying to distract himself with a method that didn’t really work at all.

“Not since the 12th,” China replied as they went into the small room set aside for blood donations. They couldn’t use the break room in case someone walked in and saw the Chinese Countryhuman’s unnaturally red skin.

“Good.” Kangwon locked the door, just in case.

"Well, let's not get too hasty," the other man replied, perching on the edge of the chair in the corner of the sterile room. "We haven't *found* any new anthrax. That doesn't mean there hasn't *been* any."

"I'm trying to be optimistic."

Bacillus anthracis was a spore that infected animals and humans. Respiratory anthrax came with a fever and bloody fluid that filled your lungs and made it hard to breathe, and eventually caused shock, while cutaneous anthrax caused necrotized spots called eschars, and lesions that spread, rotting the skin, along with aching, sweating, and a deadly fever. The type you caught depended on how you'd contracted it- through skin or inhalation.

Both could cause hemorrhagic meningitis, causing the brain to swell and bleed, amongst other things.

Like with the leaves, Kangwon had mostly been thinking about the damage it could wreak on their people, just viewing the animals as a vector for it. But now that he thought about it…

They were encouraging livestock farming to make up for the meat shortages, and getting most of their imports from China and CCCP, with China being more convenient. Any animal that caught anthrax had to be culled so it wouldn't spread to the rest, and any infected meat couldn't be eaten. Anthrax was bad enough in people, but if it swept through their livestock populations at the same time as an anthracnose blight struck their orchards, or if a corn or soybean disease spread…

They'd have a famine.

"That's not a very optimistic face, Little Brother," China remarked, eyes piercing through him like he knew what he was thinking.

He probably did. There was no way he hadn't thought about it.

"Not to tell you what to do in your own country," Kangwon began, keeping his hands busy with setting up another IV. "But treat those anthrax cases seriously. And any positive tests."

China smiled, his face mask set aside now that they were alone.

“Only if you do the same.”

“Trust me, we will.”

With an effort, Kangwon both set his worries aside for now and dragged the chair (China refusing to move from it) out of the corner and over to the IV pole.

“Sleeve.”

Lazily, the Chinese man stripped off his outer coat, inner coat, and winter uniform, leaving him in his long-sleeved white undershirt. Which he definitely had another undershirt beneath.

‘Enough layers?’

As he rolled up his bell-shaped sleeve, Kangwon watched, but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary on the exposed inside, leaving him with no idea how he pulled so many things out of there.

Done, China presented his arm like a rare scroll, laying it on the armrest. “Do what you will with me.”

Kangwon shook his head, pouring antiseptic on a cotton ball.

“Big moves being made in the peace talks,” China remarked as he worked. “A glimmer of hope. Or I’m sure that’s what our mutual antagonist would like us to believe.”

The full story about the Geoje Island massacre on the 13th had recently came out. The right-wing prisoners from their army had been taken out and given guns, allowed to patrol the camps with Rhee’s men and discipline their former comrades. When some of the other prisoners had thrown stones at them, they’d mowed them down with their guns, murdering twelve and wounding over two dozen, if the reports weren’t downplaying it.

Their Supreme Command was furious, of course, and so was China’s. If they were doing that to the KPA, they could just as easily be doing it to the PVA. They'd been constantly seeking a formal explanation. It’d gotten so bad that Van Fleet had actually

addressed it in a Tokyo newspaper, if only to say that the two hundred and fifty prisoners they'd killed in under a month wasn't anything compared to how Communists were handled in Greece, and heavily imply they should just be grateful they weren't all being shot outright.

According to the telegrams the Premier sent to keep the provinces up to date with Korea out, the other countries weren't exactly happy that the head of their 'United Nations' force was gunning down POWs. Even the Red Cross had concerns, and considering they'd said the Nazi camps in the World Anti-Facsist War had acceptable conditions, that was probably saying something.

The Americans couldn't exactly give them an excuse this time, because there wasn't one.

So they wanted to make it go away.

Yesterday, they'd used the same tactic they had before to tell them what they wanted, strongly hinting to their own newspapers that if Korea and China just dropped the massacre issue and went into secret sessions with them so the rest of the world wouldn't hear what they were talking about, they'd finally allow the POW issue to be settled.

It was disgusting to think that in order to make the Americans follow international law, and to get their soldiers back so they couldn't be tortured by Rhee, they'd have to overlook the torture being done now.

But today they'd taken the deal. The secret sessions would begin in four days, on the 25th.

China already knew everything about it, since he'd been at the discussions about whether to accept or not. So Kangwon had a good idea of what he was really working up to. But he played along as he finished dabbing his skin clean.

"You don't think so?"

China tipped his head back to the ceiling. "Even if the POW issue

gets resolved, don't we still have the one of your nervous-looking brother?"

They did.

"Once we get the POWs and everything else handled, Gangwon'll be the only thing stopping the armistice," he replied, trying to find China's vein.

Even after the months of doing this, he wasn't as familiar with his as he was with Korea's. And he swore it was like the Chinese country's moved every time.

"Then maybe we can get a UN observer to come see him."

They couldn't come clean that they had him right now, since if America knew for sure, he might use it as an excuse not to talk about the prisoners of war. But he wouldn't have anything to fall back on once that was solved.

"He can testify that he's with us by choice, and since he's not technically a soldier in any army, it's not hypocritical to refuse to repatriate him."

There it was. Kangwon slid the needle into China's cephalic vein. He flinched aggressively, but was clearly overreacting.

"Not going to comfort me?" China asked in disappointment. When the province gave him a dry look, he said, "You realize any UN observer that was both convinced your Gangwon was here of his own free will, and honest enough to share that would only be accused of being paid off by our Soviet comrade, yes?"

Securing the IV, Kangwon said, "Then maybe we could invite the UN himself."

China laughed lightly. "I'm sure he'd just *love* to visit us." The corners of his lips lowered slightly. "A word of advice- the United Nations might want this messy war business over with before the blood splatters on his wings get too hard to hide. But he won't lift a hand to end it. He prefers his feathers bloodied to torn out."

Kangwon wasn't going to argue with that. The United Nations clearly wasn't working like it'd been supposed to.

"You're probably right," he admitted, sitting on the stool he'd dragged over before he passed out. "But if we could get even a few of the other countries to realize we aren't holding Gangwon hostage, they'd put pressure on him and America. I doubt they want to drag the war out over one guy."

"Placing too much faith in foreigners again, Little Brother," China chided.

Kangwon smiled tiredly. "Placing a bit of it with you and your comrades seemed to work."

"Ah, but I'm the exception," the Chinese Countryhuman reminded him.

"If they really don't care about Korea, then that just makes it easier," Kangwon said, unbothered.

He already knew most of the other Countryhumans didn't care. It was their people he was placing faith in.

"If they don't care about Gangwon, then we don't actually need them convinced he's not a hostage, just that if America gives up on him, we'll have a ceasefire," he patiently explained. "I'm sure they don't want to lose any more of their people over a Provincehuman who clearly doesn't want to go back to the south."

The edges of China's smile cooled. "You are, of course, assuming that Western countries actually care about their people."

"At least some of them have to." Not America. He didn't care about people like Adolfo or Jepp or the woman SH had mentioned. But some of the others must.

China's voice was low. "That attitude will get you in trouble one day, Little Brother."

It sort of almost had. That day in Taejon, Jepp could've shot him after he'd patched him up, or Adolfo could've turned on him in the

camp, or refused to get medicine for Kim Mi-ju.

But they hadn't. If people in a country like America could be good, then so could other countries.

Kangwon shrugged. "If that happens, hopefully it's after the war is over."

China examined him for a long moment, then hummed, and finally asked what he'd been leading up to.

"Interesting that we've accepted such pivotal secret sessions with our enemy, and yet I don't recall seeing your Countryhuman at the discussion." His smile widened knowingly. "Almost like he's still asleep."

Kangwon looked at him steadily. "He is."

"Mm. Strange. I would have thought he'd want to be woken up if something occurred with the talks." China idly toyed with his IV line. "Especially something like this."

Kangwon gently tugged it out of his hands, straightening the tube. "Our Supreme Command decided this isn't important enough to interrupt his healing for."

"Supreme Command?" China's lips curled. "Or Supreme Command*er?*"

Kim Il-sung was the only one in their leadership that knew Korea was out, though him not being at the meeting had probably raised suspicions. And he was the one that wanted Korea to stay asleep.

As far as Korea would know.

"Aiya," the Chinese country mock-gasped when he didn't answer. "Don't tell me your Premier is going behind your Countryhuman's back to get the outcome he wants? How scandalous!"

Kangwon chewed lightly on the inside of his cheek, swallowing the urge to defend the man's honour. It wasn't really China's business, but he didn't like the idea of him thinking that was what

was happening. He actually didn't really like the proposal the Premier had added to his in the first place.

But it made sense. Kangwon already had two strikes against him with Kim Mi-ju and Hae. Another one might lose him doctoring privileges with Korea for good.

Even if his Countryhuman gave that strike knowing that even if he'd been awake, the outcome would've been the same.

And since the Premier'd offered for Kangwon's own sake, he couldn't argue too much against it.

"It's the decision he made," the Korean province said neutrally, staring steadily at him.

China examined him with too-sharp eyes, and his smile grew sly. "I see. 'He' did, did he?"

At Kangwon's long look, he laughed lightly. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me. Probably."

"Reassuring."

The Chinese man gave him another laughing smile, then dropped his gaze to his arm, where the blood was working its way through the tube.

Kangwon *really* hoped that wasn't going to come back to bite him. But there wasn't really anything he could do to make sure of that.

He watched China's blood with him in silence for a couple minutes. The fluid glistened in the tubing, slowly filling the clear bag, swelling it like a ripening fruit. The bright crimson liquid didn't look any different than human blood.

But it was.

Kangwon chewed on the idea. Yeah, it was time. It should've been awhile ago, honestly.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask." China looked back over at him, still smiling. "I can't guarantee I'll answer."

"Do you know about…" How to put it? "What our blood can do to our soldiers? Well, our people in general."

"That depends," China airily returned. "Do you?"

Kangwon gave him a wry smile. "I *am* asking. But yeah."

He'd performed a few blood transfusions on the members of Korea's Army back during the Occupation, men and women that needed emergency treatment and either couldn't wait for a hospital or couldn't be sent to one. That was how Kangwon had learned he, Korea, and his cousins were universal donors, along with every other Countryhuman and Provincehuman, presumably.

He'd also started developing a theory with Hwang, which hadn't been confirmed until they'd merged up with the KPRA, and Kangwon had started having to do transfusions more often.

"Our blood energizes people," he said to China.

It couldn't cure them or even speed up their healing to a Countryhuman's pace. But it revitalized them. It gave them just enough energy to pull them back from the edge so that they could eat or drink, or receive treatment that *could* save them, like he'd done with some of the more severe dysentery cases back in the American POW camp. Like he'd just passed over Oh Tu-hun to do with Kim Do-bom.

"I had figured you knew." China nodded to his arm, and the many track marks that covered it from elbow to wrist under his coat.

Kangwon sheepishly rubbed at them, tugging his sleeve farther down, even though they were already hidden.

He'd figured China had known, too. It might not mean anything if he'd just donated blood a few times, but he did it a lot, for their people and his. And every time Kangwon drew it, his eyes always looked amused, like he was laughing at an inside joke the province didn't know he was part of.

And the fact it was Korea he'd made the offer to give his blood to 'whoever needs it' made it feel weightier than if he'd gone to Kangwon first.

"It's not just transfusions, you know," their comrade said with a secret smile. "It works if they drink it, too."

Kangwon blinked. He hadn't known that. Of course, him and his cousins didn't go around feeding their blood to people.

"Not as well," China added, in the tone of voice someone normal might've explained traditional medicine in. "But it does work."

That was… just a bit disturbing. He guessed it made some sense. But it was still disturbing.

"How do you know that?"

China hummed disinterestedly. "That's a long, arduous story that I don't feel like telling. But tell *me* something- does CCCP know about this?"

Kangwon nodded.

He'd asked Korea if he could bring it up with the Soviet, wanting to know how universal the knowledge was, thrilled they could've possibly made a new discovery that could save more lives around the world. He'd had to wait until CCCP had withdrawn his troops after their official establishment, like he'd promised, but after, he'd been given the grudging go-ahead.

"He knows. He found out during his civil war."

Like them, the Bolsheviks had been working with limited equipment and high casualties. Sometimes the only one uninjured enough to give blood was an oblast, republic, or Countryhuman.

"He told me not to tell anyone else, though."

China nodded sagely. "Not every subdivision is with their country willingly, and not every Countryhuman has the freedom we do. I suppose if certain types of people heard that the blood of near-

immortal creatures could rejuvenate them, they might start to wonder what *else* they could do with it."

"That was pretty much what he said," Kangwon confessed, not really liking being called a 'creature.' "Other Countryhumans probably feel the same way, too. Hwang had a few old medical textbooks from around the world, and a couple newer ones, and none of the sections about us mention it."

"If the other Countryhumans even know," China pointed out. "Do you think the mighty Ming or Joseon would have ever freely given their 'holy' blood to their people? Could you picture America doing it?"

Kangwon tried to imagine the American with his cold dog-grin cutting his arm and shoving the shunt of an IV into it, inserting the other end into the vein of a soldier whose face had gone pale from blood loss, and couldn't.

"No," he admitted.

"Neither can I." The Chinese man drummed his long fingers on his thigh, watching his blood flow out of him. "Though I suppose at least some of them had to have known. Places where they're into blood sacrifice and such. And my own ancestors had an interest in alchemy. But we could be the first to bring it to the world's attention."

"I'd rather not," Kangwon said. He hadn't even been thinking of stuff like that before he'd spoken to CCCP, but after he had, he'd very quickly changed his mind. "Not while there are places like Puerto Rico out there."

He couldn't imagine what Japan would have done to the Provincehumans he'd held- SH, South Chungcheong, the Jeollas, Hwang, Gyeonggi, Hae or even Korea and South- if he had known. How much of their blood would have been drained for the sickly Yoshihito or given to people like Ishii Shiro for sick experiments to make Japanese soldiers stronger? Kangwon didn't think their blood could do that, but CCCP had been right- someone would try.

“I suppose you’re right,” China agreed easily. “Once imperialism is no more, and we’re all as free as a lóng, *then* we can start unlocking the secrets of immortality.”

He smiled, making Kangwon chuckle. “Maybe let’s start with self-sufficiency first.”

“I like to think big.” The Chinese country tapped his chin with a finger. “I think our ancestors’ penchant for making our people regard themselves as divines is boring, but when the alternative to being worshipped as a deity is being cannibalized, I suppose I can understand why they did what they did.”

Kangwon propped his chin up on his fist. “What would you choose?”

It was kind of an odd question, but he was still trying to figure out how China worked.

The other man smiled slyly. “What would your Korea choose?”

Kangwon shrugged, though he knew. “You’d have to ask him when he wakes up. I wouldn’t, though.”

“En, I think that’s the kind of question that could end up with me being hurt.” He sighed dramatically. “Your Countryhuman is a very prickly man.”

Kangwon bit back a smile, unable to agree.

China tilted his head. “But since you told me about this, even though you don’t want it getting spread around, can I take that as meaning you trust me not to? Or to not experiment on my own provinces?" He smiled slyly. “Or does that mean someone *else* trusts me?”

Kangwon had been forbidden to tell him for awhile. But before he’d gone into his recuperative coma, Korea’d finally said that he could. Ordered him, actually.

‘Not that he couldn’t’ve done it himself at some point.’

He dipped his head to China, pulling an SH. “Your donations mean a lot to us. Especially since we both know how important they are.”

The man smiled, less menacingly than some of the others he’d given him today. “My Little Sisters and I are only returning the favour. Your blood was flowing in my soldiers’ veins for months beforehand, after all.”

That was true.

China’s smile didn’t change, but his eyes almost seemed to soften. “But Korea’s donations are also appreciated, as is every offer of generosity.”

He reached out, thumb caressing over the plastic tubing his blood was flowing through.

“Especially when China knows what it means.”

Kangwon let him muse in silence until the bag was full, then removed the IV from his arm, patting it clean again, and sticking a piece of medical tape over the puncture.

China held his arm out, his pout as petulant as his voice. “You’re not going to kiss it better?”

“Still not answering that, like the other three times.”

“Shame,” the other man said normally, rolling his sleeve down.

When he made jokes like that, it made Kangwon sort of… not really nervous. But they felt a little too pointed. Even though there was no way China could know.

Putting that aside as he put away the IV and got the blood ready for transfer, he asked, “You seem to know a lot of things you probably shouldn’t.”

“Definitely shouldn’t,” China agreed smoothly.

“Do you know where any of the blood we’ve donated to your soldiers ended up? Or where yours did?” Kangwon turned back to

him, bag of life-saving fluid held carefully in his hands.

It was warm, like a crimson apple that had ripened in the sun until being picked at the perfect moment.

“You’re asking if the effects work on people that aren’t ours?” China tipped his head, smiling. “They do. Make of that what you will.”

‘Huh.’ Interesting.

China stood, stretching lazily. “Now let’s get you back to that stuffy Quarantine Hospital. You have a life to save, don’t you?”

Kangwon cradled the blood to his chest. “To try, at least.”

“I’m sure you’ll succeed.” As he passed him, China tweaked his cheek. “Clever little doctor.”

The province rubbed his face. Yeah. Still not a fan of that.

Thanks to the wonders of the Willys MB Jeep (and China seizing control of the wheel to speed), Kangwon didn’t have to do much to make sure the blood would be safe on the trip (besides firmly hold the frame of the vehicle so he wouldn't fall out with it).

“Thanks for the ride,” he said, hopping out at the entrance. China had insisted on getting as close as possible. “And the blood. I’ll talk to you later, comrade.”

He took a few steps away, then turned back, hesitating. China watched him patiently from the driver’s seat while he gestured his guards away to their usual posts on the hills flanking the hospital.

When they were out of hearing range, Kangwon lowered his voice. “Hey, do you think you could…” He almost bit his nail, but whisked it away in time. “Could you not tell Korea that drinking our blood affects people, too?”

China regarded him thoughtfully. “Are you asking me to lie to your country?”

“No,” Kangwon said, still feeling guilty. “You weren’t lying before.

You just didn't mention it to him. Just… keep not mentioning it. Please."

"Hmmmm," their comrade hummed in exaggerated thought, then lifted a single shoulder. "Alright. I suppose I'll keep not mentioning it. But only because I like you both so much."

"Thanks." Kangwon sighed in relief, padding away into to the cool depths of the hospital, hopefully to push Oh Tu-hun back from the edge.

He loved Korea, he really did. More than anyone.

But his Countryhuman was a hypocrite at his core. As much as he told Kangwon not to overdo it with the blood transfusions, the province knew that the only thing that kept him from draining his own blood dry for their hospitals was the time it took, time that he felt could be better spent elsewhere, seeking freedom so that their people wouldn't need the blood.

Kangwon really wished he could do something about that, but unfortunately, he was pretty certain Korea was aware that he was a hypocrite, which meant bringing it to his attention never worked. And he couldn't form a united front with his cousins because most of them had either accepted it as a lost cause or overlooked it, since his hypocrisy was always the selfless type.

But just because Korea was being selfless didn't mean that was always a good thing. There was a middle ground that Kangwon was probably never going to be able to get him to set foot on. And because of that, he didn't want his Countryhuman becoming aware of the ease of slitting your arm and pouring your blood straight into someone's mouth to help them that China had claimed.

After all, if it came to being worshipped or devoured, Kangwon knew which one Korea would choose.

Finally, the blood reveal I have been skirting around for over a hundred chapters!

It's basically as Kangwon says- Countryhuman blood can't magically heal people, but it does revitalize them for a bit. Modern day, because blood drives are popular and it's good publicity to donate blood, pretty much everyone knows countries/provinces/etcetera are universal donors. But because the blood isn't tracked (it's marked as O- and allowed to disappear intentionally because some people would definitely be weird about Countryhuman blood), no one knows about the revitalization effect. Most Countryhumans likely also aren't aware of this because outside of those drives, most wouldn't just give their blood to a human. The only ones who know for sure are a handful of Socialist countries, because they fought side by side with their people, and also have the mindset of 'everything for the people,' so they aren't adverse to sharing blood with a 'commoner.' North and China, their provinces (though it might only be two (now one) of China's, who knows), CCCP (now gone), Cuba, Vietnam, and Laos (told by Vietnam). These are the people who know for sure, and are aware that each other know. As far as they know, they are the first countries to ever discover this. There might have been or might be others in the world who are aware, but it's difficult to know for sure. The above people barely talk about it with each other, let alone non-Socialists. CCCP's children were never told. The Southern provinces haven't told South because they know it would get back to America.

During the war against Japan, many guerrillas that fought with the Koreans were aware of what the blood they were given did because Kangwon wasn't thinking about secrecy back then, but modern day the only human that knows is the President of State Affairs (because North is a *tiiiny* bit overprotective and has no other way to convince him to have a blood transfusion for a simple cold, or consent to one for his children (it's not actually a choice). North and the provinces donate frequently, but like in other countries, no one is told it's their blood. Kangwon just makes sure it's marked for use in severe cases, or handles transfusions himself. In practice, many nurses and doctors likely have at least suspicions about oddly-labelled blood, Kangwon advising transfusions for cases that usually shouldn't require one, and the patients' reactions once it's

given. But it’s only ever talked about quietly, and no one ever asks. It works. For a healthcare worker, that’s often all that matters.

There are hints scattered throughout the story about the event that is the reason why China knows feeding their blood to people works, too. He's actually fed it to someone half-on page. If you're ever rereading, keep that in mind and tell me if you spot it. ^^

Because I have been researching so many illnesses, and because I have a VPN, ads think I am 1) in at least seven different countries, and 2) dying of multiple diseases, one of which has been eradicated. Every ad I have seen for the last week is for health insurance, and most of them are in a different language.

Saving Face

South Pyongan was back in Pyongyang, in the General's underground office for the first time, even taking off her mask so he'd see her face and know she meant *business.*

And she'd brought out the big gun.

"Thank you for taking time to meet with us, Comrade General." SH dipped her head to him as he sat back at his desk.

"Just comrade, please," he said, not for the first time. But SH was a stickler for politeness, so she wouldn't listen.

South Pyongan actually never really knew what to call him in private now. Calling him 'Chairman Kim' was weird when she wasn't in the Party (and Korea didn't like them calling him so casually by just his last name), 'Premier Kim' had the same problem and felt too stuffy and formal, 'Supreme Commander' and 'General' felt like she was waiting for an order, and unlike her brother and some cousins, she didn't like using people's full names every time she addressed them. Too polite.

Yeah, calling him 'comrade' would solve her issues, and she'd used to call him that during the war against Japan. But now it felt like if she used it too much, he'd start asking why she didn't just join the Worker's Party, too.

She usually settled for 'Ya.' Just not in front of others and never in front of Korea.

"Ya." She barged past SH to smack a hand on his desk. "We got that message about holding secret talks so the Yankees don't have to face up to killing our guys. What gives?"

Her cousin fluttered nervously, pulling her arm off the desk.

"What Comrade South Pyongan *means,"* she began with an

apologetic smile. "Is we reviewed the message we were sent, and we have some concerns about the idea of dropping the inquiry into the Geoje Island massacres, and entering secret sessions. It seems unfair to our comrades in the camps to allow the miguk-n- Americans to force us into silence on what's happening to them."

"They *killed* our *guys."* South Pyongan broke free from her cousin's grip to smack her hand on the desk again. "Like two hundred of 'em back in February, and now they're giving the traitors guns and letting them mow them down like caged animals!"

"And it's obvious that has to be just what happened," SH said, trying to pry her arm away again. "And there's probably more they want to hide. Otherwise they wouldn't want to talk in secret all of a sudden."

With a noise, she finally yanked South Pyongan back, linking arms tightly with her so she couldn't attack his desk again.

She smiled politely at him. "We aren't saying the decision made by our comrades is wrong, but after all the enemy has done, we can't help but think it's unfair to their victims to give up on seeking answers just to allow the enemy to save face."

"Yeah." South Pyongan crossed her arms, making her cousin adjust her grip. "All of that."

See, this was why she'd brought her. Without SH she'd probably just kick over Korea's desk in the corner and punch a hole in the (concrete) wall.

"South Hamgyong-do and South Pyongan-do just wanted to get clarification on the decision." SH bowed her head.

"Of course." The General dipped his back. "It is why you were notified. If it were up to me, you would have been involved in making it. We would all prefer to have our provinces involved directly in the war talks."

He didn't say why they weren't, but they already knew anyway. Korea and his paranoia about the Commands.

"It would be an injustice to let the enemy get away with their inhumane crimes simply so they can save face," the man admitted.

"So why are we letting them!?" South Pyongan burst out, feeling SH squeeze her bicep.

"Because it isn't about saving their face," the General said, not even blinking at her raised tone. "It is about saving our comrades. Does it reflect poorly on us to overlook the atrocities in the enemy camps in an attempt to achieve an armistice? Yes. We seem desperate to sign. We lose face ourselves."

South Pyongan grit her teeth. She hated to think of that Yankee lounging down in Seoul or Busan or wherever, smirking to himself, so sure they were weakening when they *weren't.*

"But our concerns aren't with face," the man continued. "They are with winning this war and putting an end to the hardship our people are being made to go through."

"But we *aren't* winning," South Pyongan snapped in frustration. "We're signing an armistice and letting them get away with all the shit they've done. We're letting Korea stay Divided!"

SH nails sank into her arm.

Oops. Maybe she shouldn't have said that out loud.

But it was true. The Yanks had talked about three months after the armistice was signed to pull out foreign troops and 'settle the Korean question,' but they'd also talked about thirty days until an armistice in November, a few weeks until one in July and October. Three months could be nine months, or three years, or-

And it didn't matter. It shouldn't be up to the Yanks. Their country should be up to *them.* They didn't need three months to decide to kick all the foreigners out. They wanted them out *now.* There was no 'Korean question.' They weren't one of Hwang's equations to be solved. There was only one question when it came to Korea, and that was 'Should they be Reunified?' And it was up to them to solve, and everyone, even the worst nation-traitor alive, agreed that the

answer was fucking *'Yes.'*

"It isn't a military victory," the General said, not flinching at her words. "But signing an armistice is a win. The enemy has been made to understand that they can't destroy us outright. The Korean people's fighting spirit overcame them. This is why they resort to their tricks."

It was like what her brother had said before she'd convinced him to vote against the ceasefire last year. But who'd been right? Her. The Yank had been scheming, he had used the time the talks gave to bring in more bastards, he had just flattened more villages, made up more lies, dropped more bombs and germs.

"But we will not fall to them." Kim Il-sung stood, and damn if South Pyongan hadn't almost forgotten he was taller than her. "We will force them into peace, and then we will bring to light their crimes."

He picked a paper off his desk, handing it to SH, who read it over.

"Someone escaped from Geoje Island," she said in surprise.

South Pyongan leaned over, skimming the typed report, catching words like 'beatings' and 'forced to renounce' before her brain prickled too much to keep reading.

"He says he was beaten, and the reactionary prisoners forced him to sign their blood petition to not be sent back to the north." SH's words dripped with a venom South Pyongan usually only heard when she was talking about her brother.

"A handful of prisoners have managed to escape," their General informed them. "They made their way through gruelling hardships to return to us and tell their stories of the barbarities they were made to suffer. But thousands more remain."

The news only made South Pyongan's blood burn hotter. "And we need to *free* them."

"We will," he said. "And then their stories will be told."

SH paused, setting the testimony back on the desk. "We drop the massacres for now, sign a ceasefire, get our soldiers back, and then we have eyewitness testimony on everything the Yan- Americans have done."

There was a faint smile on the General's face. "Five men may be dismissed. Five hundred are less easily."

"Or women," SH said grimly, and his smile faded.

"Yes," he said heavily.

SH's hold on South Pyongan tightened hard enough to hurt (someone else, not her). She squeezed back awkwardly.

Yeah, from everything they'd seen, and the shit she'd heard... She would *not* want to be a regular chick in a Yankee camp.

"To the Americans, we lose face instead of them," the General said. "They get to say that in our inability to continue the war, we grow desperate to end it, even putting aside the well-being of our own comrades. But the freedom-loving peoples of the world understand that we only want peace, and are sacrificing justice to win it." His eyes narrowed, just a little bit. "And *we* understand that the sacrifice is only temporary."

South Pyongan's gloves creaked as her knuckles tightened, Chagang's words from that same vote creeping in.

'The Korean people want peace. That is what we have been fighting for since the beginning.'

'The beginning.' Even before he'd been separated from her brother. And how many people had they lost fighting for that peace, people they'd never been able to avenge? How many people had they lost now?

"I suppose it would make investigating the germ warfare easier, too," SH mused. "If we aren't dealing with more active cases, and if our scientists and the Chinese Commission could work without all the interruptions from bombs, then maybe we'd be able to get enough proof to get justice for that, too."

But even she sounded reluctant.

Unable to help herself, South Pyongan burst out, "But it *isn't* justice! It wouldn't *be* justice! Even if they got charged or some shit, they'd get what? A few years in prison? And do you really think the Yank would let them serve their full sentence?"

Liaotung and Liaoxi had told them about the Jap scientists in America's hands. According to them, there was even a rumour that the bastards weren't even getting prosecuted, let alone executed.

"He sent Ishii Shiro to our country." South Pyongan pounded on the desk with her free hand. "And that pretty boy said he sent him again a few days ago. That bastard tortured *thousands* of our people, hundreds of thousands of Chinese, cut them into pieces in his sick fucking experiments and he's still walking around free and clear. Do you really think they'd lock up their own pasty fuckers? "

"Language," SH said tightly, even though South Pyongan's arm was wet where her nails had drawn blood through her suit.

"Even if they do, it isn't going to be enough!" South Pyongan cried, the desk shuddering as she pounded it again, then again. "Those bastards don't deserve a slap on the wrist or a few years in a cell! They deserve to *die!*

This wasn't like the idiot reactionaries that'd been tricked into fighting for Rhee, or the landlords that were cruel because of what they were, not who they were. These weren't people they could re-educate into upstanding citizens that loved their country and their people.

These were the bastards dropping plague on them, raping their women by the thousands, destroying their homes, starving them, arming Rhee's nation-traitors so they could slaughter hundreds of thousands of civilians, locking their people in cages and torturing them just like the Japs had.

The Japanese had never been punished for it. *Japan* had never been punished for it. He hadn't died in those bomb blasts, the scientists and doctors and war generals and soldiers hadn't either.

Fucking Hirohito was still alive, still the damn Emperor, even if he had a string around his shoulders. Japan was still there, the one responsible for all of it, the one that had annexed their country, torn down their palaces, taken away their names and culture. He was still alive, *they* were still alive, living the lives that they still weren't letting her people live.

And the exact same thing was going to happen to the Yanks. They were the reason this war was going on two years, they were the reason it'd started in the first place, all because they wanted to get one over on CCCP, because they had beef with a country that wasn't even Korea and couldn't stand them being independent, not another Yankee colony. And when they were finally forced to sign the armistice, they were just going to be able to walk away, leaving Korea to clean up the mess.

There was no re-educating the Yankee bastards. And even if there was, America would never do it because his soldiers and politicians were already doing exactly what he wanted.

"They should *die,"* she fiercely decreed again, and SH let go of her arm so she could slam her palms down on the desk, unable to do anything else to get rid of the churning fury inside her.

"They should," her cousin agreed, and her voice was quiet, but simmering with a rage she'd never heard from her.

And even if they did, even if every single Yankee general and soldier responsible for ruining their country was executed by firing squad, America would still be out there. The one behind it all, the one puppeteering Korea's brother against him, would just *get away with it.*

Kim Il-sung looked at them both with dark eyes. He didn't give them some bullshit about how death wasn't always the worse suffering or justice didn't need to always be violent. He'd fought the Japs for damn near his entire life, and so had his father, and just like them, he'd had to watch the worst ones, the ones that deserved to die more than anyone else, get away.

"Sometimes we give up the right of true justice so that we don't

need to seek more of it."

South Pyongan bared her teeth, lowering her head as her nails scraped at the hardwood.

If the war had ended when it should have, her tank crew wouldn't have died. If it ended now, thousands of their people in the camps might live. Their testimonies wouldn't be enough for the miguk-nom to be executed, but they would *have* their testimonies, they would have *them*.

Because they would be alive.

'We're getting married!'

South Pyongan squeezed her eyes shut, thumping her fist on the desk one last time, then spinning away. *"Damm*it."

The other two were silent. SH was staring at a painting on the wall above Korea's desk, one of hers, it looked like. That bird she'd painted after Liberation. She swore she could feel the dark energy coming off her, choking the room, a heavy shadow looming over them.

Or maybe South Pyongan was just projecting how pissed she was.

Her cousin didn't say anything about the General's words when she finally turned her head back to him. She just asked quietly, "And why aren't we waking Korea up for his approval?"

South Pyongan paused, looking over her shoulder. SH's face was neutral, but her eyes were narrowed and burning.

Was she... thinking about waking him up so he'd fight the decision?

The General sighed, sitting back down in his chair. "I've spoken with him about this before. In case Comrade Korea is absent for whatever reason, I have standing orders to do whatever it takes to get a ceasefire."

"He wanted to be woken up if anything happened," SH said, her

voice icy. "But Kangwon says you told him not to."

The General gave a tired smile. "Of course. Our Countryhuman's criticism of me won't be so harsh."

SH looked like she'd put something together, and after a sec, South Pyongan did, too.

'Sly bastard.' It was definitely true that Korea would never go off on one of their people the way he did on them, let alone the General.

"It is my decision to let our comrade recover properly from his illness, and to move ahead on these talks without him, and mine alone," the man said, hands clasped on his abused desk. "We will work it out between us after he's rested."

He cut his eyes to SH. "Comrade South Hamgyong doesn't want to take this deal."

SH hunched, even though she was doing a really bad job at hiding it. "I just don't want..." Her fists balled at her sides.

"If we woke Comrade Korea up right now, what do you think he would say?" the General asked, not harshly. "Would he accept the secret talks for the chance that the enemy would finally settle the prisoner of war issue and sign a peace? Or would he reject it?"

SH's lips pressed together.

"He'd take it," South Pyongan said, and her cousin whipped her head around to her. "What? He would."

'I think every single person who has ever harmed any of our people for any reason should be lined up against the wall and have a bullet put through their skull. Landlords, capitalists, the Japanese, the Americans- I want them all ***dead.***

'But we can't.'

"He wouldn't like it," she said. She didn't like it. "But he would."

This wasn't exactly the Party line. But it was the line their people needed. Peace.

Even if it kept him apart from his loser brother a little longer. Three months or three years, she knew he wouldn't let it be for good.

She could tell SH admitted it to herself when she swung her head away, closing her eyes. They did that freaky thing they did where they flickered really fast under her purple-stained eyelids.

Then she went limp.

"Yes," she quietly agreed. "He would take it. He would have to."

The General dipped his head. "And then it would become his decision."

"And he'd feel guilty about it, like always." SH hid her face behind her hand, holding it there.

The man didn't confirm or deny it. He just blinked slowly.

South Pyongan guessed he'd been freaked out by the way Korea had been acting after the Fifth Phase Offensive failure and accepting the peace talks in the first place, too. He probably didn't want him to start getting weird again either.

She got it now. All of it. She *hated* that she got it. But she did.

Korea would stay asleep. And they'd enter secret sessions with the Yankees, and let them save face for what they'd done to their comrades.

For now.

SH thanked the General, dipping her head, subdued as she headed for the door. South Pyongan told her she'd catch up, lingering.

"Hey," she said when she was alone with the man, totally not awkwardly. "Sorry for yelling at you."

She hated apologizing, but it was always smart to stay on good footing with the people running your country. If they weren't losers, anyway.

"If you or our comrades ever take issue with any of Supreme Command's decisions, you should always voice them," he replied. "Even if you can't participate in the initial discussions for now, our Comrade Provinces' input does still matter." The corners of his lips twitched. "And I appreciate my birth province's passion."

South Pyongan bobbed her head, pursing her lips. *"Sooooo* does that mean you won't tell Korea about this?"

Definitely smiling now, he said, "I don't see any reason to."

Hm. She'd been wondering if she should ask him if he approved of her entrepreneurial idea, so if Korea busted her, she could be like 'Well, the General said I could.' But maybe not. Even if he did, he was already covering for Kangwon, so she didn't want to cause any other issues with him and Korea. Or cause any issues with *her* and Korea if he found out she'd made the guy an accessory to... crime? Cronyism, maybe? Tiptoeing around the edges of it at least.

And she'd already decided to do it, so if he didn't approve, she'd be going behind their Premier's back. Not the best thing to do when they were supposed to be a united front.

She wondered if he *would* approve. Did he agree with Korea's 'skirting the law' thing? Did he know he wanted her to play dirty against the enemies in their ranks? Had he maybe suggested it?

Even though she was Kim Il-sung's birth province, and she'd known Korea longer than anyone but Kangwon, she didn't know how much they shared any more than the others. And she... wasn't a fan of that.

"Thanks," she said to him, pulling a gauze-wrapped box out of her bag before she forgot. "And tell Jong-il and Kyong-hui their favourite province says hey."

"Bribing my children," the General noted when he saw the sticks of

sweet potato yeot inside that she'd bought from Completely Reasonable Prices Kim at a completely reasonably-priced discount.

"Noooo, never," South Pyongan denied, totally trying to bribe his children. She turned to head out.

"One more thing."

She looked back over at him, and he smiled.

"I'm grateful my birth province has learned not only when to show passion, but when to show restraint."

The words sort of sounded like they meant more than they did. She narrowed her eyes, that niggling thought that plagued her every time she had any sort of private talk with him coming back. It wasn't an anxiety because she didn't get anxious. But it was uncomfortable.

Just how much *did* Korea tell him? Had he told him about the beach? Did he know about the farmer whose head she'd bashed in just for being a greedy idiot?

His little mysterious smile didn't tell her crap.

"That's South Pyongan province," she said casually. "Always knowing what's best."

He kept smiling at her, and with one last suspicious look, she joined SH in the tunnel.

Her cousin was standing still, her eyes doing the flickering thing again. She didn't even seem like she'd heard the door open, and jumped when the other province slapped a hand on her shoulder.

"You good?"

SH nodded, smiling. The edges of her lips were tight. "Just... mad. I know it's right, but..."

"Yeah, no arguments here." If she thought about it too hard, she'd get worked up again. "Thanks for coming with. Even if we didn't

end up leading a charge."

"Of course."

Her cousin's hands were still balled tight, blood welling up between her fingers.

She had even more personal beef with the Yank Supreme than South Pyongan had. The idea of him getting away with everything he'd done to them probably pissed her off even more than her. Which was sort of an unimaginable level of pissed.

She liked it. Her cousin had always been a word swallower, holding crap back to be polite or ‘ladylike’ or something. South Pyongan was pleased she’d been a little more open about when she was ticked off lately, like just now. Her big gun was getting a little more firepower.

'Still keeps trying to deep-clean the bunker, though.'

"Sorry," SH said, exhaling as she smoothed her tunic down, leaving a smear of blood at the hem. "I'm alright. Really."

"Want to punch a wall?" South Pyongan asked, gesturing towards the nearest one. "It might make you feel better."

SH eyed the white-plaster like she was actually tempted, making the Pyongan perk up, excited to see it.

Then some wrecker (emotionally, not politically) came around the corner carrying a telegram, and she tore her eyes away, shaking her head.

"I probably shouldn't break my hands when I have publicity pieces to work on."

South Pyongan sighed. "True. Come on. Let's go to the hospital and get our blood results."

"My ones from yesterday were-"

"Disease waits for no province!" South Pyongan wrapped an arm

around her (her blood results yesterday *had* been clear), putting on her blindfold one-handed as she whistled for her bodyguards, who were just around the corner.

As they escorted them out of the complex, she tried to swagger as much as she could with her vision gone, like she wasn't bothered at all that they were giving the Yankees a chance to save face, like she knew their faces were so ugly there *was* no saving them.

There wasn't. America might escape what was coming to him now, but he couldn't forever. She knew her and SH weren't the only ones with grudges. She knew every single one of their guys that came back from the camps beaten and bruised, every woman that had to deal with a bastard she hadn't wanted to, and every single person that had to suffer through one of the Yank's diseases or watch their family suffer through them would want justice for it, just like they wanted justice from Japan. *Korea* would want justice for it.

And they would fucking *get* it.

—

Kangwon held the jar of water in his gloved hands, holding it up to the light, watching as the movement made the tiny bodies inside spin. Dozens of dead fleas swirled around, colliding into each other to form one thick, dark mass of glistening plates before disintegrating.

He held the magnifying glass up to his eye, squinting. He'd tried hard to make sure the glass container he'd poured the contents of the clay jar into remained clean, but even the distortion of clear glass made it hard to see.

But as one flea floated up to the surface of the water, and the light caught its flat body, he thought he could see a dark clot inside its gut.

"Comrade Kangwon?" Choi Ryong-so- chairman of the Kumsong-ri Epidemic Prevention Committee- prompted in a tone that said he was prepared for the worst.

The province set the jar down carefully next to the well, turning to him and the rest of the Kangso County and Kumsong-ri Epidemic Prevention Corps.

"Can't tell for sure," he said, not voicing his concerns. "We'll take a few back to the lab. Burn the rest."

The Epidemic Prevention Corps moved in to start separating a few fleas from the jar for testing, and give the area around the well another thorough search before moving on to burning the rest. They'd start around the epicentre, then spread out.

"Start directing the sanitation efforts," Kangwon ordered Choi Ryong-so. "And tell everyone in the upper village to keep an eye out for rats or cats even after they're carried out. Kill them and burn the bodies, and always take precautions when handling them. And make sure everyone knows not to eat them, no matter how hungry they are."

You shouldn't be able to catch the plague from eating an animal infected with it, just from the bite of a flea. But if one crawled off while the rodent was being cleaned, or contaminated fluids got into the cook's mouth, that'd be bad.

A few of the Kumsong-ri People's Committee members looked offended at the idea them or their neighbours would eat rats, but Kangwon wasn't taking chances. He'd eaten them before he knew how many diseases they carried, and Hae had eaten that raw clam. When people were starving, anything looked good.

Thankfully, Choi Ryong-su took it seriously, his square jaw set as he pressed his fist to his chest.

The epidemics had taught Kangwon that the best way to give health or hygiene instructions was to assume your patient was as dumb as possible, even when you knew they weren't. It made it so you wouldn't overlook instructions that were just common sense to you. The same thing applied to making sure your village was healthy and properly cleaned- you couldn't have too much respect for your neighbours. The chairman looked like he got that.

Kangwon left as the investigation began in earnest, traipsing across the sprouting grass of the field for the residential district, several dozen metres away from the well that served it. A man stood behind a simple chosonjip, wringing his hands as he watched the sanitation team spread out, and the Village People's Committee head off to muster the villagers into joining.

"What's it look like?" Pak Yun-ho asked as he approached.

He was young, twenty-six from the briefing Kangwon had got on the way here, and a peasant.

"We won't know until we get the results back," Kangwon told him. "We're just taking precautions for now. Would you mind telling me what happened? You don't need to be as detailed as you were with the investigators."

He'd been interviewed before Kangwon got here, and he'd already got the basics. He could read the full transcripts later. Right now he wanted it from the source.

"Not much to say," Pak said, his eyes flicking over Kangwon's shoulder. "I woke up last night around four to an American deathbird circling low."

The word choice made Kangwon wonder if South Pyongan was spreading her language through her province during her many visits. Kangso County was just east of Nampo, next to the main highway.

Which was why it made a good target.

"I laid awake, and it flew off eventually," Pak told him. "But I couldn't get back to sleep. So I got up around six, just as it was starting to get light, and went to wash up at the well." He gestured to the low ring of stone. "I'd left a full jar there last night so I wouldn't have to go to the trouble of drawing up more, but when I went to dip my hands in, I notice something floating on the surface. A bunch of black specks. When I realized they were fleas-"

He curled his lip with an instinctive revulsion, and Kangwon

nodded in sympathy. He'd never had a problem with bugs before this (he actually thought they were neat), but a lot of people did. NJ had always looked a little sick whenever Gyeong would show her a beetle he'd caught.

Pak shuddered, shaking the thought away as he glanced over to where the investigators were combing over every inch of ground. "Anyway, I decided I didn't need to wash my face, after all. When I got back to the house, my neighbour, Song Chang-won- I think the Epidemic guys are interviewing him right now- was there. He'd wanted to talk farm, but I dragged him over to take a look, and make sure I wasn't seeing things. He's the one who brought up the plane the night before, and once we realized the Americans had probably left them there, we went right away to tell the People's Committee."

Kangwon nodded. "Good job. Can you remember if you saw any fleas on the ground around the well? Or were they just in the jar?"

Pak shook his head. "It was too dark to see at first. But I didn't spot any when the sun came up."

Kangwon and the others hadn't seen any either before he'd disturbed the scene.

"Did you hear any detonations last night?" he followed up. "Or anything weird?"

The man thought, which meant he wasn't just thoughtlessly repeating what he'd said to the investigators earlier.

"No," he said eventually. "I really can't remember anything but the plane. I wasn't too worried, since they're so damn- 'scuse the language- so common, so I wasn't paying close attention. But Mr. Song says he didn't hear anything, either. And he'd woken up at the sound of it, too."

Kangwon nodded, his fingers twitching.

They'd interview more villagers to find out who'd all woken up when the plane arrived to see if any of them had heard even a pop.

But considering there didn't seem to be any containers around, even China's 'eggshell' types, it wasn't looking good. Especially since fleas were hardy enough they didn't need a silk parachute to drift them down.

The Americans had probably been aiming for the well, which was why they'd circled low overhead for so long. Maybe they'd seen the outline of it, or the glint of moonlight off the water in the jar. It wasn't like they could precision-bomb a container that was barely fifty centimetres across, so they'd probably resorted to spraying, which would be easier from the low altitude, and using sturdy insects. Which meant the fleas in the water were just the ones that'd been unlucky enough to land in it and drown.

Which meant the rest were still out there.

Kangwon lowered his brows, his voice getting more serious to show this was important. "Comrade Pak. Think carefully- did any of them bite you? Are there any itchy spots or bumps on your body that weren't there before?"

The young man subconsciously ran his hands over the legs of his grey trousers and padded white shirt.

"I didn't feel any take a bite," he said. "And nothing itches."

"That's good," Kangwon said, even though he wasn't relieved.

Flea bites didn't always sting. He'd pet stray cats before, and hadn't realized a flea had snagged onto him and was drinking his blood until a street over. Animal fleas were different than human fleas, but not functionally. They also didn't always leave marks.

He still advised, "If that changes, go to the Epidemic Prevention Committee right away. Same if you have any of these symptoms."

He wrote down the common ones for bubonic plague in the notebook he'd requisitioned for his investigations, flipping through pages of patient names, eyewitness sightings of enemy planes dropping non-explosive materials, and a rough map of the northern half of Korea with symbols to mark which outbreaks were where.

He hoped he wouldn't have to add the plague triangle to Kumsong-ri after this.

Carefully, he tore the corner of the page off and handed it to the man.

"Headaches, weakness, fever, muscle pain, chills," he recited, and there was a proud tinge to his voice that made Kangwon think he was one of the peasants that'd only learned to read recently with the literacy program.

He nodded in approval. "Other symptoms should be reported, too, but those are some of the major ones. Don't just write it off as being sore from work, and hope it'll go away."

The man hesitated as he folded the paper. "It *is* sowing season. We're pretty busy."

"Being behind on sowing is better than being dead," Kangwon said firmly.

Though with how enthusiastically Hae was committing to 'The struggle for food is a struggle for the country and for victory at the front' now that she was free from house arrest, people might be tempted to think otherwise.

"You've got me there," Pak conceded, stashing the list of symptoms in his pocket. "But I do have work to get to today. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Just remember what I said."

As the peasant left, Kangwon looked back over at the well, the investigation team giving the area one last scan before they'd spread out the bundles of straw they had and burn them, hoping to scourge any fleas left.

The village had gotten lucky. Pak was the closest resident to the well, and he'd kept the cap on it tight. And without his jar of water being left out, they might not even know they needed to implement sanitation.

From the rows of village houses behind him, he could hear cries coming from the square as the villagers were worked up into a hygiene frenzy by the People's Committee and their Epidemic Prevention comrades, ready to protect their village.

Hopefully it'd be enough.

Kangwon exhaled, then went to grab the fleas.

He didn't stick around for the full investigation or mass sanitation movement, needing to get back to the hospital. But he volunteered to take the sample fleas with him, dropping them off at the closest lab to Pyongyang. From there they'd probably be transferred to Sinuiju. It was safer to do lab work there. The MiGs couldn't stop every fighter-bomber sneaking across the border to drop germs on China, but they could stop bombers from destroying the underground labs on this side of the border.

The bacteriologists were in a buzz, sorting and categorizing files and specimens, the few English speakers using any breaks they had to translate some of the autopsy and bacteriological results they had on hand, getting ready for the Oslo World Peace Council and the plea for an investigation.

The United Nations was still refusing to take their protest seriously, even with the Soviet Union campaigning for them. Everyone knew the best hope they had for a real investigation was at the council.

And that wasn't all. Kangwon hoped for the best in the foreign nations, but he wasn't naïve- he knew that any investigation carried out would be called fake by America. He'd say the investigators were paid off, and try to smother the final report. And a lot of the other countries, whether they were like America and Japan or just reluctant to not be 'right,' would want to *let* it be smothered.

Their representatives and China's weren't allowed in UN meetings. They were barely even allowed to speak the few times they were. The Republic of China was still seen as the one real China, and America was doing his best to get the world to see South the same way. They didn't have diplomats or ambassadors overseas to plead

their case, only communiques sent to the UN, which could be read and thrown out, never seen by anyone else.

The Oslo Peace Council was the chance to change that. The World Peace Council had members from almost every nation, representatives from tons of parties and organizations across Europe, and even American affiliates. Kangwon didn't like to call any nation 'major' since it implied the rest of them were minor, but the Imperialist nations obviously had more pull than their colonies or former colonies. And almost all of them had people in it. People who were sympathetic to the anti-Imperialist and Socialist causes, and tended to be anti-war. Vocal people, who if they were convinced would go home and be vocal about what they'd heard, and try to convince the rest of their countrymen of what America was doing to Korea and China.

Even if their Countryhumans refused to admit they were wrong, or if they really were rotten all the way down, the way Korea's colonizers were, their people couldn't be. If enough of them heard what their homelands were part of, they would turn against the war, seek the truth, and refuse to let the report be swept under a carpet of leaf litter.

He wished Korea could go. Kangwon knew he could convince every single person in the room. He'd have them all campaigning day and night for the United Nations to acknowledge what was being done to their country before the investigation even began.

He was supposed to wake him up tomorrow, and the assembly wasn't until three days later, on the 29th. But he knew his Countryhuman wouldn't go. He'd always hated even crossing the border to China during the Occupation, so he'd definitely be against leaving the country now. And he wouldn't trust the idea of being around so many foreigners, in a country across the world, unarmed. That actually kind of sounded like his nightmare.

Kangwon wondered if when they were officially recognized by the UN, SH would have to pry him out of some dark corner like a cat to get him to go to the meetings.

As he dwelled on the upcoming council, he returned to the

Quarantine Hospital, just to disinfect properly before seeing Korea, and to check on his patients.

Kim Do-bom was alright for now, even with his blood-high worn off. Kangwon had given him more yesterday. He was pretty sure they'd caught the malaria in time to stop it from becoming severe, so now he was just trying to keep his brain healthy, and hoping he wouldn't develop a permanent disability.

As he pushed open Oh Tu-hun's room, like he'd been opening every door he passed, he found it empty. Empty of its patient, anyway.

Gangwon was sitting on the neatly-made cot, head in his hands.

Kangwon knew before he looked up. His drawn expression only confirmed it.

"Did he go peacefully?" he asked heavily, sliding in and closing the door.

"No," Gangwon said, voice worn as he looked down. "He was seizing. I got here first to hold him down. I tried to hook myself up to the IV, but I was too s-slow."

"It's not your fault," Kangwon soothed. He didn't need to sign it. He knew his brother would know what he was saying. "You know he hasn't been doing well."

Encephalitis swelled the brain, putting pressure on the stem, causing symptoms like seizures, memory loss, and hallucinations. The old man had hung on for awhile, but he'd rapidly deteriorated over the last week, starting to lose his mental faculties. China's blood had given him a day of full lucidity, but after, he'd sank into his mind, forgetting who his nurses were, not even recognizing Kangwon and Gangwon.

"Even if you'd gotten the blood into him, it wouldn't've cured him," he told his brother, signing now.

Their blood could pull people back from the edge to allow them to be cured for real. But encephalitis *had* no cure. No matter how

many transfusions they gave him, even if Kangwon had cut his wrist and drained all the blood on his body into his mouth, eventually the edge would be too close to pull him back from.

"I kn-know," Gangwon said quietly, with a deep exhale. "I know. I'm not going to let it make me spiral. I just..." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I *hate* this."

"Yeah," Kangwon said quietly, rubbing his back. "Me too."

He made his brother take a break, even though he didn't want to, before setting out to see Korea, subdued.

They needed that investigation. They needed to expose America. Even if the United Nations didn't do anything, maybe more eyes on Korea, more people who knew, would force the Americans to stop.

They had the proof. They had *tons* of it.

Houseflies should never been seen until May, let alone January. Stable flies shouldn't be until the same month. The anthomyiid flies also probably shouldn't be seen until then, and they'd never even seen its species in Korea before, just like some of the springtails and sun flies they'd found in China had never been recorded there. The locusts were early, the crickets were early, the mosquitoes were early, the human fleas shouldn't be found outside of human habitation, and the bubonic plague shouldn't be found outside its endemic zone with no chain of infection.

They had film evidence- the masses of insects when the Epidemic Prevention Committee had managed to get there in time with one of their rare cameras to record. They'd taken pictures of the fleas in the bucket and the scene as it was when they'd arrived. They had eyewitness reports and interviews, and even more captured American pilots that'd confessed. They had *proof.*

But they'd had proof last year, too. Not as much as this year, but enough to warrant suspicion, to warrant an international investigation.

And they hadn't gotten it. They hadn't been believed.

North Pyongan was on Korea-duty at the bunker, and he'd cooked his rations up for him- rice, like usual, but with small red berries in it. Liaoxi held a finger to her lips as Kangwon thanked them.

The Chinese woman's face was playful, but the Korean could see the sheen of sweat on her brow, even though it wasn't warm enough for it yet, and the dark patches under her eyes. She was feeling the effects of the sympathetic fever, like she'd told him a few days ago.

There wasn't anything he could do for her, just like there wasn't anything he'd been able to do for Oh Tu-hun. Or Sip Tal-sun.

Kangwon shut himself into the small, cold room with Korea, dropping to his knees next to him by the harsh white glare of his flashlight.

His Countryhuman was still tossing and turning, muttering to himself with his brows pulled in. Even after three weeks, his body hadn't given in to the recuperative coma.

But even restless sleep was better than none.

"You'd be able to convince them," Kangwon murmured, stroking a hand across his forehead as he took his temperature. The fever had broken, but he was still warm.

He knew there was no world in which his Countryhuman went to that meeting. He would if he believed it would actually do something, that some people would want to help them and actually be capable of it. He'd travel across the continents and speak to hundreds of foreigners, even if he didn't have his gun, if it would get them justice and peace.

But he didn't trust them. Even if he thought some of the people at the council would care, he wouldn't think the ones in their home countries would.

Kangwon's hand stilled on his country's brow.

As much as Korea's willingness to put himself in danger was

exasperating as a doctor, it had also probably saved more lives than even Kangwon had, or at least made it so he hadn't *needed* to save those lives. His province wished his country's willingness to be 'devoured' wasn't so strong, but he didn't wish it didn't exist at all.

Because that was part of being a Countryhuman, wasn't it? The part that their old 'mighty' ancestors hadn't seen, or had rejected for their own sakes. If you wanted to serve your people, you had to be willing to let them devour you. You couldn't *let* them, but you did need to be willing.

And it was the same for a Provincehuman. Kangwon would never let himself run his body truly into the ground. Even if he gave too much, he wouldn't give more than he could. Even if he pushed himself too far, he wouldn't push himself past the edge. He couldn't, not if he wanted to keep saving people.

But he wanted to. He wanted to drain every last drop of his blood for the patients who needed it. He wanted to give up sleep and meals if it meant he'd be there for one more person, so that they wouldn't die alone on the cold floor, or wouldn't die at all. He would if he could.

If it would expose the germ warfare, if it would get justice for Oh Tu-hun, Choi Ki-tak and his family, Kim Do-bom, and every single other person affected by America's plagues, if it could end the war, Korea wouldn't hesitate to throw himself into the danger that the World Peace Council could be. The only reason he wouldn't was because he didn't think it would work.

But Kangwon did.

Korea made a low sound in his sleep, and his province pulled his hand from his brow. His fingers itched, and he busied them with feeding his Countryhuman, sliding the pale slurry of rice scattered with the blood red goji berries into his mouth, massaging his throat to make it go down, a practiced habit.

His cousins wouldn't approve. His comrades in the Health Ministry probably wouldn't approve. Gangwon...

'I'll go if you want me to.'

His brother might not approve. But he'd understand.

The Premier might not approve either, though he couldn't actually stop him. But Korea definitely wouldn't approve, and *he* could.

But not if he was still asleep.

He'd be mad. He was already going to be mad that Kangwon hadn't woken him up before the secret sessions started today, even with the Premier covering for him.

But maybe he could be mad while they were halfway to stopping the germ warfare, to bringing all of America's crimes to light. When the world knew for sure that biological warfare really was being used on Korea, they'd start to question the other atrocities that the Americans insisted were Communist propaganda, like the POW camp massacres, and Taejon. Maybe even as they dropped the issue here in order to get peace, the international community could take it up, and get their comrades the justice they deserved.

Kangwon knew that even if the majority of people wanted to be 'right,' they really only wanted to be good, and that was true for foreigners, too. They just had to show them that what they believed *wasn't* good.

It'd be hard. Their representatives had been ignored last year, and it would be even easier to ignore the doctors they were sending to the World Peace Council. But a Provincehuman would be harder to ignore.

Right now, Korea and China weren't allowed to have a voice.

Maybe Kangwon could serve as one.

'Nothing bad ever happens to the provinces!'

Michael Parenti noooooooo. >< I'm so upset. The world lost a good person. Read 'Blackshirts and Reds' and 'Inventing Reality' in his memory. And watch a Yellow Parenti speech. Actually this is a short clip. Please watch. He was really an

amazing person. ㅠㅠ

https://youtu.be/eoxT1UwTM3I?si=gT8IIaZddYsHZSkd

We had a bad flea infestation in my childhood house. Amongst other things. I think this chapter maybe gave me flashbacks. But rest assured all the flea knowledge is firsthand. Sometimes you can feel when a flea bites (small sharp sting), but usually not. You just look down and your legs are coated in little black specks. (we had a BAD flea problem) And they often don't even itch or leave a mark. They just bite you, take from you, and you never know. Insult to injury. Okay yeah this definitely gave me flashbacks.

Anyway, I like to think that Comrade Kim Jong-il and South Pyongan were besties. He shows up at her Pyongsong house at midnight: 'I have an idea for a film.' South Pyongan, completely unbothered at being woke up, more excited than she's ever been: 'I want to be the lead.'
She's actually been in movies (usually playing Pyongan or the old South Pyongan in period pieces) but only while Kim Jong-il was alive. She's not actually a good actor.

Losing Heart

1915

The guards left, taking their lantern with them, and the shack was plunged into darkness again.

South was still too dazed to move, but he heard the gasp and scrabble as his brother heaved off the floor, dragging himself over to him, helping him sit.

"Are you okay?" North didn't give him a chance to answer before his hands were frantically roaming his body, searching for injuries.

His other half whimpered when he touched the side of his head, and his brother pulled his hand back like he'd been burned. South leaned into him, wrapping his arms around him to try and make the darkness stop swirling.

"I'm... alright," he made himself murmur, wondering why his brother was sitting so high on his knees when all he wanted was to rest his chin on his shoulder.

He tried to pull him down to his level, but when his grip on his back tightened, North stiffened, a sound escaping his throat, and South realized the shirt under his hands was soaked, wet and warm.

The shock made his head finally stop spinning like a top, and he quickly let go, distressed.

"North, you're bleeding!"

He shouldn't have sounded surprised, he knew that. North was always bleeding when the guards were done with them, nails torn from gouging at flesh and the floor, cuts where their knuckles had scraped his skin open, his lips burst, blood staining his teeth like when-

And of course he was bleeding now. Today's creative attempt to

cover up the sound of North prying a board off the window with South's singing (which had worked), and use it to bash their guards' heads in while South ran (worked less well) had made the Japanese get creative, too. While the others were beating North with their batons, one went off and came back with a thick stick, like a tree branch covered with jagged stubs where smaller limbs had been hacked off, and used it to cane him.

South hadn't been awake for most of it. All he remembered was turning around to be dragged back in after North had been overwhelmed, and then his brother coming for the guard while the branch came for him.

The branch reached its target first. He'd woken up just as the guard with the crooked teeth was giving his brother one last kick.

"I hadn't... *realized,"* North replied to his cry through gritted teeth.

South could feel his legs shaking where their knees were slotted together, but his brother didn't sit down, rising higher. The thigh South's knee was pressed against spasmed like it didn't belong to him, and North instinctively grabbed his shoulders, curling over him as his breath rasped.

South steadied his brother's hips, about to try and make him lay down, when he realized with horror that he could feel blood on his pants, too, soaking through any even slightly cleaner patches left on the coarse fabric. He thought of that brief, bleary flash he'd gotten of his brother before the room went dark, and realized not all of the blood dyeing his clothes had been from his back.

"North," he asked hesitantly, trying to hold him as carefully as possible. "How much of you did they cane?"

"I'm fine," his brother clipped, which wasn't what he'd asked. He released his shoulders and walked back on his knees, his teeth creaking.

"You shouldn't be sitting," South fretted, trying to crawl towards him again.

But the room spun, and he suddenly canted over, collapsing, his body thumping on the floorboards.

"South!"

There was a scrabbling sound, a sharp gasp, and then he was being sat up in his brother's arms. South blinked blearily up at the outline of his panicked face, and he almost thought he could see the taegeuk on his flag swirling round and round, even though it was way too dark for that. And also it shouldn't be able to get bigger, swallowing his vision.

'Pretty.'

He blinked hard until the emblem disappeared, then cautiously sat up. He tried to rub his throbbing temple, but yanked his hand away as even that sent a stab of pain through it.

"Don't touch," North said sharply, grabbing his hand.

South suddenly realized his brother had lowered himself to hold him, and his eyes widened as he jerked towards him, the small, dark room getting wobbly again.

"North, you've got to lie down."

His brother wasn't sitting. It felt like he was on his knees with them spread far apart. His thighs weren't resting on the calves folded underneath them, but hovering, keeping his butt from touching the floor by just a few centimetres. It had to be putting even more strain on his wounds.

"Come on," he urged before he could respond. "You need to get your clothes off so I can clean your back."

Even though the injuries weren't touching the floor, he knew he couldn't be comfortable sitting up. And it was hard enough getting the small bloodstains out of their clothes, especially since they didn't have much water. They'd only had these ones for a year, and they were already ruined.

He tried to unbutton North's shirt, but was met by his hands

protecting the buttons as he leaned away.

"I'm fine," he said, and South could feel his eyes fixed on his injured temple, even in the dark. "You're the one with a head wound."

"We get head wounds all the time."

He hated the way they made him feel, sluggish and hot, turning every snort and chuckle from the guards recalling how they'd whooped them into a piece of steel being stabbed into his brain. And he hated when North got one, and he started to slur, or got that far-away look, like his body was holding South, but his mind had gone somewhere far inside where he couldn't reach.

It was scary. He couldn't fight like North. If the guards came in to hurt them again, there was nothing he could do. If they tried to do something to his brother like the guard he'd- he'd gotten rid of that one time, South wouldn't be able to stop them. He'd have to try, but he wasn't like his brother, and he couldn't- he really didn't think he could kill like him. But he also couldn't let him get hurt or... anything else.

South hated getting head injuries. But he'd rather he got them than North.

"That doesn't mean you can get used to them," North retorted.

He said that, but he had seemed to. He hadn't gone away inside himself in months, even after Japan had cracked his head into the floor over and over on the day he'd had killed that man-

'Six.'

-and the guards had pounded his skull with their boots after.

They must have felt like the Koreas hadn't paid enough for killing another one of their friends, or maybe they were mad at being injured by North when they'd caught them. Or maybe they just liked hurting them. Either way, even after everything Japan had done to North, they'd came to beat him, too, and South with him.

'It's unfair!' South had tried to tell them. *'Japan already punished us!'*

But they hadn't listened, just dragged them away from the window and their last dream of light. So even though they were both already hurt, even though South hadn't been supposed to be punished because North had taken his for him, he'd *still* ended up getting beaten. And North had ended up...

Bad. It'd been bad. Even three months later, with their major breaks and sprains healed enough that they only twinged now, South could see the pain that tightened the corners of his eyes when he did the workouts he refused to stop. And when it was light out, he could still see the yellow-green mottling on almost every inch of his brother's white skin.

It'd be turning purple again. Fresh dark patches already blooming where the men's fists had impacted. He knew his back must look awful.

"I'm not used to it," he said, reaching for his brother's shirt again. "But it's not bleeding that much. Yours are. We need to make sure they don't-"

"I can take care of it," North interrupted, his shoulders hunching as his bloodied knuckles tightened around the fabric.

"You can't reach your- your own back." South's words almost slipped away as the darkness whirled again. "And it's not like I can sleep anyway."

He had to stay up in case his brain was bleeding or something. If it was, he didn't want to die in his sleep. He wanted to hear his brother's voice as he went, telling him it was okay, the way he'd so desperately craved over the week his throat had been healing. He wanted to go with North's hand in his.

His brother hesitated.

"Please," South begged, rounding his eyes even though he couldn't see him. "If you get some kind of infection, you might go into a coma."

Even if his other half being out might allow enough time to pass without causing trouble that they'd start receiving food and water again, South didn't want that to happen. If North going inside himself was bad, being stuck in here with his 'dead' body would be even worse.

That guard's glazed, accusing eyes flashed through his head, and he squeezed his shut.

"You won't be able to protect me," he whimpered.

"...Fine," North grudgingly gave in, the way South knew the words would make him do. He could hear his hands fall away from his buttons. "But I'm cleaning yours first."

"You're so stubborn." But South didn't argue, crawling to the thin futon, reaching under it to pull out the corner of their tiny blanket they'd used their teeth to painstakingly gnaw off (okay, mostly North's fangs; they really came in handy sometimes).

The scrap had... seen better days. You could tell even in the dark. It was stiff and ratty and almost black with all the blood it had soaked up. But it was better than nothing.

South went to grab the bucket, but North stopped him.

"No water," he said.

Right. Even before Japan came, they were probably going to lose it again.

South's stomach cramped with dread. If he'd though the limiting was bad, it was even worse to have none at all. It'd only been two days last time. But by the end, his mouth felt like it was stuffed full of cotton, his head was pounding almost as bad as now, and the only thing he could think about was how *thirsty* he was. When they'd finally brought the bucket back, he'd ignored North's warning and drank so fast he'd thrown up.

"Do you think they'll take it for even longer this time?" he asked in a small voice, remembering Japan's warning.

'The next time you act poorly, it will be three. Then four. Then five. Until you both learn your lessons.'

North clearly hadn't learned. The fact that they'd tried to escape today, the moment he'd decided they were both healed enough, proved it.

His brother didn't flinch. "If they do, we'll deal with it."

Easy for him to say. Besides making his pee smell awful, those couple days hadn't even seemed to affect him.

South pouted, and the northern Korea gently flicked his cheek.

"And I'll save you the last sip."

Then his other half cupped his face, using the crusty blanket scrap to clean his temple. His touch was feather-light, light enough that someone else wouldn't be able to believe he'd been using those hands to swing a board hard enough to bash skulls earlier.

But his other half knew. North could use his hands to plunge a knife into a man over and over until he choked on his own blood, to crack someone's skull on the ground like an egg, and to drive a nose so hard into a face that it went back into the brain.

But he also used them to rub South's back when he was sick, and to break the ice on their water bucket, and gently clean his wounds. He was the only one his brother was gentle with, and he was *only* ever gentle to him, even when they were play-fighting. It was why he lost so much now.

South's eyes half-slitted as North wiped his injury clean. It really wasn't bleeding that much. The part of the stick that caught him was smooth (thank God, or it could have pierced through into his brain), and it was more one of those wounds that definitely did more damage inside than out.

But it still felt good to have his brother take care of him.

North was meticulous, even though he had blood sheeting down his own back. When he was finally done, he leaned back, and South

slumped forward, resting his forehead on his shoulder. His brother folded him in his arms, rubbing his hand up and down his back, like he did when they slept at night.

"I know what you're doing," South mumbled, his fingers spidering up his chest. "You're not gonna stop me."

North *'tch'*ed as he fumbled with his buttons. "Fine."

He gently pushed him away, undoing his own shirt, folding it neatly and placing it on the floor. South heard the floorboards creak as he laid down under the window.

The thin cracks of light that managed to get around the boards didn't show much, but the small glimpses they did show were enough to make South suck in a breath and want to cover his eyes again.

He managed not to. The spinning was always worse when it was just the darkness, like he was spiralling into some deep black void he'd never escape from.

So he shuffled forward, staying on this side of his brother so he wouldn't block the moonlight. Unsure entirely of what to do, he started with using his hands to map out his other half's back, trying to brush his fingers across it as gently as possible. North's muscles still coiled.

Just like South thought, his entire back was coated in sticky warmth. It was hard to find the places where the wood had punctured. As his hands moved lower, brushing the waistband of his brother's pants, he knew he'd been right.

That jagged branch had been used to cane his entire back, all the way from his neck down to his thighs.

"It's bad," he assessed.

He could feel his brother's glare. "No, really?"

"Yeah, really."

The sharp, jutting edges of his shoulder blades and defined knobs of his spine were normal, just like they were for South. But the coin-sized (South imagined, he'd never seen a coin) holes the protrusions on the branch had left when they pierced his skin weren't. And if South strained his eyes really hard, he could tell his brother's body was dark even in the places not covered in blood. If he could see him, his flag would look like it was purple-black and red instead of white.

"I think you should take off your pants, too," he suggested in concern. His brother wasn't going to be able to sit for awhile.

"I can handle that," North said stoically.

"I don't mind."

It'd be embarrassing if it wasn't his brother, but they were two halves of a whole, so it was different. And South was actually really worried about him getting an infection. Japan had said they wouldn't be separated, but what if North got so sick he had to be taken to a hospital?

Yeah, knowing Japan that... probably wouldn't happen. But it was still an option, and South didn't want to risk it. He'd rather have his brother comatose, so long as he was with him. Then he wouldn't be alone, and he could at least try to keep him safe.

"It's fine," North clipped. "I can do it, South."

Giving up, South muttered, "Stubborn," again as he started to wipe him down, trying to make sure his touch was as light as his other half's had been.

North had used to let him clean him up after their beatings with no problem, even the embarrassing places. But it felt like he was getting more reluctant lately. He had to be talked into it now.

It worried South a little.

"North," he asked hesitantly as he gently prodded his back for raw skin he had to be extra careful with. "I'm not doing anything wrong when I have to do stuff like this, am I?"

"No," North replied immediately, and his brother let out a breath of relief.

He knew if his brother said it, he meant it. He'd never shied away from telling South when he applied too much pressure or anything. And North never lied to him.

They'd be free someday. They would. And they could have real doctors do this stuff. They wouldn't need them in the first place because they wouldn't be being beaten for trying to escape. They wouldn't *have* to escape anymore.

It took a really long time, long enough that South was starting to get even sleepier, even though North had let him get a couple hours before their breakout attempt. But he made sure to be just as thorough as his brother was. Once enough blood was gone that his other half's skin looked a little paler, he started to probe out the tears in it by skimming his hand over the plane of his back, then focusing his efforts when he thought he'd found one.

He knew it probably wouldn't look great once it was morning, and they had a little more light. And their 'washcloth' was definitely done for since he couldn't wash it. But he hoped it helped at least a little.

South was pleased when North's breathing got a little raspier as he fell asleep.

He knew his brother wouldn't actually be mad if he just went ahead and cleaned the rest of him. But if South woke up with his pants being taken off, it would terrify him, and he knew it would scare North, too, even if it was just for a second.

So when he was as done with his back as he could be, he set the gross cloth aside and lay down on the floor, turning his face towards his brother's. He could just see his outline where the silver moonlight rimmed it.

He still wasn't used to not having a window. He didn't think he ever would be. It'd been nice back in February, when it had made it a little warmer than having just the open bars, or even the glass.

But now that winter was over, he missed being able to see the grass turn green outside, and the birds that perched up on the wall to sing their songs while they preened their colourful feathers. The maple tree was long gone, but sometimes tiny white flowers the size of his fingernail would pop up in the shade.

Now he couldn't even tell that spring was here, that the long nights were over and the world had started to be reborn. The only way left to tell which season was outside their walls was by how cold or hot it got. South wondered how long it would be before he forgot what the sky even looked like.

No, he wouldn't. He'd keep seeing glimpses of it whenever North led another escape attempt. But it wasn't really worth it when he'd just end up with head trauma so bad he forgot anyway.

He sighed in his mind, reaching across the small space between them to stroke his brother's bruising cheek.

He couldn't blame his other half for the window. He'd been trying to save them. He hadn't known Japan would do something like that, even though they'd been dreading it for awhile.

And he'd taken South's punishment for him. Even if South hadn't actually done anything, Japan hadn't seen it that way. And North had got himself hurt even worse to make sure he wouldn't pay for his actions. He'd taken the brunt of the guards' beatings after, too. And South knew he had him to thank for not waking up with *his* back caned today.

His other half traced his fingers over his sleeping brother's jawline. He couldn't feel it, but he knew his jaw hadn't set right after the last break. He knew his brother's face better than anything, it was as close as he got to seeing his own, and he could tell it was crooked now. Just a little bit, enough that no one but him would notice.

'Who else is there to?'

The guards never looked at them, except to sneer. And South bet they didn't even know what the Koreas looked like, besides them

having the wrong flag. They didn't want to see *them,* just the damage they left on them.

And Japan never looked at anyone.

South wiggled close to North, until their brows were touching and he could feel his breath on his face. It smelled awful, just like his. Scrubbing their teeth with their fingers like his brother always insisted might keep them a little cleaner, but it didn't help with bad breath. But even if he teased him about it sometimes (and got teased back), the smell was a familiar awful, soothing. He could feel sleep dragging him down, and he wanted to curl up next to his brother's warm side and rest.

But they shouldn't sleep on the floor. Even if North got blood on the futon, it was better than being on the splintery wood.

South touched his finger to the knob that stuck out just belong his brother's neck, and ran his finger down the ridges of his spine. *'Bump bump bump bump,'* all the way to the bottom. The second time he did it, North shuddered. The third time, he muttered, "Stop it."

South did it again, and he turned his face away, squirming against the floor. Despite his aching head, his other half giggled, releasing him from the torture.

"Got to get to bed," he informed him. "And you need to clean the rest of your... cuts."

North's shadow moved as he pushed himself up, hissing quietly. But once he was up on his knees, he helped South sit, steadying him as he swayed.

They supported each other as they shuffled to the futon, before collapsing in a pile of limbs, North making sure he landed on his front, half on top of South.

"I don't think you should sleep on your back tonight," the southern Korea recommended.

"Wasn't planning on it," North muttered into his neck.

South knew he should tell him to get cleaned up again, but he was warm and comfortable under his brother's weight. He wanted to wrap his arms around him, but didn't want to hurt him any more than he already was, so he settled for holding the sides of his arms.

"I'll wake you up if something starts happening with your head," North offered before he could ask.

South hummed happily, closing his eyes.

He knew there wasn't really any way for his brother to tell if his brain started bleeding. But it helped to know he was watching over him.

It was still dark when he woke up again. Usually not having North next to him would make him jolt up, but his head felt thick and muzzy, so all he could do was have his heart almost stop.

But then it restarted as he heard the rustle of clothes and little hisses North made as he wiped himself down.

'Good,' South thought blearily. He didn't know why his brother was getting touchy about getting tended to, but so long as it wasn't because of South, it was fine. And so long as he still cleaned himself.

North made an annoyed sound through his teeth as he pulled his pants back on, and his brother winced in sympathy. None of the ways he could imagine to put them on would feel great.

"Are you okay?" he mustered the energy to murmur.

"I'm fine," North replied quietly, keeping his voice low. "I'll be back in soon. Go back to sleep."

South lingered on the edge of dreaming, hearing the shuffling and scratching as his brother moved over to the foot of the futon, and started carving his next tally mark into the wall with the stone he kept wedged between the floorboards.

He never made the marks first thing in the morning. Always at the end of the day, and never until after an escape attempt had

failed.

South thought it was silly. The longer he left it, the more time he had to forget. And the idea of that made him nervous. With the light gone, his brother's tally was the only thing that let him know for sure how many days they'd been in here, that there *were* still days and not just an endless blear of dim twilight and dark.

But North insisted. And he hadn't forgotten yet.

When his brother was done marking another day of captivity, he crawled back into the futon, twining his legs with South's, and resting his chin on his head. There wouldn't be any pressing their backs together tonight.

His other half knew when they cuddled like this, he liked sleeping on his back better, so that South could curl up to him. South liked that better, too. So he half-turned, making sure he didn't push North too far onto his injured back, and held onto his shoulders, burying his face in his chest, happy to feel a bit of tension drain out of him.

North's hand brushed the edge of his head wound, then stroked softly along his back.

"Next time," he murmured.

South pushed away the dread he felt at the thought, nuzzling into his other half.

"Next time," he agreed.

—

1952

South's house was on fire. It was burning him alive.

The cold winter had been blessed relief on his burns. He'd realized this year that all the time spent lying on his ondol floor hadn't actually been helping, just made him sweat more, making his burns sting and his bandages cling. The heat soothed his body, sure. But the cold numbed everything else, the way he needed it numbed.

When one of the remaining burns started to hurt again, the edges widening as America was forced to bomb the land he held in order to get rid of North's soldiers and the Chinese, he'd just had to press it to the cool wooden floor or edge of the bookshelf or climb onto the tile kitchen counter and lie still for a few hours until the chill made it go away. It'd worked for every major burn he had left.

Except for that unnatural gash. He didn't like touching that one.

Despite the little bit of relief, winter had been awful, too. The cold surfaces of everything inside were nice on his skin, but the rest of his body couldn't handle it. All the windows wide open, wearing light, loose clothes, having to toss his blanket off at night because that was when most of America's bombs struck.

It reminded him of the shack, of those long, freezing nights when the wind first rattled the windowpane, then wailed through the gaping hole left by North shattering the window, then the cracks in the boards that covered it, cutting off the outside world. It'd just been South and North and the dark and cold. And in that final year, there had been less and less of that second thing.

Now North had shattered the window again, smashed the glass just so he could make someone bleed, because there was a violence inside him and always had been and he couldn't stand to just *behave.*

And this time he wasn't even there to keep South warm.

It was like the cold inside the house leeched through the burns, that gash, seeping into his blood and marrow and heart, until he was numb, and he couldn't remember a time he hadn't been.

But it was still better than the fire. Here in Busan, the snow had all melted, leaving puddles on the road and the front yard a morass of mud that he never set anything more than eyes on. Spring was here, and soon summer would be, too. Soon South would be suffocated under that cloying heat as his wounds festered beneath moist bandages, burning all over again as his sweat soaked into the scabs and sores. The American nurses would come by to change his dressings more often, giving short answers when he spoke, never

looking him in the eye, like they were bandaging an animal, like he wasn't even there.

It was unfair. North had started this, and his own burns had to still be worse than South's. He'd be covered head to toe, flayed open like South's back had once been. He was suffering worse, like he deserved to, yet South was the one being tended to by foreign women with clinical hands and attitude problems, while his brother was being looked after by Kangwon, with his warm smile and steady hands, and probably by Gangwon, too, the way he had been when he'd left South in the first place.

It was *unfair*. *He* was the one who'd started this war, he was the one that always got them punished, he was the one that had gotten South whipped, and he was the one that had left him behind. But still *he* was the one that got to be looked after by people who cared for some reason when South *knew* he didn't appreciate it, while he was always left alone in the cold and dark, patched up by people he didn't even know, who didn't even think about him when they were done.

He wasn't cold now. The ondol was on, filling the house with its insidious heat. America had told him to start a fire in it, so he could come over. He didn't like the chill, and he wouldn't let South go to his place because Grace was sick or something and it was so damn *hot* inside.

He *shouldn't* be cold now. But he was. His body was overheating, even pressed against the kitchen table, as far from the heated bedroom as possible, his burns were sweltering, the old sickening smell of cooking meat wafting up from the collar of the suit he'd put on so he'd look presentable. The house was on fire and he was burning, but his insides were still so *cold*.

He was always freezing or suffocating. Why couldn't he ever just be *warm* again? Why couldn't he just-

The front door slammed open and South scrambled off the table, wincing as he held the burn gash on his right side. He'd moved too fast, but he really didn't feel like being made fun of for his weird habits today.

"Hey, kid!" America called. "You in?"

Where else would he be? There wasn't any point in going outside. The grey city only got more depressing in spring, with the brown mud splattered all over it, traipsed in by the constant flow of soldiers and dirty refugees. The melting snow made everything feel wet and filthy and even grosser.

And there were too many eyes, fixed on his shoes or darting past him. He'd been practicing conversations all winter, and finally mustered up his courage to try and talk to a girl at the market last week, hoping maybe he could start trying to make people like him. If North could do it, he *knew* he could.

He'd thought he was doing okay. He hadn't been stuttering, and since it'd been cold out, he hadn't been hunching over or flinching from the burns, and he hadn't smelled like roast dog. He'd even managed to make a joke about the weather that had made her laugh a little, something North definitely couldn't have done. He'd really felt like someone might like him, or could. They could become friends, and she could come over to watch the foreign films he had, and she would see him, maybe even-

Then he realized she wasn't looking him in the eyes. She wasn't even looking at his lower face, like you would to be polite. Her gaze was on the turnips on the patchwork blanket spread out by her feet. The only time it rose was to look past him at his guards, or at the market square or the sky or anything else that wasn't *him*.

No. There wasn't anything for South outside. Not until the war was over. Until the war was *won*.

"I'm here," he called casually to America, his chest tightening with dread.

Not because of his friend. He knew he didn't have to worry about what he'd set up with the Communists. But because with every step he took down the hall, the air grew hotter and hotter, until he crossed the sitting room to enter his bedroom, and was smacked in the face with a wall of heat.

America was already sitting on the floor, legs splayed comfortably.

"Y'know," he said, tipping his head to look at him in the doorway. "I kinda get this 'sitting on the floor thing' you people do now. It's the only way a man won't freeze his ass off here. Thanks for warming the place up for me, by the by. You like it *way* too cold for this ole southern boy."

"Yeah." South smiled, reluctantly closing the door, trapping himself in with the heat. "No problem."

He *didn't* like it cold. He just liked the numb.

The heat of the ondol floor soaked through his house sandals as he crossed the small room. Last year he'd been annoyed that whoever had owned this house had a Western bed instead of a futon. What was the point of an ondol if it didn't warm up the place you slept?

Now he was glad for it. The elevated bed made it a little warmer with the heat off. He wanted to sit on it now, legs drawn up, safe from the heat emanating through the floorboards.

But America was sitting on the floor, and it felt rude to sit higher than him. Plus he'd probably still end up next to him.

'Oh, you think you're better than me, Southie? I see how it is.' South could just hear his friend saying something like that before he dragged him down to join him. He'd be joking, but the Korean would still feel a little bad. And be on the floor anyway.

South didn't want to feel bad anymore. He didn't need anything else to numb.

So he sat next to America, trying to ignore the heat that immediately enveloped him as he set the bottle of applejack and glasses on the floor between them. Men couldn't have serious discussions without alcohol, after all.

His friend snatched the bottle up to pour, laughing as he held it up to the orange lamplight.

"Started without me, kid?"

South flushed, looking away from the half-empty container. He guessed at some point he must have drank out of it. Maybe that was why the room had spun a little when he'd got up.

'And why your hands aren't shaking.'

'Go to Hell.'

He was already struggling with the heat. He didn't need the voice in his head, too.

"I have the other stuff you gave me," he said, half-standing, even the brief break of contact with the floor a relief.

America pulled him back down. "This should do. I've got shit to do after, so a clear head's fine by me. Unless you need your tongue a little more lubricated for our chat?"

He smirked, an eyebrow rising above his aviators.

"I'm okay," South said, feigning confidence.

No, it wasn't feigned. He could get through a conversation with just a glass or two. He knew he could.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but his bandages already felt wet.

America had taken off his suit jacket, tossing it onto the bed, so it was probably acceptable to do the same. He wasn't sure if he'd needed to be more formal for this or not, since it was the first time after that whole... thing that his friend was coming to him on his own volition just to update him on the armistice. It felt sort of like after he'd freaked out about him not telling him anything, he should show him he really appreciated this. He'd made sure to wear the 'Brooks Brothers' outfit America had got him.

South unbuttoned his dark blue, pin-striped jacket, but stopped before he could take it off. The white shirt under it had a moisture stain on the right side.

The Korean flushed in shame. *'That stupid burn.'*

He didn't want America to feel bad that his pilots were hurting him, or pull his shirt up to ogle at it again. So it looked like he was keeping the stifling suit on.

Even with it unbuttoned, he had to fight the urge to squirm as the fire from the floor worked its way up through his body. The glass of applejack that went straight to his lips after his friend handed it to him only helped a little. The ice he'd added didn't get rid of the heat pooling in his burns, only made the cold inside spread.

"So-" America clapped his hands together after setting his glass down on the floorboards. "Let's get down to business. I don't have much to tell ya, just that the Reds accepted, so the secret sessions are startinggggg... tomorrow."

A little bit of anxiety sparked in South's chest, and he took another drink to soothe it.

"But I figured I'd come by myself, just in case you had any questions," the other man continued. "They actually accepted a coupla days ago. Sorry it took so long to share the beans. I wanted to make sure the commies weren't going to do something unsportsmanly like cancel last minute, y'know?"

South nodded. He'd been wearing holes in the floor ever since America told him about how he was going to ask for secret sessions that might settle the POW thing, but his friend had been sending someone over every day to reassure him that there wasn't any news yet.

He guessed technically there *had* been news, but he got why America didn't want to tell him until the talks were a sure thing.

"Any questions or concerns going into it, Southie?"

Running a finger over the rim of his glass, South asked, "Are you really going to let them get what they want with the POWs?"

America's smile was sharp. "What are you reeeeally asking, kid? C'mon now, don't be shy."

South inhaled, then turned his head to look him in the aviators.

"You're not going to end the war, are you?"

America swirled his glass, tipping his head at him. "Depends. Do you want me to?"

Swallowing, South said, "No."

His friend nodded, taking a swig, letting out a little sigh of satisfaction. "Then nope."

The tension went out of South's muscles, and he almost forgot about how his burns had started stinging again.

America must have seen his relief, because he laughed, reaching over to ruffle his head. "Come on, kid. I told you I'll always do what's best for you. And we both know that's not giving into the Reds and letting you get absorbed. "

South took another drink, just to celebrate, not because his mouth was already dry. "Yeah. I was just a little worried since North held out through winter."

He'd been hoping the season would finish his brother off, make the Chinese and everyone else being starved because he couldn't just give up turn on him, and make him finally accept that he had lost.

But it hadn't. And he knew North wouldn't see spring with the same dread he did. He'd see it as the end of hardship, just like the way he always had in the shack, like the end of winter meant nothing that had happened the previous year- none of the failed escape attempts, none of the beatings, none of the broken bones or hungry days- mattered anymore. Even when he'd been acting the way he had in that final year before he'd left, March First had brought something back to him, the thing that had made him leave him.

South wished Gojong had been born in winter. He wished the protest had been held in the darkest depths on the longest day.

If winter hadn't crushed his brother, then they couldn't count on him seeing sense in the green seasons. Which meant South would have to struggle though another long summer, another rainy season

and grey fall, another few months of cold, lonely winter before he could Reunify with his brother.

But it was better than what would happen if they Reunified on even some of the Reds' terms. Better than if North found out about... everything.

America hand-waved his worry. "I'm not gonna give up just because he's holding on like a dog with a chicken bone. He's got a couple months left in him at most. And even if he runs past the end of his leash, his puppets can't. His little commie government can't hold together much longer." He raised a brow. "And you really think the chinks want to stick around for *another* winter?"

South shook his head. He didn't even know why they'd stuck around for two of them. The first one made sense since they were winning, and had even taken Seoul. But now it was clear they couldn't take it again. He couldn't see why China or whoever was in control would keep them here.

He wished they'd just go home. Then America's armies could crush North's, and he wouldn't have to worry about-

He wasn't worried. He trusted America.

But he'd still feel better if the Chinese were gone.

"Exactly." America nodded decisively. "And the fact that the Reds accepted these sessions means they're getting desperate."

South hesitated. He knew America knew more about politics and stuff than him, but...

"I don't think they are."

His friend cocked his head. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

South took another drink. "North's planning something. He has to be. There's no way he'd let the whole massacre thing go if he wasn't."

Not when he'd looked at him like that after his eye had been

taken.

America gave him a considering look. "You know, you never told me what you thought about that, Southie."

His friend had told him about the massacres before they'd hit the news. But South had had... a little too much to drink on those days, so he'd sort of found it hard to care. He'd mostly just grunted in acknowledgement and pretended to pass out until America left.

He knew by now that alcohol and talking about prisoners of war didn't mix.

Now he shrugged. "They're Communists. Just 'cuz they're not fighting now doesn't mean they couldn't again."

The more he thought about it, the more the entire concept of prisoners of war baffled him. It was weird that someone that had been shooting at you or your soldiers for months, probably killing dozens of them, was suddenly someone that had to be protected just because they'd surrendered or hadn't died when shot. And not just protected, but treated well. South had been shocked to learn that not only were POWs supposed to be allowed to receive letters, but to play sports and receive toiletries, too. Communists that had killed thousands and would kill even more the second they were returned to North were treated better than he'd been under Japan, even when his brother hadn't been around to get him in trouble.

"Besides," he said, trying not to writhe in the confines of his humid, moistening clothes. "The commies started it."

Who threw rocks at men with guns when you were behind bars? That was pretty much *asking* to be shot.

The way South saw it, every KPA prisoner that wanted to act out just to be defiant and got himself killed because of it was one less Communist to cause trouble once they were Reunified.

America grinned, his white teeth glistening. "I'll cheers to that."

He took South's glass, filling it, even though he hadn't realized it was empty. The ice in both of them clattered as they clinked rims.

"North would never see it that way, though," the Korean said after, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "He'd never let it go."

Even though him- well, his army- and the Chinese had killed even more American prisoners, and probably South's.

"So this has to be a trick." There was no way North would agree to shut up about the killings if it wasn't.

What was it he'd said in that broadcast on his Foundation Day? *We do not cower when our kin our killed. We take revenge.'*

And would that have been enough for him, if Japan had killed South? Would he be able to tell himself that just because he'd killed some Japanese, it was fine that he'd left his own brother to die, so long as he got revenge for it?

*'Not that he even **did** get revenge against Japan,'* the Southern Korea thought bitterly.

America examined him, then bobbed his head, sighing. "I'll admit, great minds think alike. But I was trying to give you a little optimism to tide you over."

There wasn't much use in being optimistic when it came to his brother. After all, almost a year of good behaviour had let South start to grow optimistic that North really wasn't going to cause problems anymore, that maybe, just maybe, they might get their window back, or warm meals, or even let out to stretch their legs once and awhile.

And then March First had came.

"Thanks," he said. "But I don't need it."

"Hey, where'd my naïve little Southie who thinks North craps gold go?" America chuckled as he leaned over, ruffling his head again. "I'm just joking, kid. You're coming along great."

South lips curled. He took another drink, feeling sluggish and hot. His dress shirt was choking him, the collar constricting his throat like a damp noose.

America drained the rest of his glass in one swallow, then stood. "Any more questions before I go? Speak now or forever hold your peace."

The Korean shook his head. As relieved as he was that America was keeping his promise and keeping him in the loop, he didn't really want to know about most of the stuff going on. It just made him think useless thoughts there wasn't any point in thinking.

He just wanted it to be over. *Really* over. And they weren't going to get that unless America won.

His ally thumped his shoulder, slinging his jacket on and sauntering for the door. South had just got up when he turned back, his expression considering under the aviators.

"In the interest of making sure you're not sitting on another bomb that's going to blow up on me, I'm surprised you didn't ask about the whole 'biowarfare' thing the Reds are raisin' a stink about again."

America had told him about it awhile ago, and offered to get him some of their newspapers that denied the claims. But South didn't need to see them.

He shrugged, just wishing he'd go so he could start cooling off. "I know you wouldn't do something like that. North and the other Reds are probably just trying to get people mad at you like last year."

Even if America would do that, it was North's fault for driving him to it. If the normal bombs wouldn't make him give up, they'd have to start looking for stuff that would. It sucked that some innocent people might get sick, but there *weren't* any innocent people in the north left. Just Communists.

And he knew America wasn't doing what North said he was. It was flu season, after all. People got sick.

And North lied.

America nodded, looking pleased. "Righto. Y'know, I'm really glad

we worked that 'China' thing out last year. Your trust really means a lot to me, Southie. Just so ya know."

He flashed a dazzling grin, and South's heart leaped. He couldn't have stopped himself from returning it if he'd tried.

"Me too," he said wholeheartedly, forgetting he was melting alive for a second. "And thank *you* for trusting me, even after... all that."

He ducked his head, embarrassed.

God, he couldn't believe he'd been letting what South Chungcheong told him drive a wedge between him and his friend for so long when he *knew* she hated him. What if he'd actually ruined their friendship or done something else stupid, just to find out she was a liar who'd only wanted to sabotage him and America's relationship for the enemy, for North?

His brother couldn't stand the idea that not only did someone like him, but the most powerful country in the *world* liked him. He was just a puppet to CCCP and Red China, but South was America's *friend.* And he was so glad his friend was understanding enough that he hadn't let him allow North to make him mess that up like he messed everything else up.

He needed him. *They* needed him. Everyone else just refused to see it.

"Watah and bridges, kid," America assured him cheerfully. "Watah and bridges. Don't bother getting up, I'll see myself out."

South was already up, but he sat back down as the other country's footsteps clomped down the hall and out the door.

'Still wish he wouldn't wear shoes inside.'

But that was just part of having a friend, right? It wasn't like people were perfect. There were probably things America didn't like about him, either. Even though if he'd ever told him any of those things, South would curl up into a ball and die.

He shifted uncomfortably at the thought of death, pushing away

the images his mind tried to conjure of POWs being mowed down behind bars. He knew that was just his old naïve self that felt a twinge of... not guilt. It wasn't his fault. But a twinge of something.

As if echoing it, there was a sharp sting in the gash in his side. Realizing he finally could, South tore off the jacket and his dress shirt, releasing a sigh of relief as the air flowed across his skin, the cloying heat dissipating a little, taking the twinge with it.

The prisoners had been commies, and just as crazy as his brother for antagonizing guys with guns. South wouldn't even try that with his guards, and they were there to keep him safe. And he knew that none of the POWs would have felt guilty if *he* was gunned down.

'Korea, run!'

He shook the woman out of his head. She'd only wanted him to run so that he'd be captured by her comrades and taken back to North to be brainwashed like him, absorbed and turned into another Soviet puppet, another drone in the hive. She hadn't cared about him. None of them did.

So the Communists had gotten what they deserved. It was North's fault, really, winding them up, making them fight, refusing to ever give up and acting like it was because he cared about people.

If he really cared about them, he'd just accept America's current terms for the POWs, and accept that most of them didn't want to go back to him. They'd literally signed blood petitions that said they wanted to stay with South. Who cared if that wasn't how things had worked before? It would end the war. And it was how things *should* work. Why would they send the anti-Communist prisoners back when they'd just be executed?

North was just jealous that some people were finally choosing South over him.

The ice fragments in his glass clinked against his teeth, and he realized it was empty again.

With an effort, he climbed to his feet. The room didn't sway much.

Three-quarters of a bottle wasn't enough to send him stumbling anymore.

He felt a flicker of pride at that. That meant he was building a tolerance, right? Maybe one day he could drink with America without the threat of embarrassing himself or saying or doing something he didn't want to hanging over him.

Then again, it might also mean he'd have to drink a lot more to forget about the throbbing agony when summer came.

"I can't catch a break," South sighed, making his way to the kitchen to find the rum America had left for him. He'd used to hate the stuff, but any port in a storm.

At least this should be the last summer. North might be riding the high of getting through winter, but it would fade by the next.

'Are you sure about that?'

Those words echoed though his mind, the ones his brother had screamed out at an audience, and at him over the recorder. A thousand years of war, until everything was burned to ash.

South shoved both voices away, his brother's and the other one, taking a swig of rum from the bottle to make sure they'd stay silent.

He *wasn't* sure. He was the opposite. But it didn't matter.

Stripping down to his briefs, he crawled onto the kitchen table, sighing as the cold started to work its way through his body. He'd rather die than go into the stove room to kill the fire fuelling the ondol, so it would be hours until it burned down and the heat faded, allowing him to lay by the couch or in his room. For now, he'd stay here, curled on the burned side that didn't have the gash on it, bottle of alcohol clutched to his thin chest as he tried to sink into the deep black void behind his eyelids.

Rum dribbled down his chin as he drank at the awkward angle, but he didn't care. He was alone anyway.

There wasn't any use in being optimistic about North. But he *could*

be optimistic about the provinces, and the northern government and people. No matter how loyal they were, how blindly devoted to him, once winter was looming again and his brother was still refusing to give up, ready to sacrifice even more of them just to win a fight he had to know he couldn't, they would realize how crazy the person they were following was, and how hopeless his cause was. They'd realize how crazy *they* were being and go back to being regular people that didn't need to be killed. They'd realize that South was here, that he cared, that he was the better option. They would all choose *him.*

The only reason the southern provinces, even South Chungcheong, were still so obsessed with North was because they hadn't seen him fail. But the northerners had. They'd all seemed so sure he could win when they were in the camp, but he *hadn't.* He'd let them down. How could South Hamgyong or Kangwon or even Hwanghae look at his brother the same when he was failing and when he *would* fail?

They couldn't.

That was why he needed Gangwon back. He knew he wouldn't be like the others. South remembered him as jumpier than Kangwon, but they'd been one person, so they had to be similar. Kangwon's friendly smiles and kind words, but without the five years spent being corrupted by Communism. Gangwon hadn't seen the hospitals or performances or political meetings. All he'd seen was war and failure. Even if he'd been with North willingly at the start, he had to have realized by now that he'd made a mistake.

South could save him. Even if the broadcasts never reached him, even if he didn't get him back until Reunification, he could *save* him, snap him out of North's influence.

'I have no intention of losing him.'

Kangwon was too far gone, just like South Chungcheong.

But Gangwon might not be.

Fun fact: this was supposed to be part of the last chapter. So the title would be Saving Face; Losing Heart. But then... things happened with the chapter length. As expected. Also if you're wondering why North still has bruises after all his bones have healed in the flashback, it's because Countryhuman bodies prioritize big wounds . If they're fully healthy and receiving enough calories, bruises will still heal first, but since him and South are constantly being starved and dehydrated, every single bit of energy is leeched from their systems to heal the major breaks, then the process drastically slows down on the smaller ones to avoid overtaxing them.

It has very feminist tones, but at the same time I feel like 'One of the Greats' by Florence and the Machine is such a good South song. Mostly the first half.
I crawled up from under the earth / Broken nails and coughing dirt / Spitting out my songs so you could sing along, oh / And with each bedraggled breath, I knew I came back from the dead / To show you how it's done, to show you what it takes / To conquer and to crucify, to become one of the greats / One of the greats
Go listen to it, the South lines will jump out.

When I was designing the prison shack, I debated on giving it a dirt floor. But since Japan wasn't intending to make them as miserable as possible from the start, I didn't. Also after all their escape attempts he realized that if he removed the floorboards as a punishment, North would probably dig down through the dirt with his bare hands until they could tunnel under the wall. So the boards stay.

Anyway, something beautiful about the Chinese word for comrade (tongzhi) growing to also be how gay people refer to each other. <3 I'm sure China hates it, though.

Mistake

"You w-want to go to the World P-Peace Council?"

Gangwon's eyes went as round as petri dishes, shooting from the words on the page to his face in shock. Kangwon was impressed he'd only tripped up on two words.

"I *am* going," he corrected, writing it instead of signing, so his brother would get what he was saying right away. "I've already talked to Comrades Kim Il-sung, Ri Pyong-nam, and Pak Hon-yong."

The Minister of Health had been wary, but eventually agreed he should go. He wasn't on the ground as much as Kangwon was as a doctor, but he made sure to visit some places personally during investigations, and all the reports eventually made their way to his office. He knew the toll the biological warfare was exacting on them, and he knew the meeting was the best place to expose it.

Kangwon had expected the Minister of Foreign Affairs to protest, since he was putting himself at risk of capture by going, which would cause a political crisis he'd have to handle. But Pak Hon-yong had actually approved surprisingly quickly.

Kim Il-sung hadn't. He'd made it clear he didn't approve at all. But he'd told Kangwon he didn't have the authority to order him not to, like the province had known he would. The Provincehumans acted on their people's wishes and desires, but only *under* Korea's orders.

"Th-That's why K-Korea's still asleep," Gangwon realized.

"Yeah."

Kangwon had told him and their cousins he was leaving their Countryhuman in his coma until March was over. He was already going to be annoyed at not being woken up for the secret talk decision, so there wasn't any harm in making sure he got more recovery time.

None of them had even suspected it was really because he'd been planning on going to Oslo in a few days. Tomorrow now.

His brother sat back on the pallet in the supply room, looking baffled in the glow of the flashlight, muted by the gloves draped over it. "W-What about the others? Are they really…?"

He trailed off, and his lips twisted, a trace of the wry half-smile Kangwon could feel on his own face.

"You didn't tell them," he said, because the Kangwon they'd been wouldn't've either.

"Nope," Kangwon said, writing the words before he leaned back on his palms. "I'm only telling you now because you can't leave the hospital to let them know."

He knew his cousins would try to stop him if they did. It was why he'd only told the Premier and their ministers he was going yesterday. It gave them less time to change their minds, and it gave the General less time to decide he should tell the others, or wake Korea up.

Gangwon shook his head, his smile fading. "Kang, that's c-c-crazy. What if Am-America sends someone to k-k-kidnap you, or one of the other c-countries does, or-"

"Gang." Kangwon caught his hand, dragging it away from his mouth. He used his own free hand to sign out some of his words to make sure he got them. "I'll be fine. Norway might not be neutral, but he's only got medical workers involved in this war. And he's at least a little left-leaning right now."

The country was still a monarchy, and their Labour Party was filled with Social Democrats, who were known to be pretty useless when they weren't being outright malicious. But they were allowing the World Peace Council to be held in their capital, and they weren't as dangerous as right-wing Nationalists or hardcore America supporters would be. To progressive movements, yes. To him personally? Hopefully not.

“Y-You’re just trying to make me feel b-b-better.” Gangwon saw right through him, his other hand going to his mouth so he could chew on his ragged nail. “He’s in N-NATO, and he v-v-voted to label Ch-Ch-“ He squeezed his eyes shut, the scrap of nail he'd had left snapping off between his teeth. *“China* as an aggressor."

Kangwon gently pried his other hand away from his mouth, pinning it on the pallet. “Okay,” he admitted. “I was trying to make you feel better. But I mean it, too.”

Cautiously, he released his brother’s hands. They went right back to his mouth, but he picked up the book anyway, writing.

“This isn’t a UN meeting,” he said when he’d finished, holding the page up to the light for Gangwon. “It’s the World Peace Council. There’ll be Soviet representatives there, and comrades from other nations. Even if there are spies, they'll be outnumbered by people that are either on our side, or at least don’t want to see something happen to a foreign Provincehuman if it could happen to theirs, too.”

“What about N-Norway?” Gangwon fretted. “You won’t be in the meeting the ent-tire time.”

It was true he’d be on his own (well, with the other people going) from the airport to the meeting hall. But transportation was arranged, so it wasn’t like he’d be strolling through the streets. And he was making sure to cut things close. No one knew a Provincehuman was coming, only a ‘special representative’ from the DPRK. Ideally, he’d be arriving an hour before the meeting, speaking on the first day, and leaving the rest to his team while he went back home directly after, not getting a hotel like the others.

“Gangwon,” he said, taking his brother’s hands again to look him in the eyes, counting on his steady words and facial movements to get through to him. “I know it’s dangerous. I know I’m taking a big chance here.”

Even if Norway himself was a good guy, a good country, his government probably wasn’t. Given the choice between Communism and fascism, Social Democrats would always pick the

second one. They were its moderate wing, after all. They had voted to label China an aggressor, and even though they didn't have troops in Korea, they'd voted as a non-permanent Security Council member to invade them in the first place.

Kangwon believed most people wanted to be good. But some of them weren't. He knew why his cousins would try to stop him, because he'd probably try to stop *them* if they'd tried this. This was dangerous.

"But I have to do it," he said firmly. "I have to try. We need to show the world what America's doing, no matter what. We need to try and stop it." His jaw feathered. "I need to do everything I can."

Gangwon searched his face, eyes piercing his in the muted light, the sheen on them wavering with uncertainty and fear.

But he was a nurse. He'd wiped down children covered in smallpox pustules that cried no matter how gentle he was. He'd fed rice slurry to the grandfathers and grandmothers shuttled into the hospital walls, doing more and more of the work of swallowing for them until they couldn't anymore, dying in a sterile hospital instead of surrounded by their families because they couldn't afford to make them sick, too. The weakest members of their society, the ones that should be protected, being laid waste to even by diseases a healthy adult could almost brush off. He'd rubbed the other nurses' backs as they reached their breaking point from sickness and death and curled up into balls in the empty rooms of patients they'd tried so hard to save. He'd seen the eschars and seizures and splatters of blood on sheets from coughs and diarrhea and rotting skin.

So his lips firmed.

"Okay," he said heavily. "Just p-please." He grabbed his brother's hands in his now, staring at him pleadingly. "Be safe. I d-don't want to lose you."

Kangwon exhaled as he understood, like he'd thought he would.

"I will," he vowed, squeezing him reassuringly. "And you won't.

Korea would kill me if I got taken.”

Gangwon half-smiled, more of a nervous twitch.

Kangwon went to sleep early, getting some rest for tomorrow. He had all his notes ready, from the investigations and treatments, and for his speech. He couldn’t command a crowd the same way Korea could've, but he wasn't bad at public speaking. He just wasn’t used to raising his voice the same way his Countryhuman could, rousing people into whatever emotion he needed.

Kangwon was more slow and steady, better at praising achievements and giving criticism than battle speeches. But steady would be good for the council. He was solid and assured, someone to be believed. His obvious exhaustion worked, too. He was a doctor worn out from his people dying, proof that they were.

Gangwon left at some point, off to do his night rounds. Kangwon twinged with half-asleep guilt, hearing shouting from somewhere deep in the hospital, filtering into the supply room through the thin walls, louder when a nurse crept in to get supplies under the watchful eyes of one of his brother's guards.

But he needed the rest. Looking tired was good. Being so tired he couldn’t think straight wasn’t.

Gangwon returned in the early hours, curling up next to him on the pallet, pulling his own blanket over him as he passed out. Kangwon felt his warm side pressed up against his, and before he sank back down into sleep, wondered if there was some way he could get a message to South from the council, something to let him know what his ‘ally’ was doing to them, what he’d done to his brother.

It was the kind of thought that made tons of sense when you were half-dreaming, but had too many obstacles if you were thinking with your whole brain. Still, he fell sleep for the final time that night with his brother’s light breathing beside him, rotating it in his mind.

He woke up early, maybe only an hour later, unused to sleeping

for so long without being woken up to help triage an inpatient or check some new symptom. The light in the supply room was the same as last night, the hall lights filtering under the door.

Kangwon sat up, yawning as he stretched. When he turned, he found Gangwon already sitting up, looking at him.

"I'm going with you," his brother said, and it was his turn for his eyes to widen, his exhaustion blown away.

"No," Kangwon immediately denied, scrabbling for the notebook. "It's too dangerous."

"B-But not for you?" Gangwon didn't wait for his answer. "You're right, Kang. This meeting is the safest chance we'll g-g-get to talk to the rest of the world. It's the best chance I'll get to tell them I'm not a hostage."

"It's also the best chance for America to get you," Kangwon said, his fingers aching to be chewed.

Gangwon's eyes were wide and frightened as he said, "I kn-know. But we've got to take the chance don't we? Things are w-working out in the secret sessions, you said. I'm going to be the only p-problem."

His brows lifted slightly. *'I know.'*

Of course he'd figured it out. Just like he'd figured out South was calling for him in the first place, and Kangwon had suspected his cousins were hiding America's demand for Gangwon from both of them at first.

"Korea wouldn't give you back," he told him. "He said he wouldn't."

"I know." Gangwon's grip on the blanket on is lap tightened. "And I don't want to go back. But I also d-don't want to be the thing that stops us from getting an armistice."

The talks were going promisingly. Both sides were revising their lists of POWs like theirs had suggested, and the Americans hadn't

played coy for the last three days, but almost easily accepted the three main proposals they had. They'd had to make a concession, one Korea wouldn't like. But settling the POWs was looking hopeful.

The concession had only redoubled Kangwon's desire to go to the council. He knew it'd end with losing comrades. He had to save the ones he could.

But with it made, in a couple days there really could be just one thing left between them and a ceasefire.

His brother.

"If I go and t-talk, and tell everyone I'm not a POW, and I'm choosing to stay here on my own, America won't be able to use me to b-block the armistice," Gangwon said.

Kangwon pointed out, "He'd probably still try."

And then he'd know for sure he was here.

Gangwon's eyes dipped to his lap, then back to his. "Do you think the other countries would let him?"

"They might not have a choice."

"They would," his brother said, clutching at the collar of his workshirt. "They could believe me, or they could believe Americ-ca. Or they could believe me, but still do what he wanted. I don't… I'm n-not sure I trust them." His gaze bored into his. "B-But you said even if they don't care about us, they'll want to- to end the war. Do you really think they would?"

Kangwon wanted to. He wanted to believe that even if the foreign nations didn't care about them, they cared about their own people. They didn't want any more of them to die in an unwinnable war for America. That even if their governments were all just like Japan's, their people weren't, *they* weren't. He wanted to believe they *did* care about them, that if they saw they weren't the bloodthirsty dictatorship the American and South's representatives had said they were, they'd realize what was being done to them was wrong, and

stop it.

He wanted them to be good.

“Yeah,” he said to his brother, quietly. “I do.”

It was why he was going.

“Then I have to go.” Gangwon’s fingers twitched, but he folded them into fists. “I have to do everything I can, too.”

Kangwon exhaled, holding his head in his hands. Through his russet fingers, he could see his brother, hands clenched so hard he was trembling, but still staring resolutely.

His brother had changed from who they’d been, and now from who he’d been. Whatever had made them the way they were when they were formed, this change was all his.

Could Kangwon deny that? What if Korea had denied them the right of changing when they’d followed him, or treated him in the cave? If he'd told Kangwon their hands were too shaky to disinfect his wounds or clean Bong-nam’s back, and it was better not to try at all… He didn’t think they’d be here now. He wouldn’t be who he was, he wouldn’t’ve saved all the people he’d saved.

But still, if the cost of his brother’s change might be him…

But that was selfish. And this was bigger than him.

“Alright,” Kangwon said, palms scraping his cheeks as he raised his head. “Then let’s get going.”

Gangwon’s guards almost didn’t let them. Hyon Jae-bom and Kim Pyeong-ung had both been in the KPRA, people they’d known personally as Kangwon, both of them former patients whose lives they’d saved. Korea had chosen the loyallest people possible to guard their secret Provincehuman.

It took a half-hour to convince them, Kangwon and Gangwon explaining the situation, how they needed to go. That Gangwon would never be alone unless it was to assure someone official that

he really was with Korea of his own free will, and that that someone wouldn't be involved with the UN at all.

The two men had been guarding the Quarantine Hospital since January, witnesses to everything Gangwon had been. In the end, they grudgingly agreed.

"I'll be b-back," he promised.

Kim Pyeong-ung's thin lips pressed flat. "See to it. We can't lose you to the enemy."

"And that's a personal 'can't,'" Hyon Jae-bom added.

The men both saluted, and the Kangwons were released.

Gangwon blinked, unused to the non-artificial rich blue light of pre-pre-dawn. He was allowed out for brief breaks as long as he kept his ear slits covered, but he never took them. Too much work to do. Like Kangwon, if he got a moment's rest it was *for* rest.

He wrapped a blindfold over his brother's eyes, working with the face mask to hide his identity. Then he made sure he couldn't hear at all through the layer of gauze wrapped around his head and stuffed into his ushanka.

The spring breeze was mellowing, getting more refreshing than biting now. Soon it'd be the type of weather where their three Chinese comrades started wearing scarves instead of hats.

'Hopefully we'll have a ceasefire by then.' And they'd be on the way home, the war never having touched their country.

But that wasn't true. It already had. The Americans had bombed over the border before they'd even arrived, burning their peasants in their fields. They'd kept doing it now, blaming it on mistakes. And they'd brought the germ warfare to them, infecting the only people that'd really come to Korea's aid.

It was just another reason to go, to try and get at least a little bit of justice, for both of them.

Kangwon led his brother to the waiting truck, stopping at Jonsung complex to get dressed, grab his materials, and tell the Premier he was taking his brother with him.

The man's full lips pressed thin. But, “Be cautious. The enemy will strike at any weakpoint they can,” was all he said.

He knew that. But sometimes you had to expose a weakpoint to win the battle.

‘And save lives.’

Dressed in their high-collared black tunic suits (Gangwon’s borrowed from a Party member with a scrawny build like his) and crisp white medical coats to drive home that they were medical professionals, they emerged into the early morning sunshine.

They’d be driving all the way to the border with the Soviet Union, where a hastily-scheduled charter plane would take them to Harbin in China to meet up with the Chinese delegates and their own, who'd already headed over to Manchuria. Then a Soviet airline would take them to Moscva, and eventually Oslo.

Kangwon knew he probably could’ve got in contact with CCCP to get a private plane for their entire group to head straight there, but he didn’t need to add asking the Soviet for favours to the list of things Korea’d be pissed at him for when they got back. At least since the civilian airline was Soviet, he wouldn’t have to pull strings to get on. International travel with Provincehumans could apparently get complicated (he’d been asking around, avoiding Hwang, even though he probably had the answer), but within the ‘Soviet Bloc’ it was apparently pretty easy. CCCP wanted to encourage international solidarity with it, since subdivisions leaving their nations was something that didn’t happen much.

Kangwon didn’t think Korea would like hearing they were part of the ‘Soviet Bloc.’ But it was convenient. And hopefully he wouldn’t have too much trouble getting into Norway.

Even if they did, and he missed the first day of the meetings, so long as he made it on one of the next three, it should be fine. A

speaking slot would almost definitely be opened up for them.

As they walked down Moran Hill towards the waiting truck, Kangwon was suddenly yanked back, a hand over his mouth as he was wrestled behind a rock formation, his back pressed to someone's chest.

His brother made a startled sound as his hold on him was torn away, and Sip Yung-su barked, "Comrade Kangwon?!"

"Get rid of them," a low voice murmured in his ear slit, and the province relaxed, sort of. He didn't ram his elbow back into his attacker's solar plexus like he'd been about to anyway.

"Just taking a toilet break," he called easily. "I'll catch up."

Footsteps pounded towards him, and his younger guard poked his head around the formation, gun drawn.

Kangwon smiled at him, now standing alone. "Sorry, should've said I was going. But it was sort of urgent."

Sip's eyes flicked over the barren slope, but even though it was still dark out, it was clearly empty. He coughed in embarrassment, holstering his gun. "Right, sorry."

"It's your job." Kangwon watched him go.

He probably should've taken the chance to go with him, but he was pretty sure he'd just be snatched again. With how early it was, he was pretty sure this wasn't just a chance meeting

"I don't have much time," he said, turning around. "What's up?"

China slid around the side of the formation, a slim shape in the shadows cast by the rock. "Where are you going, Little Brother?"

His narrowed eyes and soft tone said he already knew. Maybe he'd been inside the shelter, eavesdropping like he liked doing.

So Kangwon confessed, "Oslo."

China stepped closer, moving in a sinuous prowl that made him a bit wary. “And do you really think that’s wise?”

“No,” Kangwon admitted. “But I’m doing it anyway.”

“And taking your brother with you.” China took another step, slow and deliberate.

Kangwon held his ground, even as he thought about the foxes he’d watch stalk their prey in the woods, picking each paw up and placing it carefully down, right up until the kill rush.

“It’ll be a good opportunity to show the world we’re not holding him captive,” he said, echoing his brother’s words.

China echoed his. “And a good opportunity for our antagonist to snatch him up. A tiger cub is easy prey for an eagle.”

“Good thing we’re people.”

“Not just people.” The Countryhuman took another step, only a couple away now. “Provincehumans. I shouldn’t have to remind you what *that* means. But since you don’t seem to be using your brain right now, I will.”

One last deliberate footfall had him looming over Kangwon, staring down at him. Kangwon couldn’t see his mouth. But he got the feeling he wasn’t smiling.

“Even if you can both withstand torture, your Korea’s brother could still force your brother’s jaws open and take his secrets.” China watched him from above the mask, unblinking. “Secrets that *I* happen to have a stake in.”

“Gangwon doesn’t know about you,” Kangwon reassured him. He wanted to put some distance between them, but fought the urge. “And even if we were caught, he’d take himself out.”

He wasn’t sure if he could do it if it meant crippling him permanently, but he knew his brother could. And he was the important one.

The thought made him want to chew his nails even more than China's looming.

"For how long?" the other man asked. His voice was still cordial, but it didn't mask the energy he was radiating. "How long until he wakes up strapped to a cot, unable to disable himself again, and has everything he knows taken from him?"

Kangwon pushed the image away. "It doesn't matter," he said calmly. "The war should be over by the time he'd heal." If he did. "Then Commands won't work anymore."

"'It should be,' doesn't mean it will." China tipped his head. "And would he even need the Commands? Or would he fold the second America locked him in a dark room?"

Had one of them told him that? Korea wouldn't've.

Kangwon stuck his hands in his pockets. "I trust my brother."

"I don't trust our enemies," China countered. "And trust means nothing when it comes to Command."

He stepped forward again, and Kangwon had to give ground or else they'd be touching. When he spoke again, his voice was low.

"You are going to suffer for your trust, Little Brother. At the risk of sounding like our enemy, the Western countries aren't like us. Not because of something intrinsic, but because of time." China stepped forward again, forcing him back another step. "Do you know when this Norway was formed? 1814. He had no one to colonize his country and carve up borders as they pleased, no one to decide what his country should look like but *him.* For one hundred and thirty-eight years, he has been a kingdom, a *king.* He has never had to view the people he rules as people. He won't view you and yours as such."

"Maybe that's true," Kangwon said. Maybe all the time on the potter's wheel being molded by hands that saw him as above them had made the Norwegian Countryhuman similar to Japan and America. "But his people haven't lived longer than any other."

"But they've lived *comfortably* longer than us," China responded sharply. "You're a Marxist. You know the Europeans have spent generations as the subjects of kings and tyrants who let the blood they need from foreign nations. They don't see injustice in the boot pressing their head to the soil- they see it as their own crown. They don't know what it is to be the oppressed. Only the oppressor."

Kangwon opened his mouth, and he cut him off like he'd read his mind.

"Germany and his Hitler gave them taste. But it taught them nothing. Have you heard of the Sami?" The man didn't wait for an answer. "They're Norway's, his Indigenous people. And he and his Nordics have destroyed their villages, forbidden their languages, taken their traditions, cultures, *names."*

China's eyes slitted.

"Sounds familiar," Kangwon acknowledged. Very familiar.

"His government has torn children away from their parents and forced them into schools to 'Norwegianize' them," the country continued, tone still smooth, but eyes burning. "And Norway has *allowed* it, even after what they experienced. They've taken what the Nazis did and used it as a lesson, not in resistance, but in how to oppress. Do you know what Lebensborn was?"

Again he didn't wait for an answer. "Nazi soldiers 'recruited' women to bear their 'pure' children for them. They bred them like cattle. Do you want to know how those women are being treated now? Beaten, shorn, ran out of their homes, their children looked down upon and abused."

China leaned over, gaze burning down on him. "Some of our people might not look kindly on women who were made to bear devil-children. But *we* don't. And we change the minds of those that do. The Norwegians make no efforts to. They *want* it this way. They hate their women the same way our predecessors did."

"Our people didn't agree with it," Kangwon countered. Even if some people still held backwards views about women, it was less

and less every year, especially with how hard women were working for the war effort. “They changed it. So-“

“Because even our men know what it is to be subjugated.” China’s gaze burned hot. “They *know* what it is to be humiliated and abused. The Westerners *don’t.* Anyone that would change Norway is outnumbered by those that wouldn’t because they profit from him staying the same. And those people are the only ones in power.”

The foreign country drew himself up, eyes flashing like knives. “You are heading directly into a country whose Countryhuman and his rulers are destroying their own people. And you think they won’t hesitate to destroy *you?”*

Kangwon’s jaw clenched. But he knew he couldn’t back down.

“Maybe they’ll try,” he said, meeting China’s eyes. “But you can’t really stop me from going.”

They narrowed again as he tipped his head, voice light. “Do you think so?”

Unbidden, Kangwon remembered his confrontation with America, the way he’d watched him like a wild dog.

But China wasn’t giving off the same feral feeling. As intense as his gaze was, his tone had remained smooth, with just a hint of ice under it.

Still, Kangwon’s body was telling him he was in danger. Not standing in front of a savage hound, but a pit viper coiled to strike.

“Korea wouldn’t be very happy to hear a foreign Countryhuman was ordering one of his provinces around, even if you’re a comrade,” he said, staying calm, but very aware of how much distance he had until he was out from behind the rock and in view of his guards.

China’s eyes squinted mirthlessly. “Did I say I was going to order you?”

“I don’t think he’d be very happy with one of his provinces getting

detained. Or anything else."

"I'm not very happy at the prospect of my involvement in your war getting leaked," the man returned. "So I'll ask-"

He struck, and as ready as he was Kangwon wasn't fast enough. China's palm struck his chest, pushing him sideways into the rock before his hand was placed snugly up against the base of his neck. Pinning him lightly, not choking him, but with his fingers resting threateningly on his carotid, encouraging the province not to test an escape.

China's voice dipped low, freezing as the glacier breached the surface and he pierced him with an intense stare.

"Does your brother know that I am in your country? Is there the smallest chance that he even *thinks* I am?"

Pinned even more firmly by his gaze, Kangwon could tell he wouldn't just take a thoughtless answer.

So he thought hard, searching his memory for any chances Gangwon might've had to figure out China or his provinces were here. He tried to imagine what he would think if he saw masked people hanging around them, tried to remember when he'd first realized who 'Mao Zhilong' was.

He'd probably think they were high-ranking Chinese advisors who wanted to hide their identities from spies, or that Korea didn't want anyone knowing he was taking advice from foreigners. And he was sure Gangwon hadn't been around any of the three enough to see their white eyes or the colours of their flags. Kangwon had only seen because they were marching together through enemy territory, and China had to keep his ushanka higher on his head. And they still hadn't told him about the trial last year, so he shouldn't even suspect the Countryhuman *could* be here.

Since Korea had asked this same question, Gangwon hadn't even been in the same building as China or his provinces more than a handful of times. And they'd never been in the same room.

So Kangwon looked steadily up at China, his hand still on his throat, and confidently said, “No.”

The other man searched his face, narrow white eyes taking in every micromovement of his lips and brows, like he was reading him even deeper than his cousins and Korea could. It almost felt invasive, but Kangwon made an effort to try not to stifle any of them, letting him read that he was being honest, and hoping the fact that he could feel how his pulse didn’t match his tone didn’t make him think he wasn’t.

“I don’t want to risk your country or your people,” Kangwon added sincerely, his blood beating against China’s fingerpads. “You’ve helped us out a lot, and I don’t want to see you get hurt for it. If I thought he knew you’re here, I wouldn’t let him go.”

An armistice wouldn’t be worth it if the war just moved to their neighbour. The Chinese had been the only ones to come to their aid. China was one of the good countries for sure, even if he was weird and also maybe thinking about bashing Kangwon’s head off the rock behind him. He was just doing this because he loved his people, and the province *knew* he loved his people because he’d shared his blood with them. And none of them deserved to suffer for doing what was right.

“We don’t want to be reckless, comrade,” he told him, not dropping his gaze. “We just want to do what we can to end the war, so our people can *all* go home and live peacefully.”

China must’ve sensed his sincerity, or decided he really was telling the truth, because after a long second, his hand slid away, freeing him, even if he didn’t move back at all.

“You still shouldn’t go,” he advised, and he was back to sounding smooth and unbothered, like he hadn’t just been thinking about taking Kangwon out. “I doubt your Korea will be very pleased with you. And if he finds out I had a chance to stop you and didn’t, who do you think he’ll take it out on?”

It was true. If China tried to order him not to go, or did something to stop him, it would make Korea bristle. But so would

letting him go. It was a lose-lose situation for him, but might actually work out for Kangwon. Given the choice between directing his anger at one of his provinces or a foreign country, he'd definitely choose China. And SH would have a better chance at stopping him from doing that.

Kangwon pointedly rubbed his throat, heart still pounding. "It's a chance I've got to take."

"Mm, admirable," China noted, actually sounding like he meant it. "And so very stupid. Korea will have lost a good doctor when you don't return. And a good nurse."

Kangwon's own fingers tightened around his own neck before he dropped them. "Good thing we will."

He looked up at the sky, the dark blue lightening by a few shades. It was around four. Time to leave.

"If you're done choking me out, I've got to go now."

China clicked his tongue. "Aiya, I didn't even apply any pressure. Would you mind telling me your route before you'd go? It might at least bring me comfort if I hear your plane crashed."

He was still antagonizing him, but Kangwon figured he probably should, so he wouldn't be sweating wondering if they'd been captured by the enemy if any planes were shot down.

He opened his mouth, then paused.

China was watching him, looking like he was smiling under the mask. But there was still an intensity to the eyes above it, like when he'd been giving that Norwegian 'current affairs' monologue. And Kangwon thought he knew why he'd been giving it.

China didn't have the authority to stop him. But his cousins did.

"I've actually got to get going," he said, taking a step back.

"So soon?" China asked, taking one forward. "I'd at least like to hear what you're planning to say. Maybe your flight path, so if your

Korea wakes up in the meantime, I can reassure him?”

“My comrades already know it.” Kangwon took another step back, towards the edge of the rock. And as soon as the momentum of China’s next one ended, he turned and ran.

“You’re making a mistake.”

He wasn’t sure if the man grabbed for him or not, if he was committed to stalling with his words or willing to actually get physical. He just kept running, until he was far enough down the slope that he could see the truck waiting on the river road, and he knew the Countryhuman wouldn’t risk being seen by Gangwon.

Then he switched to a jog, looking back.

The few trees left clinging to the ridges of Moran Hill like solitary soldiers rustled in the crisp night breeze, spring buds swaying. Redstarts rustled their feathers as they waited for the sun, one even perching on the rock formation to preen its brown feathers. A drone came from over the hills. Nothing else moved.

Kangwon still hurried down to the base of the hill, jogging for the truck.

“Everything alright, comrade?” Sip Yung-su asked in concern.

“Yeah,” he said, jumping into the back with Gangwon. “But let’s hurry.”

Ri Il hit the gas on the GAZ-67, and they sped through the east checkpoint, on the highway to Chongjin and the Soviet border, hopefully before Liaoxi or Liaotung had reached the bunker.

China must’ve been prepared for this. Either he’d been lurking around Jonsung complex yesterday or picked up on something Kangwon was giving off when he’d taken his blood again after. He wasn't nervous, exactly, but he was filled with anticipation. And the Chinese man was scarily observant. If he really had been choking out Kangwon, he didn’t think he would’ve been able to filch the pistol at his hip the way he'd taken America's.

He rubbed at his throat again, deciding that he wouldn't tell Korea about that, if only to spare their alliance. His Countryhuman had a pretty firm 'I'm the only one allowed to throw him around' rule.

He also decided that one of his priorities in life was to never get pushed up against a wall by a foreign Countryhuman again. But with the way things were going, if he ran into Norway, it was probably going to happen.

'Better than anything else he could do to us.'

Gangwon cast him nervous looks as he kept peering around the canvas that covered the back to glance down the road behind them, prepared for a glimpse of the GAZ-MM or Chinese Jeep emerging out of the dark behind them.

Kangwon wasn't ready to get in a road race with his cousins, which meant he'd have to try and persuade them to let them go instead. Which would never work, especially if South Pyongan or North Hamgyong were there. Or SH. They'd try to talk him out of it, probably succeed at getting him to leave Gangwon, then resort to force to get him to stay. He knew they weren't above it. He'd tie one of them up if it would keep them safe, too. He'd tie up Korea to stop him from running off the way he did, even if his Countryhuman hated him for it. It would devastate him, but at least he'd be safe.

But they needed to do this. They needed to try.

He gave his brother a reassuring look, leaning back into the vehicle. There were only two seats in the front, so the provinces were sitting hunched up on the bench where cargo should go, safely hidden from any observers.

Gangwon pulled out his notebook, a fresh one Kangwon had bought with his own money, not wanting to take the one filled with their personal conversations out of the country in case something did happen.

"W-Why aren't we going to China first?" he asked. He'd gotten good at not talking too loud, but his volume crept up a little now,

overcompensating for the fabric muffling him.

Kangwon balanced the notebook on his knees, writing, “The Chinese border’s got too many eyes on it. Plus it’ll be blocked up.”

Nighttime used to be the best time to cross the border, but now it was the other way around for a small section of the Amnok corridor. With the B-29 bombers limited, the day would be filled with supplies coming over, officers moving back and forth, the medical discharges being returned home, and stealthy troop movements (though most of them were still saved for the dark hours to disguise them from any reconnaissance planes that got too close). Kangwon had seen it for himself when making sure none of the villages in the area were infected (another thing he’d added to his notes- considering the Sinuiju area had a huge amount of traffic and Chinese soldiers stationed in it, it was weird that there were significantly less outbreaks than in areas beyond it, on both sides of the border)

Plus the Soviet border would have less of a chance for spies. Only slightly less, but Kangwon wanted to make sure they moved as carefully as possible. The amount of time they’d lose driving north was made up for by security and trying to limit the chance of Korea brutally murdering him when this was over to as little as possible.

“Get some sleep,” he advised, Gangwon straining to see what he’d written in the dark. “You were up late last night.”

He'd only got maybe an hour’s sleep. And they had a long road ahead of them.

His brother nodded, leaning against him in the cramped space, head cushioned by his ushanka. He closed his eyes, but Kangwon could tell by the way he picked his nails that he was too nervous to rest.

He held his brother's hands in one of his, stopping him from ruining what was left of his fingertips, and with one last backwards look, settled in for the drive, trying not to think about what China had said as he ran, not shouted in desperation, but calm, a solemn omen.

‘You’re making a mistake.’

Kangwon being the most calm, understanding, emotionally intelligent person alive:
Every Countryhuman within a ten-ri radius, including his own:
I need to slam him into a wall.

Also my cat was purring so loudly this morning as I aggressively rubbed his belly and face. I love him so much. <3

A Cruel Echo

It was ten hours from Pyongyang to the northern border, even with Ri Il driving as fast as possible, and Kangwon's identification card breezing them through checkpoints. They only stopped to refuel at supply depots, refusing to take toilet breaks until then, even though Kangwon had to bite down on the doctor's advice that it wasn't good to hold it.

As the sun rose, their country passed them by beyond the open doors of the GAZ. Rolling fields of freshly tilled and planted earth surrounded Pyongyang and Hwanghae, but almost no peasants tended them. Even without the B-29s, the other bombers were more than enough to keep most people nocturnal, the rising sun sending them scurrying into their holes. The few people Kangwon could see past the canvas worked quickly, never looking down for too long. Clusters of mounds dotted the landscape, dug-outs with people sleeping the day away inside.

As they reached the edge of Hwanghae, passing into Kangwon's province, hills rose up around them, scrub trees clinging to the muddy earth, still scarred from artillery from when the southern army had marched on the north. They passed empty villages, doors swinging on crumbling huts, where refugees had evacuated, heading for caves or anywhere safer than on a main road. Debris from the ruins that hadn't been so lucky lined the culverts, piles of brick, stone, wood, anything salvageable enough to reuse. Workers and volunteers surrounded some of them, piling them into carts and jige, headed for the local factories or depots, while others sat abandoned, not enough hands left even for something as important as not wasting resources.

Kangwon could feel his brother watching with him, getting his first good look at their country in over a year. His gaze filled with bone-deep sorrow as they passed a side road leading to a village, reading *'QUARANTINED. UNAUTHORIZED TRAVEL PROHIBITED BY THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH.'* Militia men in face masks

flanked it, watching them pass with shadowed eyes.

"It's why we're going," Kangwon murmured, squeezing his brother's hand as he showed him the words. "To try and stop it."

Gangwon's expression firmed, eyes hardening with resolve. "W-We will. And Korea will stop the war."

Kangwon squeezed his hand.

They didn't follow the highway all the way to Wonsan, turning on a mountain road that'd started being used more ever since their coasts were put under constant bombardment. Kangwon didn't need to see his capital to know it was just like those empty villages. He'd seen it from a distance on his visit to check on some of the rear units a week ago, the decimated swaths mirroring the burns on his skin.

As the mountains fell away again on SH's Kowon County, he looked west, across the plains. A patch of blackened earth spread at the foot of the hills, not even piles of rubble left to mark that a village had once stood there.

As bad as Wonsan was, it was still getting off lucky.

"W-Was that Yongpyong-ri?" his brother asked quietly.

"Yeah." Kangwon tore his eyes away. "It was."

Spring retreated the farther north they went, snow still lining the mountains around Chongjin and beyond. They finally reached Tumangang on the Soviet border around fourteen hundred. Sip Yung-su cut the engine, glancing nervously up at the sky. Kangwon joined him, making sure the fighters he could see off the coast were theirs before stretching out his compressed muscles, which he hadn't gotten to do since Chongjin.

"Let's hurry," his younger guard urged. "I don't like you being out in the open."

The area around the Tuman River was all floodplains and fields. The only cover was the buildings still standing in Tumangang Town

and the dug-outs pebbling the ground around the border bridge. From here, Kangwon could see the shining surface of Sobon Lake to the south, fishermen crowded around it. And to the north he could see across the river into both China and the CCCP, where peasants in a distant village carried water from the riverbank, and workers worked on a rail line. Their countries all converged here, on the Tuman.

It was almost peaceful. The Americans weren't as brave about bombing up here, where every time they 'missed' their target, they might hit the Soviet Union. And though Ridgway had sent multiple raids claiming to be targeting troop build-ups, he still didn't seem quite as eager to do that as MacArthur had been.

But Kangwon could still see the craters where they had gotten brave, and the chunks missing from the border town. And he could see the American ships to the east, floating on the grey seas beyond the mouth of the Tuman, as close as they could get to the Soviet maritime border, waiting.

"Well," he said to his guards. "Here goes nothing."

"I still think we should come with you," Ri Il tried to persuade him one final time.

"You comrades know too much," Kangwon told him, also for one final time. "I know you're both capable, but no one knows if they're strong enough to resist torture until they do."

Which China had to know.

He glanced down the road behind them. "Comrade Kim Il-sung has a guard for us that we'll meet up with in Harbin. And you wouldn't be able to get on the charter plane anyway. I'm sure an hour from Kasan to Vladivostok won't kill us."

He smiled, but neither man looked reassured. They knew his guard wouldn't be able to go armed into a foreign country. Kangwon himself was feeling naked without his firearms and blade. The new comrade would be another pair of eyes at most.

"Just be safe," Ri Il said, obviously still reluctant.

"That's the goal." Kangwon sobered, looking up at them. "But if something does happen to us, Korea might execute you."

They both nodded grimly.

Korea didn't like executing anyone that could be re-educated, and he really wouldn't like executing someone that didn't even need to be re-educated. Ri Il and Sip Yung-su weren't being malicious- they were trusting their Provincehuman to champion the well-being of their republic.

But Kangwon *was* a Provincehuman. Which meant they weren't regular bodyguards. If he got hurt on their watch because they'd been too slow or not skilled enough, they'd probably be dismissed and held in a secure location until the war was over. But if he got hurt *because* of them, or because they'd let him do something they knew they shouldn't have, that was treason. If he was here for Korea to take his anger out on, it would probably save them.

But if him and Gangwon didn't come back, nothing would.

"I'm giving you permission to flee the country," he said calmly, the same thing he'd said to Gangwon's guards. "If I'm not back by April 3nd, you have a standing order to head to China or the Soviet Union."

He was doing this to try and help their people, and Korea. If he messed up, he didn't want his comrades getting harmed, or for his Countryhuman to do something he'd regret. It was his and Gangwon's decision to risk themselves- he couldn't ask his comrades to pay for it.

"If you don't come back," Ri Il said gravely. "Then we deserve to be executed."

Sip Yung-su nodded, jaw set.

With their decision made, Kangwon clasped arms with both of them, and they saluted as him and Gangwon headed for the border.

The guards manning the crossing watched them approach, and accepted their identity cards and travel papers easily, not asking questions, even though they were clearly curious. Pak Hon-yong had made all the arrangements for them, like the charter plane and the train to Vladivostok.

Kangwon's boots thumped on the wooden bridge, then on the dirt road on the other side, and suddenly they were no longer in Korea.

The air didn't feel any heavier. The breeze wasn't any less fresh or pine-scented. He didn't feel like he'd just been drained of energy or that something important had been taken from him. He was just suddenly very aware of the fact that he wasn't in his country, like he had been the few times he'd left it during the Occupation.

He wondered if it was mental or a Provincehuman thing. He knew at least some of his other cousins felt it, but then again, it could just be because they weren't used to leaving their borders. Maybe he'd ask China if he felt it, if they were still on good terms when he got back. Or his provinces.

Then again, if any of them did share the feeling (and didn't lie about it), maybe Kangwon shouldn't bring attention to it.

If it was a Provincehuman thing, what did that mean? Borders shouldn't really mean much, since country territory changed all the time, especially in the past. So if Korea annexed the ground he was standing on now, would he suddenly feel like it was his country?

Korea would never do that, but if he did, would he change? If their people did affect them in some subtle way, not just the way they treated them, but *them,* what would happen to him or North Hamgyong with the thousands of Russians living in Kasan now theirs? Would something in them change right away, or with time as they integrated and became their people?

Kangwon rejected the idea. As much as they all denied Japan's claim on them, Korea *had* been a Japanese colony. They'd been an official part of his empire for thirty-five years. If stolen land could change a Countryhuman, wouldn't some part of them have leeched into Japan, made him realize that what he was doing was wrong?

Wouldn't he have started to see them as just as much his people as the Japanese, and wanted to do what was best for them, free them?

...Was that why colonizers always tried to crush their colonies' cultures, or the minorities whose lands they conquered, like the Sami in Norway? To Norwegianize them, or Americanize Puerto Rico? As the years went by, did their stolen people start to leech into them, make them start to see things differently, so they moved to crush everything that made them see differently?

In the early years, Japan had kept their people distinct. They'd been forbidden from taking Japanese names, told they were subhuman. It wasn't until the thirties that he'd started to say their people were related, that they were cut from the same cloth, and began to force them to take Japanese names, to follow Shintoism and root out every last bit of Korean culture, even the ones he'd been lax towards until then. The treatment had only gotten worse, but the goal was different- not oppressing Koreans because they were 'lesser beings' that deserved to be oppressed, but doing it because he wanted them to become indistinguishable from the Japanese.

Had he done it because he felt himself changing?

The idea made Kangwon shiver in the truck to the Kasan rail station.

As open-minded as he was, it made him feel defiant, and uncharacteristically possessive. He didn't like to think that at any point, any bit of them or their people had belonged to Japan enough to affect him.

And he didn't like to think that if faced with seeing people they considered less-than as people, colonizers would choose to crush them over the threat of feeling empathy.

It was one of those uncomfortable questions he'd never get an answer to, so he pushed it away, watching from the window as they drove alongside the rail line that should connect them to the Soviet Union sometime soon this year, and the Korean border grew blurry behind him.

Their cousins hadn't made it in time. He could stop looking back. But he kept his eyes on it as the road curved, and so did Gangwon.

It wouldn't be the last time they ever saw their country. They'd be fine.

Still, as the train they were on carved a path through the Russian wilderness under the shadows of snow-capped mountains and deep blue lakes, Kangwon kept his eyes fixed behind them, on the grey line circled by tiny dots.

The Vladivostok peninsula was as far north as they'd ever gone during the Occupation, and they'd personally never gone into the city. Korea, SH, Chungbuk, and Hwang had, making contact with the people they needed for the March First newspaper. The town of Artyom was only familiar to them from a distance, and they still didn't see much of it as a Soviet-Korean drove them from the train station to the airport.

He'd been silent on the way, but as the Kangwons got out, he put a fist over his heart, saying in accented Korean, "Long live Korea."

Kangwon smiled, returning the gesture with Gangwon, who didn't need to hear to know what he'd said. "Long live Korea."

The Vladivostok Airport was a small cluster of buildings next to an airfield and a runway. Kangwon could only see one plane, a silver MIG emblazoned with Chinese markers, sitting on the bricks.

"Must not get a lot of people lining up to go to Vladivostok."

"What?" Gangwon asked loudly.

He sighed, signing, "Let's go find our ride."

But as they walked towards the terminal, a man jumped out of the MiG, scurrying their way.

"Ah, there are the comrades we have been waiting for!" the round-face man cried cheerily. "Come, come, don't try to escape Comrade Morozov!"

He grabbed Gangwon, whose eyes shot open, clearly terrified. Kangwon winced, but the Soviet only patted him hardily on the back before moving on to him.

Gangwon looked at him over his shoulder with alarm, signing, *'I thought he was going to kiss me!'*

Kangwon had, too. Like Korea, he wasn't the biggest fan of the Soviet quirk. Well, he was probably more okay with it than Korea. But still not okay with it.

"When we hear very important Korean comrades are to be needing a plane, Artyom and I are volunteering right away," the man said in broken Korean as he pulled away. *"Pavel Igorevich Morozov, for your pleasure. My accent is pretty good, Да?"*

Kangwon looked past him at the man still leaning against the MiG, a cigarette in his hand, even though he had a scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face, aviator goggles over his eyes, and an ushanka on his head, completely stopping him from smoking.

He raised a brow. "You're taking us in a MiG?"

He'd expected a small passenger plane, or civilian monoplane.

"Of course, it is being said that such important comrades need to be seen safely to China. And now I am seeing why." Morozov eyed them, then flapped a hand. *"Ah, but I am not here to ask questions, only to fly. Well, Artyom is."*

He led them over to the plane, and the man with the covered face pushed off it. Morozov grabbed his cigarette, sticking it between his own lips.

"Artyom is not much for conversation," he said in Russian now. "But he had to come along. He wanted to see his namesake, you see." He laughed, elbowing the man, who didn't respond, looking between the Kangwons, then at Morozov.

Kangwon couldn't see his face past the scarf, ushanka, and pilot's goggles that covered every bit of skin, but he thought he looked displeased.

"Ah, Artyom is worried because we were told there would be only one passenger," Morozov said. "But is fine. It's not like Artyom hasn't done it with three people before, right, comrade?"

He belly-roared, elbowing his friend? again so hard he stumbled.

That... probably wasn't the safest. But Kangwon guessed it was sort of his fault for bringing Gangwon last minute.

"Well get in, get in." Morozov ushered them to the plane. "The sooner Artyom is back, the sooner we can return to shooting Yankees out of the sky like ducks."

Kangwon had only seen unwrecked planes a few times from close up while visiting their small air fleet from before the war. He'd forgotten how big they looked at this distance. He followed Artyom's gestures, climbing nimbly up onto the wing of the plane, and sliding into the second seat, already dreading the short flight as he tried to arrange his legs properly. Gangwon got up almost as easily as him, but had trouble fitting in. They had to shift around awkwardly, wincing as their burns were disturbed, until he was half on top of him, crammed into the seat.

'Yeah, we're not going to be able to walk after this.' He kept the thought to himself. Mostly because he couldn't sign with his arms completely pinned between his brother and the side of the cockpit.

The Soviet man slung himself into the front, doing his checks while the provinces tried to get comfortable.

"Good luck!" Morozov called cheerfully from below. "Artyom is an okay pilot! You will probably not crash!"

"W-What did he say?" Gangwon asked. He'd taken off the ushanka and ear muffler, since they were safe from broadcasts for now.

"He said enjoy the flight," Kangwon said as their pilot closed the cockpit.

As the engine roared to life, Gangwon flinched, crying out, and his heart stopped for a moment, too.

It was that drone he was so familiar with from every waking moment of his life, that had plagued them every step to the Raktong and every step back. That even if his brother couldn't hear in the sky anymore, he'd never forget, and could feel it vibrating through his bones.

It grew louder as the engine woke up, and Kangwon had to fight the urge to grab his brother and pull him down, or run, even with nowhere to go, as his body told him the jet was right on top of them, coming for the kill.

Gangwon was clinging to him, eyes squeezed shut, and he fought back his reaction, struggling to free an arm so he could rub his shoulder.

"It's okay," he soothed, heart pounding, still expecting the world to explode around them. "We're okay."

His brother nodded into his shoulder, taking deep breaths, still trembling.

Korea had once mentioned that they'd all learn how to pilot planes when they had time. Kangwon thought that might be harder than he'd first thought.

With Artyom ready, the jet started to taxi down the runway. Gangwon sat rigid, his bony frame pressing in close to Kangwon, his grip on his shoulder tightening as the wheels left the ground. There was a brief moment of weightlessness and then-

They were airborne, soaring into the sky.

Kangwon stayed firmly pressed into the cockpit for the first few minutes, while the pilot sounded off with the air traffic controller. But after awhile, he shifted, twisting himself into a slightly more uncomfortable position to look out the thick glass surrounding them, and almost immediately forgot about the droning.

The Russian SFSR spread out below them, a rippling banner of green and white, dotted with shining blue lakes, broad bands of shimmering water weaving them into the landscape like silver

thread. Far below, just on the edge of what he could see, a train powered across the plains, smoke streaming from it in a long trail, the same one that had left Artyom Town, heading towards the next stop on its line.

Kangwon wasn't the most poetic person. The flowery prose had never really done it for him. But for a moment, he got why their visits to the top of Paektusan always sent North Pyongan to compose, and he was struck with a sudden deep longing to see Korea like this- the emerald valleys of Mount Kumgang, the gold fields of the Honam Plains, Paektusan and the sapphire waters of Chon Lake.

And their cities. Pyongyang and Wonsan and Seoul. He wished he could've seen them before the war.

He'd always thought maybe the distance made it easier. People could be like that. If it wasn't right in front of them, something they could see and touch, it wasn't as real. He'd thought maybe that was what made it so easy for the American pilots to wipe their villages off the map.

But up here, able to see the Soviet cities and towns and villages scattered over the landscape, little pockets of warmth in the vast wilderness, the people down below felt more real than ever. From so high up, none of the layouts looked unfamiliar, none of the houses looked strange. They could've been Korean, and so could the people in them. He couldn't see any of them, but he could see everything else- the roads and rails they'd built, the homes they'd carved into their country, the sort of lives they'd live inside, the same ones as his people. Nothing felt distant. Somehow, even though he was farther away from the earth than he'd ever been, he suddenly felt closer to everyone still on it.

Kangwon tried to imagine looking down at that tapestry of humanity and making the decision to wipe it out, to pull a lever and release fire hot enough to erase a village and everyone in it, or explosives to knock down the walls while families dined inside, or germs that would leave it nothing more than an empty shell. But he couldn't. It was too unthinkable.

So why wasn't it for the Americans?

"It's amazing," Gangwon breathed, pressed to the other side of the glass bubble.

"I wish Korea could see it," Kangwon murmured, knowing he couldn't hear him.

Artyom saw them looking, and he shouted over the jet's roar, "Welcome to the Motherland!"

His voice was different than Kangwon had expected. Raspy, but expressive. He realized he'd sort of been expecting him to sound like Chagang.

"It's amazing," he shouted back, leaning forward as much as he could. "But why do you call it the Motherland?"

He'd asked CCCP before, but he'd just said it was because one of the first 'Russias' had been female. He'd always wondered if his people had the same reason.

"Father is both Father and Mother!" Artyom shouted back, their plane curving. "He is our Parent."

Kangwon leaned back, content with the answer as he watched the land pass below, eventually shifting into the plains of northeast China as they took a wide curve into the country, Artyom identifying himself to more air control. The view was almost enough to forget about how bad his legs were starting to tingle after about an hour.

Almost.

But his body didn't forget. By the time they reached the Harbin airfield, Artyom had to pretty much lift them both out of the cockpit and down to the ground. Gangwon stumbled, hitting his knees as he moaned miserably, and Kangwon couldn't take more than a few steps, completely unable to feel his legs, paresthesia prickling from his thighs to his toes.

"It is a two-person plane," Artyom said sagely. "Glory to the peace-

loving peoples of the world."

After being thanked, he left to refuel for the flight back.

Still half-dead, Kangwon and Gangwon hobbled to the terminal, escorted by a Chinese security guard.

Harbin's Majiagou Airport was busier than the Artyom one, but not by much. You didn't fly unless you had money. And coming out of a civil war, not a lot of people in China did.

Their representatives were already there, ready to get on the plane that departed in twenty minutes. They eagerly met them, introducing themselves. Kangwon had already met theirs- Ri Ki-en and his entourage- but was introduced to their guard- Kim Ju-bong, an impressively large man with a shaved head- and the president of the Chinese People's Committee for World Peace- Dr. Guo Moruo, a revolutionary and non-practicing doctor trained in Japan.

"We're glad to have you, comrades," he said confidently. "With your presence, I'm sure we can shine a ray of light on the dark deeds of the American Imperialists."

Kangwon had heard he was a poet, too.

"That's the plan," he said, hoisting the small case holding his notes. It had left an imprint a couple centimetres deep in his shin from the plane.

"I have to confess, I'm a bit worried," Ri Ki-en murmured as they boarded the plane, getting on with no problems. "Given our enemy's demands, I'm afraid it isn't wise to go travelling."

His eyes slid to Gangwon.

"We can't back out n-now," his brother said, getting what he was thinking.

He tried to sound confident, but the words came out around his fingertip.

"He's right," Kangwon said more firmly. "We're in this."

Ri Ki-en dipped his head, still clearly concerned, but didn't protest anymore.

This plane ride was way longer- ten hours to Moscow in total, not counting almost double in layovers- but far more comfortable. Their seats were wide and padded, and him and Gangwon sat with their guard at the front, given priority seating by the Soviet pilot on every leg. He gave his brother the window so he could talk to Ri Ki-en across their guard and the aisle, though they kept their conversations light since there were civilians on board. Not many, just a handful of Chinese and more foreigners leaving the country, and they'd all been seated away from them, giving them space. But Kangwon could see them watching him with open curiosity.

He looked back, catching the eyes of a pale brunette woman and an older Chinese man a few seats back. The province smiled, giving a small wave, and the woman's green eyes went wide as she quickly ducked back into her seat. But the Chinese man lit up, raising his hand in return.

Kangwon sat back, pinning his case with his feet, checking to make sure no green skin was showing past Gangwon's ushanka and face mask.

It was weird to be in the Soviet civilian plane. It was way bigger than the MiG, and he felt less like a passenger and more like he'd been swallowed by some large animal. An animal that had a bad smoking habit judging by the grey smog eddying inside, making him pull out his own face mask. He didn't know a lot about planes, but this one had had the word 'Aeroflot' branded on its side in blue, letting him exercise his Russian for the first time in awhile.

Kangwon felt a little guilty about it, but when they were offered meals, he took them, devouring the cold kolbasa, warm bread and buckwheat, and the little tin of black caviar, though he turned down the alcohol like his brother did. Kim Ju-bong watched the meals be put together (giving everyone else on the plane a free poison screening), and the price was included in the tickets, so there really wasn't any reason not to. And one of the stewardesses seemed to be really put out by how skinny they were, passing him and his brother extra buns as she held a finger to her lips. It was

hard to say no to that.

Still, it felt a little like a betrayal to his cousins, who were going to sleep in the cold bunker with half-full stomachs and waking up to eat plain rice.

He was trying to eat without looking like he was starving, but he still ended up with a mouthful of black bread he couldn't swallow right. He looked away from Kim Ju-bong, silently trying not to choke, and met Gangwon's eyes, filled with the same guilt as his, his cheeks bulging with buckwheat.

Kangwon's lips twitched, and they both had to look away, now trying not to choke or break out into giggles that would single-handedly destroy their country's reputation.

The ride was smooth (metaphorically- physically they were being shaken around like the animal whose stomach they were in had decided to do star-jumps), the layovers in Chita, Novosibirsk, and the couple other cities weren't too long, and with their guard there, him and Gangwon could both get some sleep (though he only ever dozed, too interested in watching the endless tundra and settlements through the small window, intrigued by the fact that there were broad swathes of green and brown in it when he'd thought Siberia might have stayed snowy all year long). And eventually, they were in Moscva.

Well, outside it. Vnukovo Airport was a few ri southwest of the city. Sadly as hard as he squinted, he couldn't see the shape of the Kremlin against the distant skyline. He couldn't see much through the billowing grey banks of fog and the white glare of the spotlight bouncing off them. His ambiance was limited to the many windows and central tower of the looming terminal, and the large *'MOCKBA'* sign over the doors that cast dramatic shadows down below.

Now the air did feel different. Thicker, maybe. They were halfway across the world, farther away from Korea than they'd ever been. Coming down to earth, he'd seen the differences in the buildings clearly- the angular edges of apartment blocs, the few twisting spires that had survived the World Anti-Fascist War, so different than anything in Korea. He'd seen similar uniforms to the ones on

the Soviet soldiers smoking at the edge of the airfield on the comrades in their country after the Division, but the outfits of the people waiting below were definitely foreign- long, snatched-waist coats and huge fur collars on the women, slim jackets and thick, high-necked sweaters on the men, and more hats and headscarfs than he'd ever seen in his life on both. Crimson wildflowers sprouted from the bricks on the edge of the runway, and though they looked like peonies, he'd never seen their kind before.

Gangwon quailed behind him, shrinking back, and he guided him down the boarding ramp, sticking close to their entourage. The Soviets waiting for their friends and family to get off the plane were briefly distracted, watching him with wide eyes as they talked loudly to each other, either forgetting Provincehumans could understand all languages or just tired from being up so early waiting for the plane.

"Oh, that can't be a country. Whose republic do you think he is? Hungary's?"

"Look at the men with him. He's Asian for sure."

"He's very handsome, isn't he?"

"Спасибо," Kangwon replied to the last comment, smiling at the young woman with wheat-coloured hair that had said it.

She squeaked in embarrassment, hiding behind a laughing man as she buried her flushed face in her hands.

"I'm Kangwon province," Kangwon raised his voice to fulfill their curiosity and distract them from his brother. *"From the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."*

The words sent a rustle through the small gathering.

"Korea?"

"But they're still at war, yes?"

Then the rest of the passengers started to disembark, and the Provincehumans got the chance to slip away.

Away from the crowd, Gangwon peeked out from under his ushanka, looking interested in the world beyond the airport, even though he was still sheltering from the Soviets. "Kang, what's it sound like?"

Kangwon listened. Under the sounds of the onlookers behind them welcoming their loved ones back in Russian, Ukrainian, and a few other languages, he could hear raised voices from the terminal, distant engines, and the far-away whistle of a train from out in the pre-dawn. Somewhere a dog barked.

But there was nothing from the sky. For a moment, with no planes incoming or leaving, it was empty. The people around them were focused on the ones they were greeting, not looking up waiting for that to change, or hustling to get out of the light as quick as possible.

For the first time in twenty-one months, he was outside, and the drone was gone.

"Quiet," he said, and a tension he hadn't realized he'd been carrying left his shoulders. He placed his palm over his mouth for his brother.

Gangwon looked relieved, looking up at the white terminal building, red lights blinking on the top of the signal towers, then out at the vague shapes of the city beyond the edge of the spotlight.

"Do you think Korea would let us visit after the war's over?" he asked, intrigued.

Kangwon watched a brawny man get off the plane, running over to another man waiting for him. They passionately locked lips before slinging arms around each other, laughing boisterously as they headed off, asking how each other's wives and children were.

"Don't think so."

"Oh y-yeah." Gangwon side-eyed him, opened his mouth, then they both looked away awkwardly.

"Let's get inside," Kangwon suggested, starting for the terminal.

"Y-Yeah, inside." His brother scurried after him.

He was worried about getting on the plane that would take them to Stockholm, so at the final Soviet airport, the Spilve Airport in the Latvian SSR, he made sure to head to the gate early. But when he offered to show the Soviet security guard that patted him down his travel papers, he just waved his hand.

"No problem getting on the plane, comrade. Can't guarantee Stockholm or Oslo will let you in, but we can get you there."

"Thanks."

As the plane left Riga, Kangwon felt anticipation build in his chest. This leg of the journey felt... different. The Soviet Union was Socialist like them, full of comrades. If they'd ran into trouble there, if worst came to worst, he probably could've got CCCP to straighten things out. Now they were heading into a *really* foreign land- Sweden and Norway, two countries that were capitalist, and still monarchies.

'The Western countries aren't like us.'

He shoved China's words away again. Even if they weren't, it was definitely too late to back down now.

He didn't look out the window on the short flight over the Baltic Sea, focused on reviewing his notes, the death toll, his experience in the hospitals, the eyewitness testimony of finding masses of insects after American planes passed by, the insects he'd seen with his own eyes. Everything he'd collected over the past three months, all the proof of what was being done to Korea.

The Stockholm Airport didn't really know what to do with them, the security guards exchanging looks as they showed their identification cards and travel documents. They stared hard at Gangwon, hard enough to make Kangwon want to put himself between them. But he didn't want to make them think he was being protective because his brother was a hostage. And after a bit of discussion and thirty minutes alone in a back office, the Swedes decided that the best way to handle them was to pass the

responsibility to the Norwegians.

The flight to Oslo was even shorter, just an hour. Now Kangwon stayed pressed to the window with his brother, looking out at the snowy hills, reassuring himself that the homes nestled between them looked just like theirs, and the Russians' and Latvians' and Swedes'.

As the plane began to descend, he sat back, heart fluttering inside his chest. Kim Ju-bong's jaw tightened so much he could hear his teeth grinding. Ri Ki-en clasped his hands tight enough that the knuckles went pale. Gangwon started to tremble, his breath coming faster.

Kangwon reached over, holding his hand in the privacy of the dip between their seats, and his brother's fingers tightened around his. He gave him a grateful look, and the russet province smiled reassuringly.

'We can do this.'

Gangwon took a deep breath, and when he opened his eyes, they were filled with determination.

'Yeah. We can.'

The plane shuddered and jounced as the wheels touched down, landing rougher than on any of their other stops before it came to a stop. Kangwon kept his breathing slow and steady.

This was it.

They left the plane last, heading down to the gate area. It was almost nine, but the slate grey clouds hiding the sun made Oslo barely any brighter than early morning Moscva. Snow still clung to the ground in sad, wet patches, and frost glittered on the blades of grass poking through in the fields around the airport.

"We made it in time," Kangwon remarked, pleased. He'd been worried about the many layovers making them late. He also wasn't sure he had a good grasp on how time zones worked.

"There's our driver," Guo Morou nodded his chin at a man holding up a sign that had his name in hanzi. "We should be at the venue with an hour to spare."

"Good," Kangwon said as their group made their way towards him. "I want to find an American delegate and give them a moment alone with Gangwon. I'll make sure I keep an eye on the room they're in, but I want-"

"Comrades," Kim Ju-bong cut in sharply. "Trouble."

Kangwon's stomach clenched as he followed his gaze towards the terminal, where a group of men had just emerged. They were clad in black tunics with matching black caps on their head, gleaming pistols on their hips. And they didn't look friendly.

"State Police," Guo Morou said tensely.

Like their Security Force. These were the people that handled serious threats.

And they had a Provincehuman with them. A tall man with navy skin, his broad frame straining against a black tunic like the others, but with gold epaulets, a royal purple sash around his shoulders, and a small bronze crown that almost looked like it was made out of blocks of stone on his head. The crest on his face was a man in armour, arrows in hand as he presided over two lions and a naked woman. It was hard to tell if she was reclining or about to be executed.

But it was easy to tell the province was feeling just as friendly as the officers.

Kangwon was suddenly very conscious that he wasn't armed.

"Keep walking." He casually put himself between the police and Gangwon, his eyes on the driver. "Might not be for us."

But they made a beeline for them, intercepting them before they could reach their getaway.

"What seems to be-?"

"Kangwon province of North Korea?" the lead officer clipped, his eyes like chips of ice as he cut Ri Ki-en off.

"Kangwon province of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," he confirmed, keeping his tone friendly. "Can I help you?"

The Provincehuman- Oslo, he guessed- avoided his look, staring into middle-distance as he translated for the men, his voice as cold and deep as a fjord. He used 'North Korea.'

The chips of ice cut into the person hiding behind him. "Remove your mask and identify yourself."

Gangwon grabbed onto the back of Kangwon's coat, and he put himself even more firmly between them.

"Can you tell us why?" he asked casually, Oslo translating again.

He was ignored. "Identify yourself or we will be forced to identify you."

Gangwon was shaking, his eyes wide with confusion as Kangwon looked back at him.

"They want you to remove your mask," he said, trying to stay calm. He went to sign the words, but the Norwegian officer suddenly barked, *"Now!"*

Gangwon flinched at something he saw behind him, and Kangwon quickly pulled his ushanka off before the police could. Understanding, his brother removed his mask and gauze with shaky hands, squeezing his eyes shut.

Oslo examined his green skin and the gold province shape on his flag, looked at something in an officer's hand, then nodded, finally speaking his own words. "That's him."

Kangwon's heart sank.

The officer turned his icy eyes on him. "By the order of the Kingdom of Norway, acting under the authority of the United Nations, you are under arrest for the kidnapping and detaining of a

Korean Provincehuman, and for the illegal invasion of South Korea."

His pulse almost stopped, but Kangwon didn't have a chance to be speechless, quickly translating for the others. Repeating the words himself didn't make them make any more sense.

"What?!" Ri Ki-en cried, outraged. "What illegal invasion?! The United Nations is the one that got themselves illegally involved in *our* civil war!"

"Be careful if you don't want to get charged with aiding a terrorist state," one of them men said coldly.

"Terrorist?!"

"Gentlemen," Guo Morou cut in, stepping to Ri Ki-en's side. "This must be a misunderstanding. Mr. Kangwon is a Korean Provincehuman. Even if the DPRK *had* invaded another country instead of responded to threats made against them by an illegitimate government, he can't be held liable for his Countryhuman's decisions without fair trial. And how can a Korean Provincehuman kidnap a Korean Provincehuman? If such a thing happened, it would be a civil matter for Korea to resolve."

"It *is* being resolved," the Norwegian said with finality when his province had translated. "Now step aside."

Ri Ki-en placed himself in his path. "We are a *sovereign country,"* he hissed, eyes flashing. "Here to attend the World Peace Council. You have *no right* to detain our Provincehumans."

Kangwon saw the hand straying for his baton, and quickly pulled his delegate away from the man.

"Comrade Ri," he said, trying to stay calm even with his stomach turning in uneasy knots. "Don't give them an excuse. We need you at the Peace Council."

His comrade's jaw feathered. "But-"

"This is just a misunderstanding," he said, hoping Guo Morou was right, or he could at least turn it into one. "I'll try and work this out,

and make it to the Peace Council tomorrow."

Ri Ki-en's fists clenched, the cords on his neck straining. He was usually a diplomatic, unruffled man, but Kangwon could see the fury in his eyes right now.

"Comrade," Guo Morou said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We need a Korean at the council. You have the details of reports I don't have."

Kangwon nodded. "Our country needs to have a voice there."

Hopefully he could still be one. But if he couldn't...

Ri Ki-en looked between him and Gangwon, then sagged. "Fine," he spat bitterly, then rounded on the Norwegians. "But you and your country *will* be hearing from us."

"K-Kang, w-w-what's happening?" Gangwon asked, grabbing onto his sleeve.

Kangwon went to sign to him, but then the Norwegians were surrounding them, muscling them away from each other.

"Keep your hands off them!" Kim Ju-bong shouted, lunging forward.

"Don't," Kangwon called, struggling just enough to get his arms free, shoving his case into Ri Ki-en's arms, urgently telling him, "All my notes are in there. If I don't show up, use them. Don't let this distract you, focus on the biological warfare, we need-"

One of the hands grabbing at him suddenly wrapped over his mouth, yanking his head back. He tried not to fight back and give them another reason to persecute him, even as the cold steel handcuffs locked around his wrists.

Gangwon's eyes widened as they grabbed for him, backing up. "W-W-W-?"

"Don't resist!" an officer barked, hand going for his pistol, not his baton. "You are a foreign Provincehuman on Norwegian soil, any

acts of hostility are acts of war!"

"He can't hear you!" Kangwon yelled in alarm. "He's deaf, he can't-!"

"Shut it," the man restraining him growled, grabbing his mouth again, muffling him with his pale hand.

Oslo didn't translate, watching with an almost bored expression on his blue face.

Gangwon backed up, eyes blown wide and white, darting between Kangwon and the men advancing on him, clearly wanting to run, but not wanting to leave him, and knowing he had nowhere to go. With his mouth and hands restrained, Kangwon had no way to talk to him, no way but begging with his eyes, *'Don't move, don't resist.'*

His brother's thin chest heaved under his suit as he held his hands up, his breath coming in sharp gasps as he tried speak. "I-I-I'm n-n-n-n-n-ot-t- I-I'm n-n-not a- I'm- H-He's m-my- P-P-P-Please d-don't take m-m-me back t-to A-A-Am-m- A-m-m-m-m-m-"

His gasp shattered into a yelp as he was suddenly barrelled to the ground by one of the men, forced onto his stomach as they slapped more cuffs on him, Ri Ki-en, Guo Morou, and their aids making protests that weren't listened to.

Kangwon fought now, slamming his foot down onto the foot of the man holding him, taking the opportunity as his hand flew away to demand of Oslo, "If you're saying he's kidnapped, why are you handcuffing him?"

The man flicked his eyes to him, looking up and down, unimpressed. Then he looked away, like he wasn't worthy of an answer.

Realizing his brother was still gasping, so panic-stricken he couldn't get any oxygen in as the men bored down on him, Kangwon shouted in alarm, "He can't breathe! Get off him!"

At his words a blur shot past him, and Kim Ju-bong slammed bodily into the officers, sending the two men tumbling, freeing

Gangwon. Biting the bullet, Kangwon slammed his bent elbow back into his captor, breaking free and flying for his brother, skidding hard enough to scrape holes in his pants as he dropped to his knees on the merciless ground, trying to look him in the eye.

"Gang, it's okay," he quickly soothed, wishing he could help him up and rub his back. "It's okay, we'll get everything worked out, just breathe. Deep breaths."

His brother couldn't hear over the yelling, and his lips were moving too fast to read, but as he looked up at him, he calmed, his chest starting to rise and fall a little slower as he wrestled his lungs back under his control. Relief filled Kangwon a second before he was yanked roughly away from his brother.

"Assaulting a Norwegian officer," the man growled in his ear.

"He couldn't breathe," Kangwon defended, but wasn't understood by him, and was ignored by Oslo.

"Take him, too," the officer ordered, jerking his head at Kim Ju-bong.

"Gladly," the man growled as Kangwon told him what was happening, wiping blood from the nose of the guard he'd broken from his face. "You couldn't pull me away from my provinces if you tried, cunt."

"He'll comply," Oslo said, already leaving. "Handle them the way Norway said. I have other business."

"You don't have to do this!" Kangwon called after him, alarmed. He didn't know Norwegian, and he doubted it'd be easy to find a human that spoke Korean. "Let us talk to you! Please! I can prove Gangwon's with us because he wants to be!"

The Norwegian province didn't even look back, just brushed through the terminal doors and disappeared, the light glinting off his crown.

This was all going very wrong.

Kangwon and Gangwon weren't taken away by inconspicuously going around the building. They were taken through the terminal, right through the arrivals under the wide eyes of all the people that had been on the plane with them. One of the Latvian-Soviets tried to demand to know what was going on, but he was shoved aside, and everyone else just watched, a sea of pale skin and light eyes.

Kangwon flushed with shame. He was rumpled, Gangwon was still hyperventilating, and Kim Ju-bong was smeared in blood. He knew they *looked* like criminals. And now whenever one of these people thought of Korea, this was what they'd think of. His provinces being marched away by the State Police like terrorists.

Even if things worked out okay in the end, Korea was still going to kill him.

But they didn't.

As they were dragged back outside, the men holding Kangwon and Kim Ju-bong started hauling him for one sleek black cars waiting in the lot. And the men holding his brother started to take him for the other.

"Why is he getting in another car?" he demanded, but the men couldn't understand him, just like they couldn't understand Ri Ki-en and Guo Morou protesting. Even if they could, they didn't care.

"Kang, what's going on?" Gangwon cried as he was hauled for the vehicle. "W-W-Where are they taking me?"

"I don't know," he called frantically as his brother started to thrash.

"I d-d-d-on't w-w-ant to go!" he shouted, trying to break free. "I d-don't-!"

"Hold still!" a guard ordered, tightening his hold, and Kangwon yelled uselessly again, "He's deaf! He can't hear you! He doesn't know what's happening! Just let me-!"

"Gang!" his brother cried, terrified. "D-D-Don't l-let them take m-me please d-don't let them take me! Ic-c-c-an'tgobackIc-c-c-c-c-c-

Hyung!"

The word sent a desperate surge through Kangwon, and he slammed his head back into the man behind him, screw acts of war. He was too tall to smash his nose, but the impact still made him stagger, allowing Kangwon to kick back directly into his kneecap with full force. The officer let out an agonized scream, but he didn't care, tearing free and sprinting for Gangwon. Something in his face must've spooked the man holding him because he let go, fumbling for his pistol, and his brother got free, running for him.

"Hyung!"

"Hyung!"

They met halfway, colliding with each other, and Kangwon tried to lean over him, to shelter him from incoming bullets or batons. His hands were still bound, but he needed to hold his brother, needed to tell him what was happening and that it'd be okay, it'd work out. He bit down and yanked his hand up, feeling the metal cuff press painfully against his carpometacarpol. Gritting his teeth, he grabbed his thumb and *yanked,* snapping it out of place, sliding his hand free as pain lanced up his arm. Despite it, he wrapped his arms around Gangwon, and they buried their faces in each other's shoulders. He could feel his brother trying to free himself, but then meaty hands were on them, trying to pry them away from each other, the way he'd been taken by America and Rhee's men in the first place, before Kangwon had even got to know him.

But he knew him now, and he wasn't letting them take his brother so easily.

They clung to each other, Gangwon pressing as close to him as possible, trying to get as much purchase with his chin on his shoulder as he could, and Kangwon with his nails sank into his shoulder blades, blinding pain throbbing in his wrist. Kim Ju-bong and their delegates were shouting, demanding the Norwegians keep them together, and a crowd had started to form on the roadside, undeterred by the police telling them to keep back.

But the brothers didn't care, their eyes squeezed shut as they clung

to each other, tried to do it with more than their bodies so they wouldn't lose each other again.

Then the officers finally overcame the scrutiny of the crowd, and a baton slammed into Kangwon's back. He grit his teeth, holding tighter as it battered his shoulders, until a powerful blow took him in the side of the head, and the shock was just enough for the men pulling at him to haul him away, separating them.

"HYUNG!" Gangwon screamed, lunging forward on his knees, but he was yanked back, too, dragged away from Kangwon.

North Kangwon resisted his captors, reaching out for his brother, almost managing to grab him again. South Gangwon lurched for him, eyes gleaming desperately, arms straining as he tried to reach for his hand.

But his hands were still bound. He couldn't reach. And Kangwon had to watch through the bars of his outstretched fingers as his brother was ripped away from him, jammed into the back of the black car.

"HYU-!"

The door slammed, cutting him off, and as Kangwon writhed and fought his own inextricable backwards pull, the vehicle drove away.

"You can't take him!" he cried, filled with a panic he hadn't felt in maybe forever. "You can't take him! He's my brother!" To the crowd of onlookers, he pleaded, "He's my *brother!"*

They all stared at him with wondering eyes, not even the Soviet man understanding, looking confused and curious and worried and *foreign.*

And then Kangwon was being crammed into the back of the vehicle with an unconscious Kim Ju-bong, blood pouring out of his nose, and they were driving away.

Away from his brother.

This chapter has influenced my opinion on Norway. Now it's time for the 'war with Norway' arc!

You have no idea the research I had to do to figure out the trip. Soviet flight paths, which airports existed at this time, types of planes (for the planeheads, the MiG is a MiG-15UTI which has two cockpits for flight training, and the Aeroflot one is an Ilyushin Il-12, the most common Soviet airliner at the time), how long does it take, types of airline food in the 50s. My brain can't wrap around the concept of time zones, it just starts short-circuiting. When I went to China I was literally an hour off from my usual time but I had to go ask a lady twice if my flight time was on my time or the time of where I was. If my electronic ticket says departure 16:00 is that departure 16:00 from where I bought the ticket, so departure is really 15:00, or is it 16:00 now? And the DPRK is eight hours off from Oslo so you understand how this might trouble me. But I think I have everything accurate. It is also very crazy that you used to be able to just get on a plane. Not even any ID, just show up a half hour beforehand, get frisked and get on. No wonder terrorist attacks used to be so common. It's like leaving unwrapped fruit at the market.

Also a clarification- if you're reading a future document about the biowarfare, Ri Ki-en and Guo Morou will come up in it (they're real people) but they're spelled Li Ki Ien and Kuo Mo-jo because of how romaji systems change. And a reminder that in real life, 'hyung' is only used for older brothers. You wouldn't have two brothers who call each other hyung. But because of North's 'no fighting over who's older, you're both hyung/ noona/oppa/eonni' rule (wonder why he had to come up with *that),* Kangwon and Gangwon both use hyung. Just so you don't get a misinformed idea of Korean.

Everything Is Up To You

"Are Kang an' Gang goin' to be okay?" Hae reworded her question for the fifth time since this morning, when Liaotung had driven into the clearing while she was on watch, and woken them all up with the news that Kangwon and Gangwon had left for Oslo.

Worry made SH's voice come out tighter than she'd meant it to. "I'm sure they'll be fine."

Her cousin looked down at the patch of earth on the edge of the woods, her gnawed-on lower lip trembling. "What if somethin' happens to 'em?"

'Darn it, Kangwon.' She couldn't *believe* he'd pulled something like that without even telling them.

Of course if he had, they would have stopped him. Darn him for not giving them the chance. And now-

SH ran her brush over the wall. It would be fine. It had to be. Kangwon and Gangwon would be home safe in a couple days, and she and the others could ream them out for acting like Korea then.

Trying to force a more positive tone, she said, "Well, we won't know until we know. Now come on- help me get this tarp on."

Hae glumly helped her pull the canvas over the little plot of land on the edge of the woods, protecting the seeds planted in the freshly-tilled earth from any late-season frost during the night.

It had been SH's idea, using seeds and tools South Pyongan had gotten her from… somewhere. She'd just winked when she asked, which was something to tell Korea about later, but was useful for now. She'd thought that the little garden could keep Hae from wearing herself completely to the bone by making her take breaks from organizing sowing in her province, like she had been ever since she got better. And they could have healthier meals, and

donate any extra to the people they gave their rations to on weekends, or even to the front.

And she'd wanted to give Korea something nice to wake up to, not just the war talk and the secret sessions he'd still feel guilty over, especially now. She'd hoped it might make him feel a little better.

But if Kangwon and Gangwon didn't make it back…

An engine rumbled down the road, and her and Hae turned to watch as China's Jeep left it, lights off as it headed through the field of stumps towards the dark gap in the trees.

Hae looked up at SH, nervous anticipation painted across her face. Her cousin forced a smile, taking her hand, leading her in the same direction.

They had made it safely to Oslo. They'd be back in a few days. Nothing bad had happened.

SH knew she was wrong as soon as they emerged into the moon-dappled clearing outside the bunker. The rest of their cousins were gathered there with the Chinese women, China standing before them.

He looked over, meeting her eyes. Unsmiling.

When he'd finished telling them what happened, they were all silent. SH held her head in her hands.

They'd lost the Kangwons. Not just the two provinces who were able to save their people from the biowarfare, but the *Kangwons.* Kangwon who tried to work things out with her and her brother, and even if it was annoying because their relationship wasn't her fault, she always appreciated that he cared. Kangwon, who always made sure to check up on them, even with everything else he was handling right now. The only one who, even when she hated it and wished he wouldn't, tried to talk to her about her past, and had taught her the wall-painting method, the only thing she had to hold back the dark thing and keep her sane.

And Gangwon. She hadn't even gotten to know him properly, but she knew him from the old Kangwon, teasing her about her cooking, teaching her to sew, making her herbal tea when she got sick. He was so nervous and shaky now, but she knew he was still him. When she'd shown him the sketch of Seoul she'd made for Korea's birthday on the way to the Raktong, he'd smiled and seemed so pleased she'd kept up the talent she discovered after Liberation.

And now they were both gone.

It was Hwang that spoke first. "Do we know what happened after their vehicles departed the airport?" he asked urgently.

"No." China's voice wasn't as light as usual, maybe genuinely upset or maybe just rightfully thinking they wouldn't take kindly to him brushing off their cousins being kidnapped. "Your Ri Ki-en and my Guo Morou were only able to get in contact with us after today's council ended, and they did it immediately. They weren't able to find out any more information. And I am sadly lacking in Norwegian agents."

"So, what?" South Pyongan asked, anger colouring her voice as she jumped up from her log. "They're just stuck in Norway? We've gotta go break them out!"

"We can't just fly into Norway," North Pyongan said gently from beside her. "Especially when we have heard what can happen."

"Like hell we can't!" his sister cried. "Send me in if you're all too cowardly to go! If someone tries to kidnap me I'll fucking kill them. Man, woman, kid, I'll beat the fuck out of every single one of those yellow-haired snow-devils! If those Norwese think they can take my goddamn cousins, they have another thing coming. And that thing is *me."*

"Norwegians," Hwang corrected as she seethed. "And that would be an act of war."

South Pyongan rounded on him. "And stealing two of our Provincehumans isn't?"

“It is. But we can’t afford another front right now. Especially one we can’t even reach, lacking in an air force as we are.”

Despite Hwang’s clinical words, SH could see the way his hands trembled as he took his glasses off to polish them.

South Pyongan bared her teeth, then spun to kick the log, chips of bark flying, spraying North Pyongan and Liaoxi. “Ssi-bal! Those fucking *bastards!”*

“Sister.” North Pyongan put a hand on her arm, brows furrowed, and she thumped onto the log, roughly scrubbing at her masked face.

“Damn it. Fucking *damn* it.”

“What’s goin’ to happen to 'em?” Hae piped up, and the way her face crumpled in made SH’s heart pang. “Is Norway goin’ to send ‘em back to the Southern One?”

She opened her mouth, but North Hamgyong- of course, *always* him- cut her off.

“Of course he fucking is,” he growled, fists clenched. “He’s going to pack them up in a sedge box and send then straight to the Yank as a gift because Norway is his little *bitch,* just like the rest of the fucking Euros.”

“I tried to tell him,” China chimed in from the side. “He wasn’t very receptive to it.”

For once North Hamgyong didn’t seem disgusted by the foreigner talking to him. “He didn’t fucking listen because he’s a damn *moron* who thinks all everyone needs to hold hands and get along is a fucking lecture.”

He swung his head to SH, who started painting the wall reflexively, trying to put as many layers as possible between the dark thing and whatever he was about to say.

“I told you his bleeding heart was going to get him killed.”

Paint chips went flying, undoing all her work as the thing lunged at him.

"Is that all this is to you?" SH asked in furious disbelief. "A 'got you' moment? Kangwon and Gangwon are *gone,* they're in enemy hands, probably going to get handed off to America so he can torture them again, and you don't even *care?"*

"They deserve it," the person she was ashamed to call a brother growled. "They knew damn well what they were walking into." He looked her in the eye as he said it, making the dark thing tear at the wall in its struggle to get through. "They made their stupid fucking choices and now they're going to-"

"STOP IT!!"

SH startled, her own scream dying on her lips as they both startled in Hae's direction. She was up on her feet, hands balled at her sides.

"Stop fightin'," she ordered, doing her best to glare up at them. "Kang an' Gang are in trouble, and we need to get 'em back."

"Hae is right." North Pyongan moved to SH's side, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Let's all calm down."

SH took a deep breath, using it to buy time to paint a blue flower over the wall, dark blood dripping from its petals.

"You're right," she said, smiling, avoiding looking at North Hamgyong. "We need to figure out what to do."

When she got back from trying to catch up to the Kangwons with South Pyongan and Liaotung, the General had told her that all they could do was hope they succeeded, and if they did get caught that there wasn't much they *could* do. Neither them or China had diplomatic relations with Norway, and he hadn't even recognized Korea at all. Any negotiations between them would have to include the United Nations, and they all knew how *that* would go.

She wished the man would have told her what Kangwon was planning. She got why he didn't want to give them orders, but surely it wouldn't hurt for him to be hands-on with them at least

once. He didn't even have to order him not to go- he could've just had someone restrain them until she could come smack sense into her cousins' heads.

"We need to act fast," Hwang fretted. "If they're still in Norway, we need to know. While their transfer to Korea would put them more within reach, it would also put them directly into America's possession."

"And then the Southern bastard gets to pump Gangwon full of Commands," North Hamgyong finished in a growl.

SH saw Liaoxi and Liaotung exchange worried glances. North Pyongan did, too, and went to sit next to the citrine-skinned sister.

"Comrade China," SH said, looking over at him. "I think it might be best for you if you returned to your country. At least until this is resolved."

North Pyongan nodded, looking at the Chinese with concern. "If Gangwon knows you're here, South could find out."

"And that means the miguk-nom would," North Hamgyong said grimly.

Despite the fact that he hated China, and had said that awful thing about turning him over, he still looked angry. But SH knew it wasn't out of any love for their neighbours, only hate for Korea's brother.

"Even if you won't leave permanently, perhaps just for a couple weeks?" North Pyongan suggested, the words directed at China, but his hand brushing Liaoxi's. "Just enough time that we feel confident America could not have Commanded that information out of him."

North Hamgyong glowered at him, and SH knew what he was thinking. America wasn't the one that could use the Commands.

"Oo, he doesn't want his girlfriend's country to get firebombed," South Pyongan teased, poking her brother's cheek. Then she said in a completely different tone of voice, "Sorry, not the time. Yeah, seriously, you comrades should get out of here."

The Chinese provinces looked at China. SH didn't see his face so much as move, but after a second, they both shook their heads.

"I do not believe your cousin knows," Liaoxi said. "And thus he cannot tell our foe."

"And when it's tortured out of Kangwon?" North Hamgyong demanded. "He *does* know."

"Hm?" Liaotung arched a slim brow. "Are you saying Korean provinces can't handle a bit of torture? Interesting."

He glowered at her, and SH quickly said, "It's only our suggestion. If our comrades are confident their secret is safe, then we're satisfied."

"And we're goin' to get Kang and Gang back before they get tortured *or* Commanded." Hae put her hands on her hips, full of confidence. "Somehow."

They all went silent, trying to think of what that 'somehow' was.

"We need to wake Korea."

SH looked over at the stove. Chagang sat on a stump in front of it, expression solemn as he gazed back.

The others all looked around at each other reluctantly.

"I was hoping we could get them back first," SH said delicately, adding with her slightly tight smile, *'So Korea doesn't drown them both in the river.'*

"We need to," Chagang repeated, undeterred. "We do not have the means to travel to Norway. We do not have the military means to go to war with them. And we do not have the political means to negotiate their freedom. We need assistance."

SH thinned her lips. They all knew what *that* meant.

"We need to get our cousins back." For once, there was an edge to Chagang's voice- ice-cold anger.

It warmed SH's heart. She'd imagined he'd reacted to her and the others' capture by America before with stoicism. But it looked like she was likely wrong.

"As much as I understand why you would dislike what I believe you're implying," China began. "I think it might be your best course of action."

And it was one they couldn't follow without Korea. Even if that person might listen to one of them, they'd join the Kangwons in the river after for going to him.

SH scrubbed a hand over her face. She'd *really* been hoping to spare the brothers at least a little of Korea's wrath.

But his wrath was better than America's. Korea being disappointed in them might make them *want* to die. But America might really make them wish they were dead. Even though they weren't women, any number of other terrible things could still be done to them. It wasn't a question of if South would stop it- it was a question of if he'd ever even know they had been captured. Since Commands wouldn't work on Kangwon, the Yankee might take him straight to 'interrogation.'

And even if they protested, she didn't think South would investigate.

"Alright," she said eventually into the silent clearing. "I'll go wake him up."

As reluctant as she was, the decision lightened her. It had felt so strange not having Korea there in the morning to give them orders for the day, or at night to receive their reports. He'd been out before, but never for this long. Aside from her time in Gyeongmudae, this was the longest she'd ever gone without hearing his voice. Even when she had her itinerary planned for the day, she somehow still felt a little aimless carrying it out, no matter how important the work she'd set herself was. None of them had said anything, but she thought her cousins felt the same way.

But probably not North Hamgyong.

SH slid inside the bunker, off to finally wake up her Countryhuman, and hopefully rescue their cousins.

—

A jumbled mess of sounds, tastes, smells, sensations. Gentle hands he knew so well caressing his throat, some of the only ones that could touch him there without making it squeeze shut, warm slurry on his tongue, too weak to reject it, cotton in his head, sharp antiseptic, blood-

'Wake up.'

-clean cloth, sweat and desperation, a beloved warm voice telling him something he could only catch in snatches, the last spark of life draining from chestnut eyes, cool air on his burning flesh, cooked meat, his brother's wide, scared eyes looking down at him-

'Something's wrong.'

-fire lancing across his eye and his chest, over and over and ***over,*** *cool hands lifting his head onto a lap, soothing his brow, warm liquid sliding down his throat, filling his senses with the scent of medicinal herbs, bitter and fever-breaking, a soft, low song threading through it all, the words foreign but somehow familiar.*

It faded now, replaced by that high pitched droning whine, reminding him that it was March First, that it wasn't enough, that his people ***needed*** *him.*

North felt himself sinking again, and grabbed desperately for the light he could see past his lids, trying to cling to it, to drag himself out of the blackness trying to pull him down, his body trying to make him rest, to force him into a real recuperative coma when all he wanted was to

'Wake up!'

North lurched up, gasping for air like he was breaking water as he threw himself to the side, expecting an attack. He thrashed, legs tangled in the bedroll, and managed to free himself, hand going for the tiger knife, still where he'd left it when he went to sleep.

The room was empty. He stayed on all fours, panting, hand clenching reflexively around the silver blade.

His mouth was dry, he desperately needed to piss to expel the toxins his body had built up while he slept, and he felt like the fever had sweated at least five pounds off of him, leaving him soaked in sour sweat.

And he was awake, the thing he'd been fighting for for what felt like months. The pain from his burns flooded back like relief, anchoring him firmly this time, assuring him he wouldn't slip back under, and reminding him- it wasn't March First.

But his people still needed him.

And they needed him *now.* There was a pressure building inside him, every hair on his body standing on end. Something was wrong, he could feel it, the thing that had woken him up, let him break through the coma's grip. Something was-

The door swung open. SH stood in the doorway, blinking in surprise as she saw him kneeling on the floor, awake.

She was thin, a new bandage peeking out from her collar, but aside from that she looked unharmed, no worse off than when he'd gone to sleep.

Her eyes told a different story.

"Korea-"

He cut her off, his voice even raspier from disuse. "Something's wrong."

Her lips thinned. "Yes."

In a few minutes, he was dressed in his non-sweaty summer uniform and outside, filled in on what had happened.

"I'm sorry, Korea." SH lowered her eyes. "We should have driven faster. We should have cut them off."

"Don't blame Comrade SH," Liaotung said, standing. "I was the one driving. It was my fault, gege."

"Don't blame me." China sounded as unbothered as ever, even with the security of his country possibly compromised. *Again.* "I had nothing to do with it."

North ignored them all, his pulse racing.

Ssi-bal. Those stupid fucking *idiots.* He should have known.

North was going to kill them. He was going to peel all their skin off, scrub them down with raw salt, and waterboard them in soy sauce. He was going to cut off their feet at the calves so they could never leave the hospital again, and hang them around their necks like a dog with the chicken it had killed. He was going to make them both regret being *formed,* let alone going to fucking *Norway.*

But first he had to get them back.

How was he going to get them back? A Countryhuman couldn't just march into another country. It was hard enough for a Provincehuman. Norway had probably only let the Kangwons in to take them hostage. He'd have to be smuggled in, and find some way to smuggle them both out. It could take days, days he didn't have.

If he didn't get them back right now, they were going to be returned to America. He was going to make South Command Gangwon, find out everything he'd ever seen. What if North had slipped up and allowed him to see something crucial? What if he had seen China and just hadn't said anything? And he knew North was asleep, he could tell America his biowarfare had worked, he could tell his brother he was weak, that he couldn't-

And even if Gangwon didn't know anything but that, Kangwon did. And if America wanted what he knew, he wouldn't stop until he got it, tore it out of his province alongside his teeth and nails and who knew what else. If he had a human do it, he'd heal, and then he could do it all over again.

The thought made his chest grow tight, his jaw creaking.

His mind whirled, assessing his provinces while he tried to think, over and over, looking for any signs of harm.

They were all as thin as SH, but not enough to think they'd been taking advantage of his absence to donate more than they should. Chagang's bandages had moved from half of his face to two-thirds, only his eyes and an unburned portion of navy skin revealed. South Pyongan was in full protective gear, and North Hamgyong's hands were covered in cuts from working on the rails.

And they were all looking at him expectantly, like now that he was awake the problem was already half-resolved. Kangwon and Gangwon would be feeling the same way, waiting for him to rescue them like he had before.

He didn't want to resort to this. But there really was only one choice.

He drew himself up, squaring his shoulders. Anger over whose fault it was and who was complicit could come later. Right now, he had to save his provinces.

"I'm going to speak with our Supreme Commander." North marched for the Jeep, narrowed in on his goal, the thing he always detested doing.

"I need to contact CCCP."

—

1945

People marched through Pyongyang, men and women, proletariat and petite bourgeois, elders hobbling on shaking legs, leaving their futons for the first time in years, pulled out into the streets with the others, all dressed in choson-ot and black suits and rags and spotless white clothes that gleamed under the summer sun, no one left to strip them from them. Children ran underfoot, laughing, not understanding what was happening, but feeling their parents' joy, feeling that for the first time in their short lives, some unnamed heaviness had lifted off their shoulders.

Korea felt it, too. He watched the Korean- ***Korean,*** *their white banner and crimson and sapphire taegeuk, flying for the first time without fear of the hand holding it being severed by a Japanese sword-* flags wave over the crowd.

And another, too. The taegeuk, but rotated and without its black dashes, shifted to the left to make room for three red bands that crossed it horizontally. Not the flag of the exiled Provisional Government or the old Korean Empire. Lyuh Woon-hyung had said the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence was planning to use it for their People's Republic of Korea, but it wasn't theirs either.

It was their people's, the flag they'd willed into being before the exiles had set foot back in Korea, by setting up the People's Committees, by feeding their neighbours, by organizing and driving out the last Japanese. By governing themselves for the first time not only in thirty-six years but *ever.* No more monarchs, no more foreigners, just the people whose hands had truly built Korea.

And it was North's flag, too, appearing on his face with a strange tingle as he'd been embraced by their people in Seoul, the taegeuk swirling around his right eye. They'd stitched it for him when they'd heard their Countryhuman was coming, tearing up white sheets and shirts and pants, weaving threads with different hues of red and blue into them. They stuck out over the crowd, sloppy and hastily-stitched compared to the flags worked on in secret for years. But somehow, Korea felt his eyes being drawn to the patchwork People's Committee flags instead.

"Long live Korean independence! Long live Korea!"

The throng of people around him, the pulse of thousands of feet on the earth, the thrum of thousands of voices in the air, thousands of hands touching him, reaching out and embracing their country openly for the first time, finally theirs, was like that river of people from a lifetime ago, demanding independence, sweeping North along with them.

And now they had it. And he wasn't being swept along, he was flowing with them, guiding them, not to the old elementary school

where that preacher had spewed his words and then walked away when it all went wrong, but to the government district, standing boldly in the center of the old capital, none of them rebels or criminals anymore, but presenting themselves as they had in Seoul and every other town and village they'd passed through, taking their place as Korea's Countryhumans.

For the first time that he had ever seen it, Pyongyang wasn't burdened under the weight of oppression and misery, but was light, just like Seoul, just like *Korea.* For the first time ever, he was light, too.

Or he had been.

North had stepped back, letting their people overwhelm South. He still had their old flag, for some reason, and it felt so good to see the face he'd missed so desperately smile, lighting up in a way that made his chest swell so much his heart could have burst.

He couldn't let it distract him. People still crowded around him, but he kept on alert.

And through the crowd, he spotted him, the person the Soviets that had been here for days had warned him was coming when he'd arrived this morning, their foreign voices boisterous, like he should be pleased.

"Long live Korean independence!" his people chanted in elation, many of them still with no idea of how short-lived it would be.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics made his way though Korea's people like a warship slicing through waves. North watched carefully, his body wound like a coil, poised to rescue his civilians from him if he so much as brushed against one too forcefully.

But while his path didn't waver, he didn't barge through, slowing his steps just enough to give anyone that hadn't noticed him time to get out of the way, and disentangling himself from the ones that reached for him, eager to welcome an ally in the war against the Japanese, instead of shoving them away.

He was conscious of his size then, used to his body obeying his commands. Good spatial awareness. North could tell immediately that the stories of him fighting in his Civil War and this world war were true. He had the bearing of a soldier.

His teeth grit.

"South," he warned, and his brother looked at him quizzically, then followed his gaze. His eyes went as wide as landmines.

North placed himself between his brother and the approaching country, running a threat assessment as he closed the final distance.

He was huge. Enormous. He towered head and shoulders over every Korean in Pyongyang, and likely even over his own soldiers. He had none of them with him. He could be overconfident or he could be feigning harmlessness with snipers on the roof. If it was the latter, their provinces were poised to take care of it.

And he was built of pure muscle, North could tell. His shoulders and chest visibly strained at the fabric of his high-necked grey sweater, despite the thickness of the fabric. He wasn't wearing a military uniform, just that, a long brown coat, plain trousers, and an ushanka, likely to lull him into a false sense of security.

It looked like it was true that Germany had taken his eye. A black patch covered the right one. But the other was sharp, serious. Even though it was fixed on the Koreas, North could see the way it flickered, subtly scanning his surroundings, just like him. The handicap wouldn't make him any less formidable.

North's observation dipped to the hands at his sides. Red, littered with pale pink scars and more recent lines of scabs. Thick fingers and clean, malformed nails. He couldn't see his palms.

It would be a hard fight, but North knew he could take him. The country didn't have a visible weapon on him, and it would take a few precious seconds to draw his hidden pistol or blade, seconds the Korean could use to strike. The foreigner might have the physical advantage, but North was better fed than he'd ever been, and his size would let him maneuver more easily. The only difficulty would

be engaging him in melee combat long enough to allow his brother and people to put distance between them so they couldn't be used as hostages.

North didn't intend to eliminate the Soviet. If he hadn't killed Japan, he wouldn't kill CCCP, not when his troops had been so helpful in defeating the Japanese.

But depending on how this went, he *was* prepared for a fight.

The people closest to them had realized who was among them now, and drew back, expressions ranging from excited to confused and wary. The sea of people throughout Pyongyang continued to revel around them, but a hush fell over the center of the city square.

CCCP stopped before them on the stones, far enough away that North thankfully didn't have to crane his neck to look up at him.

"Korea," he said, his voice like rumbling thunder. His single white eye shifted to South, making North tense. "And Korea."

"H-Hey," South said nervously.

North wanted to tell him to stay quiet, but instead glowered up at the huge Soviet.

"You're here to divide us."

The foreign country dipped his head. "Yes. We should speak elsewhere."

Korea didn't want to go anywhere with him. He had no right to come to their country and make suggestions.

But they couldn't have this talk in public. If it happened, his people should hear it directly from him.

He nodded tersely, spinning on his heel. "Come," he ordered, not looking back at the Soviet, even though it made his shoulders prickle. South did look back, casting nervous looks at the foreigner as he scurried along at his brother's side.

North yearned to comfort him, but he had to be unflinching in the face of the interloper, especially since South wasn't.

He led him to a back alley, far from the city center. He could have commandeered an office from Jo Man-sik, but that would lend both him and CCCP a legitimacy they didn't deserve.

In the more quiet residential district, he stopped, turning in a way that made CCCP have to position himself under the eaves of a house. He was so tall he had to hunch slightly, pleasing North.

But not enough.

"We won't accept this," he declared, glaring up at him. "Korea has only just become free. We won't accept another colonizer."

"North?" South whispered, tugging at his sleeve. "Maybe let's n-not piss off the huge country."

"Shut up," North ordered, but it was too late.

CCCP turned his gaze on his brother. "I am assuming that you are to be the south, then?"

Ssi-bal, he should have told South to use their real name. They needed to reinforce their sovereignty in every way possible.

"We're both just Korea," North said at the same time his brother said, sounding oddly happy, "Y-Yeah. I'm South. I'm South."

North shot him a look as the Soviet directed to him now, "And you are the one I communicated with previously?"

It was one letter. North had only replied to be polite and secure assistance for his people.

"Yes," he said grudgingly.

CCCP nodded, his serious expression unchanged. "I cannot speak to America's intentions, but mine are not to colonize you."

"Yet here you are," Korea said coldly. His soldiers' boots in their

former capital less than ten days after their Liberation, *him* in their country without even asking permission, just notifying them. An unstoppable force they could only accept, not deny.

"Yes." He met his eyes. "I will not pretend this is not beneficial to me, but my presence here is not entirely willing. I will explain the full situation later."

It had already been explained by one of North's guerrillas, speeding as fast as he could from the Soviet Union to announce that America and CCCP had decided to divide Korea and place them under a trusteeship, bringing that weight crashing back down onto his shoulders.

"For now, I want to assure you that I have no desire to chart your course for you, only to help you stabilize your country," CCCP was saying.

North wanted to remain professional, but he couldn't help the way his lip curled. "We don't need your 'help.' Our people are doing fine on their own."

"I saw," he replied. "It is impressive. I am sure that in a half a year, they would create a unified, working government capable of rebuilding what Japan has destroyed."

North knew they could do it in a couple months.

"Then *leave,"* he growled up at him, ignoring the way South cringed. "We don't need *or* want you here."

CCCP let out a breath like a bellows. "If I do not step in, America will attempt to stake his claim to your entire Peninsula. He has set his mind on it. And when he wants something, he will not rest until he has it."

His eye flashed. It made North wary, shifting in front of his brother.

But it was also reassuring.

"Would that be bad?" South asked, peering over his shoulder.

“Isn’t America the one that beat Japan?”

“He only dropped the atom bombs,” CCCP said. If he’d sounded cold before, he was frigid now.

“It would be bad,” North assured his brother. America had been eyeing their country since even before the Japanese Occupation. “I’ll tell you later.”

CCCP inclined his head to him. “If you are a student of Marx and Lenin, as I am told, you will know of his ways, and understand how he works.”

He did. The United States of America had reached the highest bloodstained stage of capitalism awhile ago- imperialism. And he was always looking for new colonies.

Korea’s jaw feathered, and he hardened his gaze, drawing himself up to his full height as he demanded, “Would you steal our resources?”

“Anything I take will be with your permission, and will not leave you lacking.”

He’d known there was no way he’d take nothing. Every country wanted something from Korea. At least he was being honest about it.

“Would you try to take away our culture?”

“I will not touch your culture at all. That is in your hands.”

He could believe that for now. From what he’d heard, the CCCP was only restrictive of anti-revolutionary cultural practices in his republics. And North intended to be restrictive on those as well. Anything that hurt his people had to be rewritten.

“Would you let your soldiers do as they please?”

The Red Army might be Socialist, but the war had forced them to conscript those with less ideological education. And even the educated were still foreign men, unlikely to view Korean women as

anything but easy prey. Korea wanted to get to the north as soon as possible.

"No," CCCP answered. "They will be under my and my representatives' observation. My military police will arrive soon. If any excesses have been committed before then, I assure you the punishment will be swift and severe."

The punishment for rape in the Red Army was death. So long as it was implemented, North wouldn't place full responsibility on the Soviet. Only half.

South piped up with his own question from behind him. "Are you going to lock us up?"

How suddenly small his voice was sent protectiveness surging through North, and he stepped forward, showing his fangs as he snarled, "If you try, I'll *kill* you."

"North!" his brother gasped, aghast.

He would. He didn't want to make an enemy so soon after Liberation, but if *anyone* ever tried to harm his brother, he would rend them limb from limb.

'Eighteen years.'

No one was locking his brother up again. *No one.*

"No," CCCP said, and it almost sounded like his glacial voice thawed slightly. "I will not lock you up. I am sure America will not, either."

South sighed, relieved. North wasn't.

"You deported Koreans."

He'd sent them away from the east because they could be spies for Japan. In the harsh conditions caused by the war, people had died.

"I did," CCCP replied heavily. "I will make no excuses other than that I was at war. The fascists were laying waste to my west. I could

not afford the possibility of a fifth column in my east. I did what I felt I must. I am sure you have also made choices you would rather not have."

There were dozens of examples that could have crossed North's mind.

But instead, against his will, he looked over his shoulder, meeting South's eyes.

His brother gazed back, full of sorrow and…

It was in the past. He was with him now. And he wasn't letting go again.

"You killed my people," he said gruffly, looking back at CCCP. "I won't forgive you for that."

"I did not ask for your forgiveness and I do not want it," CCCP responded bluntly. "I considered every single Korean that was relocated as my own, including those that did not survive the journey. They came to me for safety, and my decisions led to their deaths. That is my burden to bear."

No answer would have pleased Korea, no matter how well he knew that a fifth column in the eastern Soviet Union would have destroyed him entirely. The Koreans sent to Central Asia weren't CCCP's- they were *his,* driven from their homeland by starvation and the Japanese.

But because he knew the Soviet couldn't actually see North's people as his, his cold, unapologetic attitude was more satisfactory than fake regret or begging for absolution he wouldn't receive. The foreigner didn't really care about Korea's people. Pretending he did just to get in his good graces would only mean he was trying to manipulate him.

His answers were all satisfactory. But none of them pleased him.

"We're going to protest this." North glared at him, challenging him.

“Ладно,” he agreed. “Though I would prefer you not make this more difficult than it need be.”

Korea would make it as difficult as he wanted to make it. It was *his* country they were carving up.

“And we will continue setting up our People’s Committees on our people’s basis,” he declared, watching him.

CCCP just nodded. “I will not interfere.”

Doubtful. He was being too easy, too agreeable.

North narrowed his eyes. “Good. We’re leaving now.”

The Soviet didn’t need to know where they were going or what they were-

“We’re going into the country to see how the village committees are doing before we go to Seoul,” South volunteered before North could hush him.

His brother had a lot to learn about military confidentiality. Even if the military part of their lives was over now, they would need it for politics. Hopefully Korea wouldn’t get any of his light mouth in the Reunification.

It had been supposed to be soon. But now…

“May I accompany you?” CCCP’s question broke him from his clenched-jaw thoughts. “The Americans will be arriving soon, and I would prefer we met them together.”

His face darkened, his lip twitching in disdain. He could just be a good actor, but North was fairly certain he genuinely despised America.

Good. At least he hadn’t gotten friendly with him while working together in the war. North despised people that would set aside their morals for personal feelings. Especially when one of them might be presiding over half his country.

North did *not* want the Soviet following them around, looming over them while they met their people. And he didn't want him around his brother or provinces. It was why he'd sent them to guard the perimeter. He would have sent South, too, if he wasn't against letting him out of his sight ever again.

But he also didn't want to leave him alone in a center of power. Jo Man-sik might be a Christian Nationalist, but at least he was Korean.

"I would appreciate seeing how your committees will be set up, as my administration will be working with them," CCCP added. "Perhaps I could learn something beneficial for my own country."

He *could* learn something. The idea of showing the foreigner how organized and successful his people already were, maybe even leading to him implementing some of their ideas in his own country, was tempting.

That, his desire to not leave him unsupervised, and his need to interrogate him made North's mind up.

"Very well, you can come with us," he clipped, making it clear it was his decision. "But you will remain out of sight when I say to. And no interfering."

The man didn't lay a hand over his heart. He just said, "You have my word."

They would see.

"And you come alone," North added, observing his reaction carefully.

"Very well," the country said after a moment. Careful consideration or thinking how to get his people to tail them? "I will need to inform my comrades first."

Kangwon had eyes specifically on him. He'd find a way to overhear if he was ordering his men to follow.

"Hurry," North ordered, and the Soviet maneuvered his way out

from under the roof, straightening to his full height as he walked away.

His footsteps were heavy, but still, after they faded North peeked out from the alley, glancing both ways down the dusty residential street to make sure he was really gone.

He was. It wasn't like someone of his size could hide.

"North, do you have to be so rude?" South fretted in a whisper, grabbing at the sleeve of his uniform. "What if he punishes you?"

"He can try," North dismissed.

He hoped he would. CCCP hadn't seemed to be emotionless like Japan. There was a temper in there somewhere, or at least strong feelings. If North could bring them out, it would prove he wasn't here with good intentions, and that Korea shouldn't be divided.

Or it would get the entire Peninsula put into America's hands.

But it didn't matter. North wasn't afraid of the American either. And he wasn't going to let the Soviet think he had any authority to 'punish' him just to avoid causing problems.

South's eyes widened. "North, he's literally huge! He's the size of a mountain! He's like-" He stretched an arm up, trying to display the other country's height. His armspan wasn't half as long. "Big!"

"And I have a gun." North held up his captured Nambu Type 94. "Several."

He was trying to teach his brother how to shoot, just in case he needed to defend himself from any Japanese or collaborator remnants. It wasn't going well. South had only shot a gun once-

Kang Kyung-nam. His wife was dead, but his children were grown with their own now. He'd have to take his brother to apologize for himself when they had the chance.

-and firearms made him nervous.

Ssi-bal, North couldn't believe the Provisional Government had him in an active warzone and hadn't taught him how to wield a gun. Had Kim Tu-bong been the only one with sense? He simultaneously wanted them to come back to Korea right now so he could chew them out, and never wanted them to return. Just because they'd been playing government in China and begging for money in America didn't mean they were all fit to govern their people.

A future problem. Hopefully there would be plenty of early-arrivers at the proclamation of the People's Republic so he could begin to sort out the useful elements from the ones that shouldn't be allowed within a ri of the halls of power.

Of course, he might not actually have a say in that.

South's brows furrowed at his words, and his hand moved up to his shoulder. The tension immediately left North's jaw.

He would. No matter what happened, he refused to let his country leave their hands again. Their people had their reins, not CCCP, not America, not anyone else.

South looked past him at the mouth of the alley, lowering his voice. "So, are we going to let them divide us?"

"No," North said immediately. Not yet anyway.

His brother's face- *his face, still so familiar and still such a rush every time he looked over to see he was alive, he was **alive** and with him*- was only semi-relieved. He chewed on the inside of his cheek.

"Maybe we should?"

"What?"

South winced. "I mean, it's not permanent, right? The guerrilla and Mr… Union? both said it was just until they can sort out a trusteeship, and then that's just until we get back on our feet. I don't like it, but it's not like we can stop them."

"If they intend to colonize us then we have to try," North

responded, fists clenching. They had fought too long and too hard to just roll over for the next great powers.

“North, aren’t they both like, *really* strong?” his brother asked. “The Provisional Government was always talking about how tough Mr. Union-“

“CCCP,” North interrupted, the honorific irritating him. “Just call him CCCP. Even if he says not to.”

“How tough CCCP is,” his brother corrected. “And even if America just dropped those bombs… I mean, he dropped those bombs.”

He rubbed his arm anxiously.

Word from Japan had been spotty, brought by wealthier Koreans able to buy tickets home immediately. But it was all… Unlike South, North couldn’t see it as good. But for all his proletarian internationalism, he also couldn’t see it as bad, aside from mourning the Koreans that had been stolen away to Japan and met the same fate as their colonizers. But it was all worrying for someone whose own country was about to play host to the one responsible for it.

“It doesn’t matter,” North dismissed. “If they try to dominate our country, we will fight. And we will fight until we are Liberated.”

They were supposed to be already.

“But…”

“South,” he interrupted, grabbing his shoulders. “Do you really want to be separated again after I just got you back?”

His brother's eyes widened. ”You think they’d s-separate us?”

“What do you think dividing us *means?”* he snapped.

“I thought- I mean, they’re dividing the country, not us.”

North made sure only his fingers dug into his shoulders, not his nails. “We *are* the country. And they *want* to divide us.”

South grabbed at his hand, pressing it to his shoulder like he could pin it there. “No, I don’t want- I don’t want to lose you again, please.” Hope rose in his eyes. “W-What if we just asked them if we could stay together? Then we could hang out in Seoul until everything’s okay? Then we’d be together and we wouldn’t have to fight anyone and-“

“South,” he cut him off, and since they were alone, he cupped his face with the hand he wasn’t holding, gently keeping his mouth shut.

His brother had a new habit, rambling. Along with that little nervous stutter. It wasn’t like he didn’t know why.

‘Eighteen years.’ And eight more.

“I won’t let anyone separate us,” North said firmly. “So if they try, we are going to have to fight. I will,” he corrected, seeing fear fill his brother’s expression. “I’ll fight for us.”

He wasn't quite used to being called ‘North’ again. But it was easy to slip back into being it for his South. He’d never stopped, after all.

“Okay,” South sighed, relief washing over him as he leaned into his palm. “But can that be the only reason you fight? I don’t want Mr- Um, CCCP and America hurting you.”

And his brother had never stopped being South.

North’s fingers curled against his cheek, then dropped. “We are going to protest no matter what. But I haven’t decided if we should fight it or not yet.”

He wanted to. No matter what, he wanted to. They didn’t need a division, they didn’t need a trusteeship, they didn’t need two countries ‘looking after’ them, let alone four. This wasn’t happening to the Philippines or Indonesia or China or any of the other places Japan had sank his claws into. It wasn't even happening to Japan. Just Korea. Only them. It was unfair and he wanted to *fight* it, to rage against it until the last.

But their country was decimated. Just because the Japanese were

gone, didn't mean their problems were solved. They'd destroyed the factories and harbours in their wake, left collaborators behind who would try and muscle their way into power to keep Korea as a different sort of colony, soldiers were returning from the war, from fighting against Japan and even fighting for him, willingly or not, disabled, broken, knowing nothing more than how to fight. Their peasants were still poor, landlords still owned all the land, and millions of people were unemployed and starving.

Korea didn't want more war. They wanted to rebuild, to solve their problems and craft the happy lives they'd deserved to live since the beginning.

"But if America and CCCP try to rule us the same way Japan did," he said to his brother. "Then we *will* fight."

"But…" His brother rubbed his arm again. "We've finally got a little peace."

"Letting them colonize us wouldn't be peace, South," Korea told him. "It would just pave the way to move violence, the same violence Japan inflicted on us all these years."

His brother's fingers dug into his own arm.

North's chest squeezed. "And if we don't act decisively and guide our people down the correct path, then we could just as easily return to the violence of Joseon."

Korea's Socialist revolution wouldn't come for years, but the Democratic one had to be carried out correctly to prepare their material conditions for it. They needed to build their resources and frameworks, reorganize society, clear out the cobwebs of feudalism and colonialism.

"We need to build a country for the masses, South," he said firmly, words coming faster as the excitement built. "Not for the Japanese or the Americans or the Soviets, not for the foreign companies or our own bourgeois and landowners. For the first time in our history, we finally have a chance to turn our country into a paradise for *our people,* to give the peasants their own land, to put

the means of production into the hands of the people that work then, to build an army to protect our people instead of capital or the men who serve it."

He could tell his brother didn't entirely understand what he was talking about, just like when he talked politics and economics with the comrades on their travels. He had his common sense, but he hadn't studied their history in the same way North had, or read the theory and experienced the praxis.

No matter. He would have time to teach him. And then they would be one.

"We can't let either America or CCCP stop that," he said with finality. "This is *our* country, and it will develop on the path that we and our people choose. And if we have to fight for that, then we *will."*

His brother's lips curved as his eyes dipped. "Still so melodramatic," he murmured. "But okay. So long as you don't leave me."

The unspoken word lingered.

"I won't," North vowed.

Not again.

The proclamation of the People's Republic of Korea was in nine, in Seoul, so once North was done in Pyongyang, they headed out of the city to visit Anju and Sunchon, before working their way south to the capital, stopping at more places in between- Nampo, Sariwon, Haeju, where the people welcomed their two Hwanghaes and two Koreas with joy, and all the villages and farmsteads connecting them. Every place came alive like they had immediately after Liberation, people even leaving work and the fields to welcome their Countryhumans, something North had to bite his tongue against reprimanding.

They deserved this, that little bright moment of thinking they finally had real freedom before he told them what America and

CCCP had planned.

When they asked, he only told them that he was going to speak out against the decision at the proclamation, making it clear that no matter what happened, Korea would be independent soon.

They had expected the Americans to be here by now, but by the time they reached the 38th Parallel, the place Korea was to be divided, they weren't. CCCP couldn't cross the line on the terms of his arrangement with America, and would be staying back with a few of North's guerrillas, that old Korea's Army core.

So the night before they reached Kaesong, in a small village outside Haeju, North slipped out of the chosonjip of the village chief he'd been spending the night in with his brother and their provinces, and approached the large figure standing by the low stone wall.

The glowing ember of the Countryhuman's cigar illuminated the eyeless half of his face, before he switched it to his other hand, away from North, and cast it into shadow.

"I have demands," the Korean announced, tilting his chin.

He hasn't managed to goad CCCP into violence yet, or even a raised voice. He had kept himself as unobtrusive as a country his size could be, not interfering at all with the Koreans' business, like he said he would.

It was suspicious.

The smoke left the Soviet's mouth in a cloud. "I will hear them."

"I want you to stay away from our People's Committees, even after the agreement is official."

North didn't care about the People's Republic of Korea. South thought it might be the thing that merged them in just two days, but he knew it wouldn't be. Lyuh Woon-hyung was a solid man and independence activist, if a bit centrist, but his Committee was only useful for coordinating organizing right now. It was just a name, and didn't represent the will of the people. Their grassroots People's

Committees did. They had created them on their own, amongst each other, and it was the outgrowing of that that would turn him and his brother into the real People's Republic. He wouldn't let that be taken away from them.

"As I said, I will not interfere," CCCP said. "My administration will be centralized around the temporary capital. What happens on the local level falls to you and your people."

He'd believe that when he saw it.

"No more than one hundred 'advisors' in my country at any time." North wouldn't have the Soviets stocking the administration with themselves the way Japan had done even before the official annexation.

"I will not make promises I cannot keep." CCCP took another drag of his cigar. "If more are needed, more will be sent."

"No more than two hundred."

The Soviet inclined his head. "I will not make a hard agreement, but I doubt more than that will be necessary."

The number was too high, but North also had the grace to admit that even one was too high. In the end, two hundred was a small number for administrating a country.

More importantly, CCCP hadn't lied that he'd accept a paltry hundred or pretended that he would follow his exact demands.

North finished with his most challenging stipulation yet.

"I am going to carry out my laws as I see fit."

Regardless of what anyone said, this was a military occupation. The occupied didn't get to exercise their own laws under a foreign army.

Yet CCCP said, "So long as your laws do not harm your people, I will not intercede." He held up a hand before North could speak. "I am aware you do not intend to harm your people. The love you

bear for them has been clear."

'Tch.' That was one of the many reasons he hadn't wanted the Soviet to come with them. He'd seen too much.

But more importantly-

"You're being too agreeable." North crossed his arms as he said it outright, planting his feet as he tried to look up at him without appearing small. "What do you want?"

"I want for us to be comrades." CCCP ground his cigar against the stone of the wall behind him, stubbing it out. "I am no Imperialist, and do not intend to colonize you. I want only to help you rebuild. As was said at the proclamation, the future of Korea should be in Korean hands."

"Yes," North clipped. "It should be."

The Soviet turned his massive frame to him, making the Korean fight the urge to stand on tip-toes.

"And I want you to be part of my family."

North blinked, before baring his fangs as he realized what that meant.

"Not a Soviet Republic," the other country clarified before he could snarl at him. "Unless you so wish-"

"I do not," North assured him frostily.

It didn't matter how even-handed CCCP was with his own republics. As he had said, the only hands Korea should be in were those of Koreans.

"Very well," the Soviet said evenly. "Then I only want you to be my son."

North was struck dumb for a second. It was unprofessional, but all he could say was, "What?"

“I want you to be my son,” CCCP reiterated, his gaze not wavering. “You do not have to give me an answer now, or ever. That is simply what I desire.”

“I see,” North managed after a moment because what the fuck was he supposed to say to *that?*

The large Countryhuman seemed unbothered by his reaction, staring out at the fields around the village, a few lamps casting pockets of light.

He wasn’t very expressive. North had never seen him make an unnecessary movement. South had said it unnerved him, that it reminded him of Japan.

His brother didn't get the same feeling. Japan had always quivered with restraint, even as his muscles never so much as twitched. There was the sense that he was holding something back, some great desire, whether it was violence or something else. The only time North had ever seen him otherwise was for a few moments on that day on Paektusan. But the Soviet simply seemed to have no patience for unnecessary motion.

CCCP’s formal, blunt speech was also different. There was more under it, in the way it coloured when he mentioned America, or grew more relaxed as he discussed politics. It had even warmed when North had interrogated him on Lenin. He wasn't blank in the same way as Japan. Just stoic.

It was tolerable. As was the way he’d avoided sticking his mouth out while they travelled, and how the Soviets in Pyongyang hadn’t started dominating the People’s Committee right away, only observed. It wasn’t ideal, but it was tolerable.

North lifted his chin again, still disconcerted by what he’d said, but with one more crucial demand. “Even if we don’t have elections yet, I want the Korean representative to be picked by me.” He knew elections would come later- they needed leadership now. But at least he could exercise the will of his people in their place. “I don’t want that Jo Man-sik in charge.”

He went to give his reasoning, then firmed his jaw. He didn't owe it. It was his country, that was all the reason he needed.

Shockingly, the Soviet almost appeared to smile. "My people had been considering him. But there is already a representative that has been selected. And while he was not formally elected, he was decided on by your revolutionaries still in my country."

Warily, North asked, "Who?"

"I believe you will approve. He goes by 'Kim Il-sung.'"

North's eyes shot open. He hadn't seen his comrade in years, since he and Kim Jong-suk had returned for the birth of their son, and they hadn't been able to get letters to each other in months with the chaos of the war.

"He's well? Have you met him?" Realizing how… intense he'd just sounded, he cleared his throat, asking more neutrally, "How is Comrade Kim Il-sung doing? If you know."

"He is well. Enthused to come home, and even more so at Japan's defeat. He wanted me to send you his greetings."

He was alive. He was well. North bubbled with questions that he bit down on. He could ask him himself.

"Of course they chose him," he said, starting to pace.

His comrade had only went on to make more of a name for himself among the Korean revolutionaries after they'd left for the Soviet Union five years ago. He'd even been a part of the Red Army, carrying on the fight against Japan.

And he'd survived.

'I will not die before my country is Liberated.'

And he hadn't. *They* hadn't. Just like all their other comrades that had to leave their homeland behind, he was coming home.

And it meant he'd accepted the Joint Occupation was going to

happen. Ssi-bal, it would have helped to know that sooner.

He whirled to CCCP, not liking that he'd hidden it. "Why didn't you say that earlier?"

"I intended it to be a surprise," the country said. He looked vaguely amused in a way that would've made North bristle if his mind wasn't whirling.

Kim Il-sung was their representative. North knew for a fact that he wouldn't sell them out to the Soviets, and didn't contain any ultra-left or right deviations. He wouldn't just passively accept the occupation, but keep their own principles alive and enact the plans they'd talked about over all those years by torchlight. He'd been who North was going to choose, if he could, since Lyuh Woon-hyung didn't have the same backbone he needed, and Jo Man-sik was too right-wing. He just hadn't known if the man would return in time, or if he was even alive.

But he was.

"This is perfect. I need to tell my provinces."

And South. He was finally going to be able to meet North's comrade. He was finally going to be able to present his family to his General the way he'd presented his son to him. And the others would be thrilled to see him again, especially Hae. And SH would light up the moment she heard Kim Jong-suk was coming back.

He halted in his tracks.

There was a knowing note to CCCP's voice. "You are going to let it be a surprise?"

North *'tch'*ed, trying to sound flat as he said, "They just don't need to know yet."

"Does this mean the Joint Occupation will be accepted?"

North firmed his jaw, turning around to face him again, thrusting out his hand. CCCP went to clasp his forearm in a businessman's shake, but the Korean caught his fingers in a Western-style one

instead, even though it made his skin crawl.

The pads of his palms were thick and worn smooth, like polished horn. Close examination showed his nails were cleaned, not clean. Calluses swelled where he'd wielded firearms and blades frequently, and from this distance he could see the red skin was mottled with even more scars than he'd thought, clearly put there by combat and labour.

North freed his hand, bracing it behind his back so he could unobtrusively wipe it on his uniform, his decision made.

"The Joint Occupation will not be accepted," he said, keeping his voice even. "Never again will we accept foreign hands on our country.

"But Korea will tolerate it."

He didn't want to drag them into another war. He didn't want his people to have to fight again so soon after they had thought they could stop. They couldn't launch directly into a fight against America and CCCP, or even one of them, not because they'd be hopelessly outmatched, but because Korea owed it to them to try the peaceful path first.

Which was why even though he had no trust for America's intentions, he had been hoping CCCP would at least be a true Marxist-Leninist.

From all their conversations, he thought he was. And neither his personality nor actions had set off any alarm bells that would have been intolerable. His administration could go against his wishes, but North didn't think he was lying about his own intentions. He would take resources, and he would do things Korea didn't like because this Joint Occupation was already something Korea didn't like, want, or need.

But he wouldn't take too much. And he wouldn't do anything that made his country have to take up arms again. If he did, Korea would simply have to be prepared to deal with it.

Prepare for war, hope for peace. Because that was what his people needed.

"I will still protest it at the proclamation of the People's Republic," he informed him, daring the Soviet to deny it. "Korea will make it known that the idea that we need a trusteeship at all is a false one, and that we will never again be subservient."

CCCP nodded. "I would expect nothing less."

"But I will make sure my people know that in order to move forward, we need to focus on creating a united front, not sowing division. *More* division," he was unable to help adding with a glower.

Many wouldn't like it. *No one* would like it. But if it was what they had to tolerate to get peace and real Liberation, then they would.

"Then we are at an agreement." The Soviet dipped his head. "That should make this more bearable."

Business concluded, he went to move by North.

The Korean clenched his teeth, then called, "Wait."

The other country looked back, waiting.

He didn't want to ask, didn't want to reveal another weakness. But he said, "Is it possible that my brother and I can stay together?"

CCCP considered. "America will not tolerate the both of you in my hands. And if you are to join him in Seoul, it will seem as if you are aligning with his capitalism over Socialism. It is unfair, I am aware. But it is true."

North knew that. Now that the international community was turning an eye to them, every little action they took would have greater meaning.

'And where were those eyes when we were being ground into the dust?' he thought bitterly. They were only looking now because they thought they could get something out of them.

Except for CCCP. He had sent that letter.

The Soviet observed him for a long moment, then said, “If you desire to join the other Korea in Seoul, I will not stop you.” At North’s suspicious look, he explained, “Your situation is unique. But if he is your family, then the choice is with you.” His eye darkened. “Tearing a family apart is the worst thing that can be done.”

North’s jaw worked. “I’ll think about it,” he said eventually.

“If you are separated, it will only be for a short time,” CCCP reminded him. “The suggested date to arrange the trusteeship is in December. And while I am sure America will be up to his tricks, I assure you I will attempt to hasten negotiations as much as I can.”

And once the trusteeship was in place, the division would be removed. Foreigners would still be attempting to control their fates and force their people down the paths they wanted. But North and South would be together, able to stop them.

“I’ll think about it,” North repeated. “And my decision will be my own.”

And until then, his brother didn’t need to know about this.

“Very well.” CCCP inclined his head. “This situation may not be ideal, but regardless, I am looking forward to working with you, Comrade Korea.”

Before North could respond, he placed his heavy, weathered hand on his shoulder, giving him another suggestion of a smile. Unnerved, the Korean batted his hand away before he could school himself.

“We will see.”

Whether it turned out CCCP was someone to be worked with or worked against, whether he decided to spend the Division in Seoul or Pyongyang, whether North stayed with South or…

Whatever he chose, one thing was for certain- he was *not* going to be the Soviet’s family. Korea had no father. Only a brother.

And for one small, shining moment, just like their people, they had had freedom. And they would have it again.

And no one, not even a veritable mountain of a country, was going to get in the way of that.

North describing CCCP the way bad yaoi and straight romance novels describe love interests: He was Large. He was Enormous. He was the size of a mountain. 'I am quite big,' CCCP said, largely.
(to be fair, North is 147 cm (4'10") at this point, and CCCP is 204 cm (6'8")

CCCP did keep their agreements. The People's Committees were left alone. There were never more than two hundred administrators. And while they did take gold and other resources from Korea this was later made up for by cancelling war debts. Ironically, North would dislike CCCP less if he hadn't kept to them. He'd hate him more, but he'd dislike him less.

Chapter title explanation because it makes me teary- part of the Soviet proclamation to Korea when the Red Army arrived:

'The Soviet Army and Allied forces have driven the Japanese plunderers from Korea. Korea has become a country of freedom. However, this is only the first step in a new era of Korean history. An abundant fruitful orchard is the result of man's effort and foresight. Therefore the happiness of the Korean people will only be achieved by the heroic efforts that you Korean people will exert. Remember those bitter days that you have suffered under Japanese rule. The very stones testify to your sufferings. You are all aware of the fact that the Japanese could afford to live in lofty spacious pavilions, well-clad, well-fed, despising Koreans and humiliating Korean customs and culture. Such a past of slavery will never be repeated. Like a nightmare, this humiliating past has now disappeared forever.
Korean people remember you have your future happiness in your own hands. You have attained liberty and independence. Now everything is up to you.'

Part of American proclamation to Korea: ‘All powers of government over the territory of Korea south of 38 degrees north latitude and the people thereof will be for the present exercised under my authority. Persons will obey my orders and orders issued under my authority. Acts of resistance to the occupying forces or any acts which may disturb public peace and safety will be punished severely. For all purposes during the military control, English will be the official language. In event of any ambiguity or diversity of interpretation or definition between any English and Korean or Japanese text, the English text shall prevail.’ (‘my’ being Douglas MacArthur diediedie)

I’m using the standard English romaji for Lyuh Woon-hyung for reference’s sake, so someone can look him up themselves. But while I admit to vibes-based romaji, I think it is a crazy way to spell 여운형. Even giving him the Northern spelling of pronouncing the rieul at the start- 려운형- would not create Lyuh to me. Unless I’m overpronouncing the English one. Still, I think there could be better spellings. Where does the ‘w’ come from?? (okay I looked this up and apparently it’s just to make the English spelling more appealing. So eye snot and nose snot, I guess). My vibes-based system would have him as Ryeo Un-hyung. I think that looks plenty appealing, and is a direct Korean transliteration. Alas.

Sons Of Sons

[image]

1952

Kangwon was screwed. Completely, utterly screwed.

He'd been taken away from the airport to a large villa in Oslo, in what looked like a wealthy residential district. They hadn't even blindfolded him, just kept guns pointed at the back seat so he couldn't jump out the car door.

He hadn't tried. He'd been busy trying to make sure Kim Ju-bong didn't choke on the blood pouring from his shattered nose. And he knew he couldn't catch up to Gangwon's car on foot.

The province held his head in the hand he hadn't dislocated as he looked out at the garden inside the villa walls. He could tell it would be lush in summer, but right now the beds were barren, and the trees had only just start to bud.

The window wasn't even locked. If he wanted, he could slide it up and jump right out. There were armed guards down below, but he knew he could evade them, and the walls half-hidden by the grey trees lining them would be too easy to scale.

But where would he go? This wasn't like the holding camp outside Seoul, where he knew almost every mountain ridge and river between him and getting back to Korea. He'd looked at a world map before he left, but that didn't help with navigating Norway. All it told him was that he'd either need to trek north across the entirety of it, or cross half of it, then all of Sweden and Finland, and cross three borders if he wanted to reach the Soviet Union, where someone *might* help him.

He knew there was a Soviet embassy somewhere in Oslo, but only in relation to the airport and the hall where the second day of the World Peace Council would be taking place right now. He didn't

know how to reach it from here. He couldn't even tell if the woods he'd seen on the other side of the villa were on the edge of the city, or just a patch of private property. He didn't know where he was at all, which was a really unnerving feeling for someone who was used to knowing the terrain of his country as well as he did his Countryhuman's face.

He could escape. But there was nowhere to go. And he didn't know where to even begin if he wanted to find Gangwon.

Kangwon let out a breath, backing away from the window to throw himself onto the way-too-plush bed. He bounced, then sank into the mattress.

'Can't be good for your back.'

His holding cell was cushier than the POW camp had been, with glossy, good-quality wood furniture, several lamps, an adjoined toilet, and amber and white walls, the paper patterned with blooming vines and birds in flight. It'd probably be nice to look at for a normal resident. For someone who was imprisoned, though, it was just sort of ironic.

He'd expected to be brought to a UN office, not a vacation home or whatever this place was. It looked like a bourgeois manor, but the men in it didn't speak Norwegian- they spoke English. And there'd been an American flag hanging limp on a pole outside when he'd been brought in. He'd think it was their embassy, but the interior looked more like a regular house.

Well, the house of a regular capitalist. A foreign one, since Kangwon hadn't even seen the sort of glass-chandeliered, wrought-iron-railinged luxury in the chosonjip and manors the Japanese and landowners had left behind. But it shared that feeling of being more a display of wealth than a home.

As he'd been escorted up the marble stairs, past artwork hanging in expensive frames and decorative plates with gold inlays that glinted as they caught the light refracted though the crystals hanging around the lamps, China's words had slipped into his mind.

'The Europeans have spent generations as the subjects of kings and tyrants who let the blood they need from foreign nations.'

He was right. Whether this place belonged to Norway or America, it wasn't the house of someone exploiting one country, like the Korean capitalists and Japanese that came over. It was more like the manor of a capitalist in Japan, someone who held strings in nations across the world, draining the 'lesser' ones dry so they could pacify their own workers with benefits. An endless web of exploitation, all leading back to the smooth satin sheets Kangwon was spread out on, made by hands the people that owned this place would never even see.

He got up, heading back to the window, pressing his forehead and tender relocated carpometacarpal against the cool glass.

Maybe it wasn't time to be thinking about the Labour Theory of Value or commodity production. But it was better than stressing about Gangwon when that wouldn't help anything.

Kangwon gripped the bottom of the window frame, lifting it up slowly. The window *could* open, but the men outside hadn't been thrilled when he'd done it last night.

Frigid air rushed into the room, carrying the smell of snow and smog. Even in this quiet, upper-class neighbourhood, probably ri away from them, the stench was thick. It'd taken Kangwon enough time to get used to industrial smells in their own cities, and the constant fog of smoke and chemicals from the war.

But the snow smell was promising. He pressed his 'nose' to the crack in the window, sniffing. It wasn't just the wet, slushy smell of the spring melt, but the heavier, crisper scent of incoming snowfall, the one that always sent him scurrying to bring in his traps and forage anything else he could when he'd lived in the cave. The clouds looked grey, too, swollen with snow.

Maybe he should try escaping tonight. If it was snowing, he'd have a better chance at getting around Oslo undetected. And if they noticed he was missing, it might slow down a search. He probably wasn't getting out of Norway, but maybe he'd at least be able to

find his brother before the United Nations came.

That was the only thing he'd been told yesterday, after he was thrown in here. That the United Nations would be coming in two days to 'sort things out.' And Kangwon knew what that meant- his brother would be taken back to America.

But maybe if they were together, Gangwon could prove he wasn't a hostage, and tell the organization what America had done to him. And Kangwon could plead their biological warfare case in person, try and reach the UN's heart, if he'd listen.

He... didn't think it would work. Like China had said, the UN wanted the war over with. Fulfilling America's demand for Gangwon would get them a little closer to that, without really lifting a hand. And if the reason he wanted the war over was to protect his image, then 'saving' Kangwon's brother would do that, too.

But it was their only option. Escaping might tarnish their country's reputation even more, but he knew Korea would want him to do it if it meant rescuing Gangwon.

A shout caught Kangwon's attention, and he lifted his head from his arms, looking out at garden. The men under his window turned towards the wall. He could just barely see someone on the other side, one of the guards waving his gun over his head.

He quickly pressed his ear slit to the gap, just catching, "-inside! Don't let them get out the back!"

The guards pivoted, looking up right into Kangwon's eyes, and he darted back, heart pounding.

'Them?' Had Kim Ju-bong woken up? He hadn't been taken out of the car with Kangwon, but maybe he had been after. Or Gangwon?

Maybe it was too optimistic to think his brother could've escaped from wherever he was and managed to make his way here to break him out. But Kangwon's heart still leaped, and he rushed to put on his medical coat so he'd be ready if they had to run. They hadn't

taken anything from him, just roughly patted him down for weapons.

He heard a door slam somewhere downstairs, follow by muffled shouting, and the man outside his door muttered, "What the fuck?"

Kangwon waited by the foot of the bed, heart pounding.

His hope turned to unease as footsteps started to thud down the hall, heavy and moving at a brisk clip, rattling the painting of a snowy mountain on his wall.

His brother didn't walk like that.

He didn't need to check the room. He'd already picked out the best weapon last night. He lunged for a nearby lamp, one with a heavy brass base, and tore it out of the wall, wincing as he used his injured hand to wrap the cord around it before hefting it with his good one, just in case. He waited.

"H-Halt!" the guard cried.

The waver in his voice made Kangwon raise his brows. The American had been pretty burly. His grip on the lamp tightened as he wondered who could make an armed man tremble.

He got his answer a second later as a deep voice boomed, *"Do not presume to order me, American."*

He'd never heard him speak English before, but the thundering baritone that vibrated your bones was one he didn't think anyone could forget.

"You will move out of my way," CCCP ordered the American. *"Or you will face the consequences."*

Kangwon relaxed slightly, relief flooding him as he tossed the lamp onto the bed. Part of him wondered if he should open the door and take the guard out for him, but he figured it was better to try and resolve this without any more violence. At least violence Korea could be blamed for.

"This house is property of the United States government," the man said tightly, doing a better job at not sounding afraid now. "You can't touch me."

CCCP's voice turned glacial, seeping through the door like the outside air through the window. *"I rose up against the tsardom and shattered every one of its laws. I destroyed every single person who attempted to chain me with them. I killed the Russian Empire. I carved his heart out with a farmer's sickle while he still lived, and crushed it in my grasp. And you think I would hesitate to destroy* ***you? Move."***

Kangwon didn't hear the Soviet do anything, but his door rattled as the guard slammed into it, then scrabbled away, like the word had physically pushed him back.

It didn't even take two hits. The first impact made the door bulge inwards, the sturdy wood cracking in half as CCCP plowed into the room shoulder-first.

This place was a residence, not an actual prison. Kangwon was pretty sure the door hadn't been locked.

The huge Countryhuman stood a few feet away from him, dressed in a slate grey military tunic embroidered with red, with several medals pinned on his left breast. His epaulets were gold, and so were the braids on his peaked general's cap. But the uniform wasn't decorative- it was clearly for active-duty.

He scanned the room, his eye coming back to Kangwon once he'd cleared it.

"Hey," the Korean said.

CCCP's expression was as thunderous as his voice. "With me. Now."

Kangwon didn't need to be told twice. But- "Guards at the window," he reported, snapping into military mode. "Orders to stop us from going out the back."

"We are not going out the back." CCCP turned on a heel, the medals on his chest clinking. "We are going out the front."

Kangwon followed him, passing the guard, who was pressed into the corner, his pistol gripped in his hands. He looked ashamed, but it clearly wasn't enough to risk taking a shot at the Soviet.

The Korean province followed him down the opulent halls, having to hurry to keep up with his long strides.

"My brother is-"

"Silence," CCCP ordered, and the way he said it made Kangwon decide to keep his mouth closed for now.

He'd never seen the man like this before. Usually he had a stern face, but a slow voice that warmed the more you talked to him, like ice melting off Mount Kumgang. Now he was like the Russian mountains him and Gangwon had flown over, still capped with white in spring.

"Look confident, stay behind me, and do not cease walking," the Soviet ordered in a low tone as they approached the staircase to the ground floor.

At the foot, between them and the door, were several Americans- a guard and what looked like three diplomats.

"Mr. CCCP," one of them piped up, sweat beading on his pale brow. "We allowed you in to confirm the province's condition. But we can't let you leave until we confirm with the United Nations that he really sent-"

CCCP didn't stop, just forged straight towards him like a locomotive, Kangwon in his wake.

"-y-you." The diplomat's eyes widened as he realized the mountain of muscle coming straight at him wasn't going to stop, and he dove out of the way just before the Soviet plowed him over.

CCCP didn't pay him any attention, just slammed open the front door. Kangwon slid out after him, keeping his head up and shoulders back, like he wasn't being walked right out of his cell.

He hustled after the Soviet as he strode down the long, curving

driveway.

"My brother-"

"Do not speak."

Since Kangwon didn't think Gangwon was back in the house, he kept quiet.

When they reached the gate, it was shut, and two Americans stood in front of it, rifles in hand, not raised, but ready.

"Halt," one ordered. "We cannot allow you to remove an American detainee from American custody without explicit permission from Mr. America."

Kangwon would've argued that he wasn't an American detainee- he was a Norwegian one, and shouldn't've been put in American custody in the first place. He also would've pointed out that as a Provincehuman from a country with no diplomatic relations with Norway *or* America, the United Nations should be the only one able to give them permission to release him.

CCCP didn't do that. He just kept walking, then finally halted a foot away from the men. Even with how tall they were, the Soviet still loomed over them.

"Two hundred metres," he said in English.

The men looked warily between each other.

"That is the blast radius of my newest atom bomb, if allowed to detonate on the ground." CCCP's words were cold. *"That is more than enough to destroy this embassy and a large chunk of this city. Imagine what it might do to the cities* ***you*** *hail from."*

One of the men's throats bobbed. "That would be an act of war."

"Detaining a sovereign Provincehuman without cause is also an act of war," the Soviet said. *"But Korea cannot fight back against that injustice."*

He lowered his head, putting his face directly in the man's, his breath rolling over him like a fog bank.

*"The Soviet Union **can.**"*

Kangwon could see the man's legs trembling. His breaths made short, sharp bursts of steam.

"I am not your Countryhuman," the Soviet man growled, his words rumbling in his chest. *"I do not want war. But if you do not open this gate, then I will bring it. If I am not in Moscva in five hours, the atom bomb will be unleashed on Oslo. Do you think your country would recall you? Or would he leave you to die while he struck back?"*

The guards exchanged nervous glances. One's knuckles tightened on his rifle. Kangwon shifted on his feet, ready to fight.

"You know as well as I do," CCCP delivered, and his lips peeled back from his fangs. *"Now **open the gate.**"*

"Screw it." One of the men broke, scrambling for the guardhouse.

"He's bluffing!" his partner cried, taking the chance to put distance between him and the Soviet.

"Don't care, I'm not risking it over some gook."

The gate opened, and CCCP didn't waste a second in resuming his stride, Kangwon in tow.

"Tell your Countryhuman that the subjugated nations of the world are no longer incapable of fighting back," the Soviet delivered, not looking at the men. *"And to not initiate battles he cannot win."*

Kangwon followed him down the cloudy Norwegian street, into a car waiting a block over.

"In the back," CCCP ordered, opening the door for him. "Stay low."

"Wait!" Out of earshot, Kangwon couldn't stay quiet anymore, stopping him for shutting the door on him. "My brother, he's-"

"Gone," CCCP clipped. "I already made my inquiries. He was sent on a plane almost immediately after you were captured."

His stony expression finally softened, a bit of the frost leaving his voice.

"I am sorry, son. He is beyond our reach now."

And heading into America's.

Numbly, Kangwon's hand slid off the door, letting CCCP shut it. The Soviet climbed into the front, starting the car.

His brother was gone. Really gone. On a plane flying over a foreign country, all alone. Or worse, back in Korea already, where South would Command him, and America might lock him up again. Or do worse.

Kangwon took a deep inhale, then let out a slow exhale. If there really wasn't anything he could do, then he couldn't sink into despair over it.

"There was a guard with us," he said, keeping his voice even.

"He is in custody," CCCP clipped, back to icy. "If something can be done in the future, it will be. But you are the priority."

"Did Korea-?"

"Silence," the man ordered again. "I do not trust this vehicle."

So Kangwon stayed silent and stayed low, keeping his head below the window as they drove at a casual pace through the streets of Oslo. He could see CCCP tense occasionally, spotting a vehicle or something else that put him on edge.

The airport wasn't far. When they pulled up, the Soviet just stepped out, leaving the car on the curb. Kangwon didn't really care right now where he'd got it.

He followed the huge man through the terminal, people gawking just like before. Only this time they were definitely looking at

CCCP, either terrified or impressed by his size. Or his presence. He didn't leave the Soviet Union often.

Out on the bricks, one of the planes- a small passenger jet- was surrounded by men in the black State Police uniform, having a stand-off with several Soviets in black suits. Snowflakes had started to swirl across the ground.

"We are on diplomatic mission," one of the Soviets- a man with angular eyes and high cheekbones- was saying as they walked up.

"A Countryhuman cannot visit another country without the express permission of that country," one of the State Police- the icy-eyed one that had been responsible for detaining the Kangwons in the first place- growled. "Which *you* do not have."

"The last I hear, a country cannot detain a foreign Provincehuman without notifying his country of origin on same day," the Soviet said, almost lazily. *"But it is seeming **you** still have not notified Korea."*

"Korea *was* notified," the Norwegian growled back. "South Korea was told immediately that two of his provinces were on Norwegian soil."

"Hmmmm," the Soviet hummed. *"For country supporting American intervention in Korea, is strange you view both a province from North Korea and one from South Korea as having the same Countryhuman. Almost as if it is a civil war, and your presence there violates the UN Charter."*

"Mm," another Soviet, this one with cropped blond hair, agreed. *"But if both **do** belong to South Korea, then isn't it strange one goes home immediately, while the other can't until the United Nations meets with him? Interesting. And contradictory."*

"It is not a contradiction," CCCP announced, making the State Police startle towards them. "It is a conflict of interest. *Your masters are in disagreement,"* he said to the Norwegians.

Their brows lowered like they'd understood, and Kangwon made an effort to hear the language under the Korean he heard for his

next words. It was Norwegian, a different dialect than the Norwegians, but intelligible. He was a little envious of his multilingualism.

"America demanded Korea's provinces to be captured and sent to him," the Soviet explained in his cold voice. *"The United Nations desired to hold this one for longer, in an attempt to not delay a ceasefire while still heeding his orders and wounding Korea. Your country obeyed both like a dog."*

The Norwegians' eyes blazed at the insult.

"But the tricks of all have been swept aside," CCCP declared. *"I will be leaving. And I will be taking Korea's province with me."*

The icy-eyed guard stepped in front of him, the others in a phalanx behind him. "That won't be happening."

Kangwon wished he could talk to them, to beg them to see that no matter how you looked at it, he'd been detained unfairly, that his brother had been taken away against his will, and that all of this was turning into a problem for Norway when he really shouldn't even be involved. He wanted to try and make them see that this was just another part of the war against Korea, a war that never should've started in the first place.

But they couldn't understand. Even if he could speak Norwegian, they wouldn't understand.

"You cannot stop me," CCCP told them.

The man's jaw feathered. "We will not be bullied in our own country by a tyrant. This isn't your dictatorship, Soviet."

*"But you **will** let yourselves be ordered into doing America's bidding,"* CCCP growled.

Kangwon nervously watched his huge fists clench, the size of chamoe melons.

Korea *really* wouldn't like it if he got involved in a fire/fistfight with the Soviet and half the Norwegian State Police. South Pyongan

would, but that was usually a sign you shouldn't do something.

"Maybe threaten to bomb them again?" he suggested. For the civilians of Oslo's sake, he hoped the earlier threat had been a bluff.

CCCP didn't look his way. But he also didn't swing on the man in front of him.

Instead he said, *"The Nazis ruled you for five years. They stripped you of your rights and your dignity, raped your wives and daughters and drafted your sons to fight their war, and when they left they burned everything in their wake to ashes. When my soldiers entered Finnmark, your people clung to their coats and **wept.** Your soldiers were armed with **my** weapons and fought with **my** men to liberate your homes. They fought bravely, but the truth is that without the Soviet Union, you would have **never** been freed."*

Some of the men looked down, their mouths tight with shame. On a few, it looked like resentment.

"I will not demand that you feel empathy when I know you will not, even with the evidence of this new Korean holocaust before you." CCCP stepped aside, showing them Kangwon in his medical coat, with his hollow cheeks and bandages, blood seeping through since he hadn't been able to change them. *"And I will not demand you thank me."* His jaw feathered. *"I know you will not. My people saved yours from fascism, and you will **never** forgive us for it."*

He bared his teeth, not in warning like Korea did, but in a grimace.

*"But you could at least show me some **respect.**"*

The air was tense, crackling with energy as the snow started to whirl faster. The Soviets had lost their 'buying time' attitudes, and were flanking the plane stairs, staring down the men closest to them. Kangwon could see the Norwegians shifting, some hands loosening on their firearms. Others tightened. The fire in their blue and green eyes burned hotter.

He hadn't understood what CCCP meant by 'You'll never forgive us for saving you from fascism.' He got not wanting to thank a

foreign country for their help (not personally, but he was used to observing it), but to hate him?

But they did. At least a few of the Norwegians whose nation would still be under Nazi control if it wasn't for the Soviet Union were staring at the Countryhuman whose army had freed them with a burning hatred. Not all. But a few.

Would they have looked at Germany like that? Would they look at America that way now, for all he'd done?

Kangwon didn't know the answer. He didn't want to guess.

"Stand down."

Everyone looked at the person that had spoken. To Kangwon's surprise, it was the icy-eyed man in charge.

He wasn't looking at anyone, staring at the gap between CCCP and Kangwon, his brown eyes fixed in middle-distance, as ice-cold as his expression.

"Sir-"

"Stand down," he clipped, and holstered his pistol. "I won't cause another diplomatic incident over something that has nothing to do with our country."

After a moment of hesitation, the other men lowered their weapons. Some of them turned their burning gazes on the commander, and there was enough disdain in them to make Kangwon blink.

CCCP didn't say anything, marching past the Norwegians, making them reluctantly shift out of the way. He sent Kangwon up the stairs first.

As the Soviet followed, the brown-eyed man called after him, the language under his Korean no longer Norwegian, "Thank you."

Kangwon saw something flicker in CCCP's eye.

Then he was inside, moving past him, his comrades on his heels.

"Hurry," he barked to the pilot. "We need to move faster than the storm."

Kangwon really hoped that was just for safety's sake, and not because atom bombs really would be dropped on Norway if the Soviet Countryhuman wasn't back in five hours.

'Maybe better not to ask.'

CCCP led him to the back of the plane, opening a door that led to a smaller compartment, the seats in it more spaced out, in pairs that faced each other. He squeezed into one of the chairs, and Kangwon sat across from him. Neither of them spoke as the plane taxied down the runway, then lifted with a jounce. After a few minutes of rough(er) turbulence, they smoothed out to the usual shaking.

A half hour later, CCCP's shoulders relaxed, and he exhaled, removing his general's cap and placing it on another seat.

"Are we out of Norwegian airspace?" Kangwon asked.

"Yes." CCCP's tone had thawed, back to the way he sounded when he'd visit Korea. Still blunt, but not cold. "I apologize for my bearing earlier, son. It was a fraught situation."

"No problem." Especially considering he'd just broken Kangwon out of Norway.

"But is that going to cause problems for you?" he asked.

A Countryhuman visiting a country without permission, threatening to use a nuclear bomb on its capital, entering and breaking (in that order), and probably some sort of airport violation to even touch ground. Those were just all the broken laws Kangwon could think of off the top of his head. And he still didn't know how he'd got that car.

"Yes," CCCP said bluntly. "But they will be handled. I could not leave my son's province in enemy hands."

Kangwon looked down at his lap. "The United Nations wasn't coming tomorrow, was he?"

"No," the man replied. "I did attempt to conduct your retrieval by legal means. I intended to visit alongside the United Nations. He informed me that his flight was to be delayed due to a possible snowstorm. I suspect the excuses would have continued to come."

The UN knew that if Kangwon was in America's hands, Korea would refuse to sign a ceasefire until he got him back, so he'd been trying to keep him in Oslo indefinitely to make him more eager to sign.

What he didn't know was that Korea would view him keeping his province there as no different than America doing it. He would've just been another POW not to capitulate over. Korea only would've doubled down once he learned about the secret talk concession.

And the longer Kangwon was there, the greater chance there was of Korea storming Oslo like a one-man army and *really* causing a diplomatic incident.

"Thanks for saving me, comrade," he said, since unlike his Countryhuman, he had no problem with that. "I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"It is no problem," CCCP dismissed, standing. "With my assisting capabilities limited by America, I will do whatever I can to help my children."

Korea hated when he called him or them that. But this probably wasn't the time or place to correct him.

"Did Korea send you?" Kangwon asked anxiously while the man disappeared inside a door at the back.

"Yes," he said back, muffled.

That meant he was awake.

The province dropped his head into his hands, ignoring how his wrist twinged.

Korea was going to kill him. He'd left him asleep, taken off for Oslo, embarrassed their country in front of a bunch of different nationalities, assaulted at least two Norwegians (something he would approve of usually, just not now), and hadn't even gotten to do what he'd went there for.

And he'd lost Gangwon.

He shook his head, trying to shake away the clinging guilt. He knew it wasn't entirely his fault. His brother had chosen to go.

It didn't make it any more bearable. Not for him, and it wouldn't for Korea.

Kangwon didn't know what he was going to do to him. But he probably deserved it.

"Food," CCCP said, emerging with a platter of dried meats, kolbasa, some sort of biscuit, chunks of some white thing, pickles, and a tin of fish. "You will eat."

He'd only been given two slices of bread with thin slices of unidentifiable meat between them since he'd been taken, and it was early this morning, when they'd came to take the handcuff off. Kangwon was used to being hungry, but the sight of the food still made his mouth water.

Still he said, "I... can't eat right now."

"Grief will linger." CCCP guessed his reason right away. "Hunger can be solved now. You will eat."

He was right. Kangwon picked up one of the kolbasa, taking a bite out of it, trying not to think about eating the airplane food with his brother just two days ago, chuckling as they tried not to choke.

The airplane.

Kangwon perked up, scarfing down the rest of the kolbasa while he patted his pockets with his good hand. Had he put it in his case...?

He found it folded in his suit pocket, pulling out a piece of paper. It was a postcard, one a Soviet stewardess had handed him when they'd got on the plane to Moscva. It showed the Red Square with the Soviet star perched on a tower in the background. He'd been planning to give it to Hae, since her small collection of ones CCCP had brought her before the war had burned with the chosonjip.

But maybe it could have another use.

"Do you have a pen? And could I borrow it if you do?"

The long, brown coat CCCP usually wore was draped over the back of his seat. He pulled one from the pocket, and Kangwon rested the card on the small table between them, scribbling out a small message. His handwriting wasn't the best, but he tried to make it as legible as possible. Luckily, it was his off hand he'd dislocated.

"Would you be able to do me a favour?" he asked, holding up the card when he was done.

Maybe he should've asked first.

But CCCP said, "If it is able to be done, it will be done."

"Is there any way you could get a postcard to the south?"

He showed the Soviet the letter, telling him what he wanted. After a second, he dipped his head, taking the card and tucking it away into his coat.

"My part will be done," he said. "But I cannot guarantee the recipient will receive it."

"I know." It was a longshot. But if he could try, he would. "Thanks."

"Eat," CCCP repeated, pouring a glass of what looked like milk out of a chilled bottle.

Kangwon took a sip, and yeah, it was milk. He'd never had milk before. Hopefully he wasn't intolerant.

He ate the food he'd been given, trying to stop halfway, but being urged by CCCP to eat all of it, leaving him full for the first time in... almost two years. It was all good, even the hard white chunks (which were apparently a healthier version of the canned 'cheese' some of his cousins had eaten from the American rations; he *really* hoped he wasn't intolerant to dairy), but he couldn't taste most of it. Wondering about where Gangwon was, what he'd be fed, dulled his tongue.

He tried to remind himself that South had been good to Hae when it came to food, bringing her those dumplings. And SH had apparently eaten okay in Gyeongmudae. Even when Korea's brother didn't think about their starving people, at least he'd been keeping the Provincehumans fed. Even Kangwon had got those yakgwa when he'd visited.

But after South had stopped visiting, him and Hae had been on small grain rations, the same amount as the other prisoners. And America had started to deprive SH of meals, too. And that was with South in the same place as her. And if the southern provinces were still locked up in separate buildings...

But South had been lonely. Hopefully he'd visit. Hopefully America wouldn't stop him, or he wouldn't stop himself. Hopefully one of the others could get through to him, someone less intense than SH and less convincing than him, to avoid scaring him away. Sang maybe. Hopefully since he'd Command Gangwon, he'd know that he was back, where he was being kept, and he wouldn't be locked up in an isolated cell again.

But even if it wasn't a cell, he was still going to be isolated.

"I hope Gangwon's okay," he said out loud, turning away from the window, not wanting to watch the Swedish houses their shadow ripped over.

He knew he was just looking for reassurance he wouldn't be getting from Korea. His Countryhuman would probably tell him it was all his fault.

Maybe he shouldn't be looking for it from a foreign

Countryhuman, but... He needed to hear it right now.

"I am sure he will be." The words were ones Kangwon would have used for a patient, but the following weren't. "And if he is not, then they will pay."

Kangwon caught himself about to nibble on his fingernail, and tucked his hands into his pockets, glancing out at the sky instead, grey, but clear now that they were beyond the edge of the storm.

"If you are having trouble with nail biting, you may put lemon juice on them," CCCP said, apparently having noticed his struggle. "Or some other distasteful liquid when lemons are hard to find. Gasoline proved useful for Turkmenistan."

The joke(?) startled a chuckle out of Kangwon, as agitated as he was. It helped set his head a bit more straight. There was nothing he could do for his brother now but return to Korea and help Liberate their country. No point in stressing himself sick over it. Not when Korea was already going to go in on him enough.

And China. Kangwon didn't know if he'd keep dragging him into conversations now that Korea was awake. But he knew he'd at least give him a 'told you so' look.

He had. And he'd been right. Maybe not about some if it, but about a lot. Norway, the Norwegians, the UN.

And Kangwon had definitely made a mistake.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked after a long moment, and when he got assent, continued, "Do you think people are good or bad? In general. It's just something I've been wondering about lately."

The Soviet seemed to think about it as the plane rattled them around. When the turbulence lessened, he said, "I must believe that they are good."

"But are they?"

"They are." CCCP sounded more assured. "Those in my care are my

children. If I am forever anticipating that one will turn on me, I will not be able to treat them how I must. I remain vigilant for those who would do harm, while believing that the majority will not."

Kangwon chewed on his inner cheek. "Can you do that? Be alert and see the best in people at the same time? How do you not get... paranoid?"

Korea tended to come off as suspicious and cynical, and when it came to foreigners, he was. But Kangwon knew it was still as shock to him every time a Korean committed some heinous act. In the past, he'd seen the best in their people and the worst in everyone else. Communist theory and the General had changed the latter a little, but neither had done much to the former. If he was on alert for Rheeites and traitors, it was because they weren't 'their people' to him anymore.

But they were. For better or worse, and everything that could mean for a Countryhuman. And they wouldn't just be able to get rid of them after the war was over.

Kangwon had once wondered if he should direct criticism towards Korea at a Party meeting over it, since he wouldn't listen to him personally. He'd thought about mentioning that he had too much of a rosy view of their people, considering that, in the end, they were all just that. He knew he couldn't say what he really wanted to, but maybe it could get through to him that way.

He never had, though, because it hadn't been as necessary before the war, and because he'd been worried about the consequences for their country. It was why he'd voted the way he had at the pre-criticism session vote over what to tell Korea about South- because too much faith was better than the alternative.

But Kangwon had had too much faith in Norway and the people in it, and look where that had gotten him. And yeah, it was different. But it still made him think that he was glad the vote had turned out the way it had, even if everything they'd said really had just gone in one ear slit and out the other. He didn't want Korea's faith to burn him.

But at the same time, he couldn't help but feel that the alternative was worse, even now. If there was a way to get Korea onto the middle ground he'd never touched in his life, to uproot the flower garden in his head and see people's flaws while still seeing the best in them, he wanted to know it.

Because he was still worried that this war might drive Korea towards that alternative.

"Those in my family would never betray me, nor the rest of their siblings," CCCP said to him. "And if they do, then they were not of my family in the first place. I watch for those who are pretending to be kin. I do not wait for kin to turn."

Kangwon fiddled with his fingers in his pockets. That didn't quite help their situation.

"Korea's kin did turn on him, though," the province couldn't help point out. "He took his eye."

"Да," the Soviet agreed. "But perhaps he should reconsider what 'family' is."

Kangwon lips twitched a little sadly. "I'm not sure he'd want to hear that."

"Which is why I have not said it to him." CCCP gave him a considering look. "You asked me that on his behalf, did you not?"

Kangwon sucked his teeth, then nodded. "Yeah. Korea probably wouldn't want me to say this to you, but... I'm a little worried that if he ever admits that half of Korea is complicit in the suffering of our people, it might make him... lose faith in our country."

CCCP shook his head. "I do not think you need to fear that. I know my son well enough to know he could never lose faith in his people."

Kangwon hesitated, then nodded. That hadn't been what he'd meant. He knew Korea would never lose faith in their people, their cause, or their nation.

But if his Countryhuman knew he had said even that little bit about him to CCCP, it would probably be the final straw in getting him beaten to death with a sandal, so he switched the subject back.

"But there are bad people," he pointed out. "Those outside of your family. What do you think makes them that way? Are they just born like that or-"

"No one is born how they are," CCCP firmly cut him off. "There is no such thing as a soul or fate. There are only choices and the humans that make them. Nurture can be overcome. Even one who is born with a mental impairment can still choose who they will be."

Though China's opinion had been a bit more cynically worded, Kangwon still saw a tie-in.

"So we need to guide our people towards the right choices."

He and CCCP probably had different ideas of what 'right' meant, but since they were both Socialists, they likely both meant fostering working class solidarity while eradicating class exploitation, poverty, sexism, and things like that. Comfortable, ideologically awakened people were less likely to make 'wrong' choices, such as exploiting others for their own gain or turning to crime. The disproportionate amount of war crimes committed by South's army proved that.

"Да." CCCP took a sip from his own glass of milk. "Our aim is to create a society where right choices are encouraged, and simpler to make. Unlike in capitalist societies, where those who make wrong choices become rich and influential, and those who make the right ones are neglected or even punished, we care for those who make the right choices, and we try to educate those who make wrong ones. And if that fails, we remove them."

Kangwon mulled over that, thinking about what exactly led someone to make choices so wrong that they became a tyrant. "What about America? Why do you think he's the way he is?"

He wasn't sure if he should bring up his questions about how

much their people influenced them directly. He didn't actually know CCCP very well, if he'd be uncomfortable the way Korea would. Or catch on to part of what he'd meant before.

CCCP's thick brows drew in. "It does not matter why he is the way he is. It only matters *what* he is. He has made his choices. And he is one of those who must be removed. Just as was the Japanese Empire, or the Russian Empire."

That name again.

Kangwon side-eyed the Soviet country, remembering what he'd said about 'crushing the Russian Empire's heart in his grasp.'

There was a frequently spoken of topic among anti-Communists, one that had had multiple articles of propaganda and pamphlets written about it, both by them and by CCCP's own scholars and theorists, who hotly refuted the claim. Kangwon had read several of them written by the Japanese to turn Koreans against Socialism during the Occupation, since filial piety was so important to their people. But there'd never been a direct statement by the Countryhuman himself.

The Korean provinces, too, had whispered about it over the table while CCCP and Korea conferred during his monthly visits during the trusteeship, though none had ever had the chance (or courage) to get him alone to ask it, even Hwang. Kangwon had a chance now, though, and while he wouldn't want the glare the Soviet had given the Norwegians turned on him, he was fairly certain he wouldn't be thrown out of the plane for asking it.

"They say you killed your father," he said, as casually as he could.

The Soviet's face didn't change. "Да. Some do."

He made no further comment, so Kangwon prodded, "And did you? If you don't mind me asking."

The reply this time was immediate. "Нет. That man was no father of mine. He did not raise us as a father should. I was born of the people, not of an empire."

That was pretty much how the Soviet information workers said it.

"Then why don't you make some sort of announcement saying that?" Kangwon asked. "You personally."

"Because it does not matter. Those who support me would do so whether he was my father or not. And those who want to use the word 'patricide' to paint me as a monster would continue to do so, even if they knew it were not so. The truth is not important to them, only that I am seen with blood on my hands."

Kangwon bobbed his head at that. There'd been those who spread rumours over the last few years about things from the Agrarian Reform to the Soviet trusteeship to the Labour Law. When their claims had been firmly refuted, and they'd seen the truth, instead of changing their beliefs, many just found new tales to repeat. It hadn't been about truth or justice, but instead about casting a shadow on Korea and waylaying their efforts to restore the country.

Or maybe it was like China had said. Maybe they only cared about being right, and the concept that they weren't was too much to contemplate.

"And what would be more monstrous?" CCCP's voice hardened as his knuckles tightened around his armrests. "To kill someone with whom you shared blood, or to excuse his actions? To look away while he committed pogroms on the very people he was sworn to protect, to ignore the blood on his sword, simply because he could be called a *'father?'"* He bared his fangs at the word.

"The second one," Kangwon said, both because he believed it, and because the Soviet had very sharp canines, and he would like to see them hidden behind his lips again. He definitely got why that guard had buckled.

He got his wish as the man relaxed, hands unclenching. "Exactly. So it does not matter what the Russian Empire was or why he was what he was. Only that he made his choices, and that he was punished for them. I and my family know I am no monster, and that my choices are different than his." His voice was glacial as he fixed his eye on Kangwon. "I am not him."

Oh yeah. That look- even if not actually directed at Kangwon- would've made him quake back during the Occupation.

It would have still made Gangwon quake.

"I don't think anyone would disagree with that," he agreed, mostly unquaking. "You're the country that saved Europe from a Nazi takeover. That really should put you firmly on the 'not-a-monster' list."

CCCP sounded grimly amused when he responded, "You would be surprised, son."

Right. He'd saved Europe. But some people would never forgive him for it.

When the plane touched down in Moscva, the Soviet didn't get out right away, looking at Kangwon with a more gentle look on his face.

"You are a good boy," he said fondly, making Kangwon flush. "And so is Korea. He believes strongly in what he is doing, and he has faith that his people do, too. That is what sets us apart from those such as America or the Russian Empire. He will be fine."

CCCP put a hand on Kangwon's shoulder, favouring him with a rare small smile. "You all will be."

If you read Safeway/Warring Pyongyang, you always knew it was going to end this way. Gangwon </3

The villa Kangwon is kept in actually was the American embassy at the time. It's called Villa Otium, and was built by a man who made his living exploiting Russian petroleum pre-liberation. The US bought it to serve as their embassy back then, buying out a piece of Norway. I thought it was fitting to use for this.

When I was firmly deciding when Kangwon realized he liked men, I was thinking about having CCCP being his awakening. Because he's probably done that to a lot of men . But then I decided it was more in character for him to have been just

formed knowing he was gay. He didn't even have to meet a man to be attracted to. He just knew. And he never cared. 1910s Korea and Kangwon was perfectly accepting of the fact he's not straight. Zero internalized homophobic for him.

[image]

I got mixed up because I posted the last chapter while editing this chapter, so I added the image to the wrong one. ㅜㅜ So *here* is the redraw of CCCP propositioning Kangwon in a car (not what's happening). Except now it's in a plane. But that's still not what's happening.
Canonically he's sitting across from him. But *you* try drawing Countryhuman side profiles.

The Price We Pay

Kangwon was sent across the Soviet Union while CCCP stayed in Moscva to handle the trouble he'd caused for his country. He took non-stop military trucks, monoplanes, and trains through Siberia and into the east, accompanied by Soviet men to guard him, the trip taking days before he finally arrived at Kasan once more.

As the train rolled under the shadows of the Russian mountains and into the station, all he could think about was heading this way with Gangwon just days earlier, so in awe of the scenery. He'd been so sure…

It was one of their Security Forces comrades that picked him up, not in a vehicle, but walking him all the way from the train strain to the bridge across the Tuman.

Or where the bridge had been. Only splinters remained, wooden wreckage floating in the river, fetched up against the low banks. It had to have been recent if it wasn't fixed yet.

It was bold to bomb the Soviet border directly. Kangwon knew in his heart it was America's way at getting back at CCCP for getting to him before he could.

He had to cross over a temporary pontoon bridge farther down the shore, bidding the border guard farewell. If he wondered why he'd been escorting one of his Provincehumans over from the Soviet Union, he didn't ask, just saluted.

Kangwon's stomach churned with worry, thinking of Kim Ju-bong, Ri Il, Sip Yung-Su, and Gangwon's guards. He hoped Norway would just send the first man back. He hoped Korea hadn't done anything he'd regret.

Despite everything, something in him eased as he crossed back into their country, either something intrinsic or just the sense that he was home.

He hoped his brother could feel it, too, even if he was terrified.

As he walked towards the dug-out mounds, thinking he'd be waiting for a ride, someone climbed out from one, turning his way with the sharpness of a blade.

Kangwon's steps almost faltered, his chest immediately growing tight as the spring afternoon cooled.

Korea.

His head was lowered, glaring up from under his eye at his province as he approached, perfectly motionless. It was his tiger-look, the one he gave when he wanted to pounce on someone and tear them to shreds, or when he was going to.

Korea had been mad at him before, with Kim Mi-ju, with Hae. Usually always for hiding something from him because he knew it wouldn't do any good to tell him.

But he'd never looked at him like that.

Kangwon kept walking, trying to look casual. But his own head was lowering, his shoulders hunching up around his ear slits, in shame instead of predatory intent. He stopped in front of Korea, making an effort to look him in the eye.

He opened his mouth to apologize or explain or beg for forgiveness.

But what came out, sounding smaller than usual, was, "They took Gangwon."

Korea's gaze didn't flicker. He just turned on a heel, marching off, leaving Kangwon no choice but to follow.

He kept his mouth shut, knuckles firmly pressed against his lips. He didn't need an order to know talking wouldn't be wise right now.

And he'd known he wouldn't be getting any comfort anyway.

He followed him off the road for a tense hour, into the hills west of Tumangang, where the GAZ was waiting hidden under a tarp. It rustled, and someone slid out, charging straight at him.

"You bastard!"

He braced himself, taking South Pyongan's punch on his shoulder, feeling his burns crack and burst under the force. Not holding back, she punched him with her full strength again on the other side, then started to rain lighter blows all over his back and chest.

"You stupid sneaky *bastard!"*

She grabbed his shoulders, going to double him over and knee him in the gut, when North Pyongan wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back.

"Leave him alone," he said, casting a worried at Korea, who just stood there, expression stormy. "He has been through enough."

"Not nearly enough!" South Pyongan strained against him. "Let me at him, I'm gonna beat the sense into his stupid round head!"

Since she wasn't breaking out of her brother's grip as easily as she could've, Kangwon stopped preparing for another blow, then was almost knocked back as Hae plowed into him.

"Kangahmissedyasomuchahwassoworriedwhy'dyougoareyouokaywhatwasN

Hae leaned back, still holding his sides, and looked around, her brows crinkling.

"Where's Gang?"

Kangwon opened his mouth, then shook his head.

South Pyongan went limp in North Pyongan's arms, whose eyes closed. "Shit," the female Pyongan cursed.

The others were all there, and had heard.

Dismayed, SH put a hand over her mouth. “Kangwon, I’m so-“

“None of you are ever going to leave this country again.”

They all turned to Korea, taken aback. The look on his face was like being plunged back into the Norwegian winter.

Hwang’s brows furrowed. “I know it’s not common for Provincehumans to leave, but within the Communist Bloc-“

“I don’t care.” Korea’s voice was flat, but they could all hear the tension simmering under it. It made North Pyongan take his sister back a step. "None of you are ever setting foot over these borders again.”

SH frowned. “But you said we could try going to the World Art Festival once-“

“And now I’m not!” Korea snapped, rounding on her. “It is *never* going to be safe! Even once this war is over, the other counties are still going to try and destroy us. They will do *anything* to cripple Korea, to tear us down and make us pay for not submitting to them.”

“Korea.” Kangwon made himself speak. “CCCP helped-“

Korea twisted his neck to him. *“You shut up.”*

He didn’t scream it. But his low, dark tone made Kangwon clack his jaw shut instantly.

The Soviet helping only made it worse anyway.

“CCCP only agreed to fetch you because he wants me on his side,” Korea growled. “If he didn’t want an American puppet on his doorstep, you would still be in Norway, or being tortured like your brother.”

“Korea-“ SH tried.

He didn’t even hear her. “That is the *only* reason he and the other Socialists help us. That is the only reason *China* is helping us.”

North Pyongan frowned at that, but they all knew not to interrupt.

"We can't even trust our allies, let alone America's puppets." His eye swirled, blown wide open. *"Any* of them would do what Norway did if it would benefit them, they'd do it even if it *didn't* benefit them. They would take you hostage and tear you apart just to get to *me,* to destroy our country. We can't trust *any of them.* Do you understand me?"

Kangwon had been worried about this. That Norway's capture of him might end up undoing all the progress their General and Marx and Lenin had made.

"Do you understand me?!" Korea snarled, and they all jumped.

"Yes, Korea." Some of them said it more reluctantly, but they all knew they had to say it. At least right now. Sense could come when their Countryhuman's chest wasn't rising and falling so sharply.

"Then *why* couldn't you understand earlier?" Korea rounded on Kangwon. "Why did you have to get Gangwon stolen?!"

"Korea, that's enough," SH said disapprovingly. "He just lost his brother."

Korea bared his fangs at her, then took a deep breath, straightening up.

"None of you are *ever* going to leave Korea again. And that is *final."*

He turned, marching for the truck, tearing the canvas off it with a violence that said he wished it was Norway or America or maybe even CCCP.

The provinces lingered awkwardly. Kangwon could feel them looking at him, unsure of what to say.

"We should go," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "He'll leave us here if we don't."

He walked past them, heading for the truck. His cousins followed

in silence.

They all piled into the bed, even Hae giving up the chance to sit next to Korea. She curled in against Kangwon's side instead, wrapping around his arm, for once not even interested in finding out what was in the paper-wrapped package he had. The others packed in around him, like they were trying to make sure he couldn't jump out.

"We were hoping if we came with him, it might take some of his edge off," SH explained with a smile that faded fast.

"It did succeed," Hwang said, pushing his glasses up. "Kangwon is still breathing."

They all gave quick, tight smiles. All of them knew Kangwon's punishment couldn't be over yet. Gangwon was gone. A ten-hour drive wasn't enough to even make a scratch in Korea's fury.

"What's goin' to happen to Gang?" Hae asked quietly as the truck started up. "Is he goin' to be okay?"

"I'm sure he will be," SH said, giving Kangwon a sympathetic smile. "And we'll see him again soon."

At the back of the truck bed, North Hamgyong's jaw feathered. Chagang winced.

"I take it Korea's filled in on the secret talks?" Kangwon asked.

SH's smiled faltered. "Mm. He's forgiven the General for…" Her eyes flicked to the front of the vehicle, silently finishing, *'Your scheme.'*

"But he is still displeased with us," North Pyongan sighed.

"And he is *pissed* with you," South Pyongan added, leaning over her brother to punch him again. "And so are we."

Hwang nodded emphatically. "You offered us no chance to dissuade you, which means you were well aware of how ill-advised your trip was. You left us incredibly worried, and you risked… far

too much."

His eyes lowered. Kangwon's did, too.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We really thought we'd be able to get an investigation, and maybe show the world Gangwon isn't- wasn't a hostage."

It felt foolish now, with the truck feeling one more person short.

"And now he is one," North Hamgyong growled, ignoring the look SH gave him. "Are you happy now? Your fucking 'trust' got him handed over to the Yank."

"Don't blame Kangwon," his sister shot at him.

"Why not? It's his fault." North Hamgyong glared at the russet province. "Do you get it now? Korea's right- we can't trust the other countries. They're all like the Jap and the damn Yank."

"They aren't," Kangwon said tiredly. "It's a class thing, not a foreigner one. We were just too hopeful that Norway wasn't one of the bourgeois."

'But you said even if they don't care about us, they'll want to- to end the war. Do you really think they would?'

"I was too hopeful." He picked at his nails. "I was wrong."

"They're *all* part of the bourgeois," North Hamgyong growled. "If they weren't, they wouldn't be the fucking Countryhuman in charge of a capitalist country. How is it that you're the damn Marxist, but *I'm* the only one that gets that? They're all slavers and colonizers and puppets. They're *all* corrupt. And if a Countryhuman is corrupt, then the entire damn country is. That's why-"

He slammed his jaw shut, narrowing his eyes at the front of the truck. At least he got that some things really shouldn't be overheard.

"And you're just *sitting* there," he growled before Kangwon could say anything. "Acting like Gangwon's going to be fine, like it isn't

your bleeding heart that's getting him mind-raped right now while the Yank watches. That is *your damn fault."*

SH had slammed her eyes shut at the one word, her lids flickering as she did the painting method he'd taught her, but now they blazed as she turned on her brother.

"Can you *shut up!?"* she snapped. "I know *you* wouldn't care, but Kangwon just lost his sibling. He doesn't need to be told it's his fault."

"So Korea can say it, but I can't?"

"Neither of you should say it!"

"Comrades," Kangwon cut in. "Cut it out. It is my fault." He looked at North Hamgyong. "And it's Gangwon's fault, too. He knew it was dangerous, and he still wanted to go. It wasn't like I talked him into it. And blaming myself can't rewind time. It doesn't bring him back." He gave his cousin a tired smile. "Blaming him wouldn't change anything either."

North Hamgyong got what he was saying, his jaw bulging. But Kangwon could tell it hadn't gotten through to him. It never did.

"Whatever," he grunted, sitting back as he crossed his arms, turning away from them.

"He'll be alright," Kangwon said, hoping it was true. "America didn't torture us last time. Even with everything he did to SH. He wouldn't do it while South could Command the truth out of them."

"And he won't win the war," SH said firmly, hands clenched in her tunic. "Since we'll be… negotiating the Reunification, there won't be any chance for him to do anything."

North Hamgyong grimaced. Chagang winced again.

"Yeah." Kangwon mustered a reassuring smile for Hae. "Gangwon'll be fine. Even if America puts him in solitary again, it's like Korea said during the temporary retreat- He's capable. He handled seven months. He can handle a few more."

Hopefully without undoing all of the progress he'd made in recovering.

"And just maybe he can even inform the South of the fact that he was imprisoned at all," Hwang said. "He could finally shine a light on that crime."

North Hamgyong scoffed. "If the Southern bastard even cares."

"He'll care," Kangwon assured.

He hoped he would. South hadn't been a bad person. And being imprisoned was something he should be empathetic towards. Maybe it wouldn't be enough to get him to rebel against America. But maybe it could help him see his 'friend' wasn't the person he thought he was.

"Kang." Hae raised her big eyes to him. "Can you never do that again? Ah *hate* when Korea runs off. It makes me feel awful an' scared, and ah don't like it. Ah don't want you to start doin' it, too. If Gang *an'* you hadn't come back…"

Her voice broke, stabbing through his chest, and he put an arm around her.

"I won't," he said, rubbing her shoulder. "We can't leave anymore anyways."

She didn't smile at the joke, just pushed her lower lip out and buried her face in his side.

The rest of the journey back to Pyongyang was quiet, filled with just the sound of the engine, half-hearted attempts from SH and South Pyongan to lighten the mood, and the crackling aura of Korea's rage. They reached the city in the middle of the night, as bombs were falling on the rail lines to the south, taking out the bridge over the Taedong again.

But instead of heading to the bunker, Korea took them into the dark, rubble-strewn streets with their lights off. They only stopped once they reached the Party Foundation Building. Then he stopped the truck, tossing the keys to Chagang.

“Return to the bunker,” he ordered, just as frigid as he’d been earlier, not even slightly calmed. “Not Kangwon.”

Some of Kangwon’s cousins hesitated, shifting uneasily.

“Return to the bunker,” their Countryhuman growled, and they moved aside, letting their unlucky cousin climb out of the truck.

“From CCCP,” he said quietly, passing the package he had to SH. “Cured meat and tinned fish for Korea.”

“I’ll make sure it gets donated,” she sighed, tucking it away.

They both knew it was what he’d order. And knowing CCCP had done that little extra for him would just fan their Countryhuman's fury.

Just like Europe would never forgive the country for saving them from fascism, Korea would never forgive him for not being the tyrant he expected.

Chagang caught him before he could walk over to Korea.

“He is more scared than angry,” he intoned. “So is North Hamgyong. And I’m sorry Gangwon was taken from you.”

Kangwon blinked, but his cousin was already climbing into the driver’s seat. The GAZ pulled away, leaving him and Korea facing each other on the cracked stones under the looming shadow of the office building.

Yeah, he didn’t know about that. Korea definitely *looked* angry. And he knew most of it came from fear over what could’ve happened to him, and what could be happening to Gangwon.

But Kangwon also knew when his Countryhuman’s anger came from fear, it was far more dangerous.

Korea’s eye went to his bloody wrist, and Kangwon watched his face somehow darken even more.

“Did they hurt you?” he growled.

His expression twisted into something murderous, and Kangwon decided not to tell him about how the State Police beat him with their batons.

"No," he managed after a second, holding his wrist. "I did it getting out of my cuffs."

It was a good thing the Americans had taken the other cuff off him. If he'd came back with a chain dangling from his wrist…

They didn't have atom bombs or an air force. But he knew Korea would want to find some way to make Norway pay. And since he'd know he shouldn't, it would just be one more thing on his shoulders.

Korea's eye was still fixed on his bloody hand. The cords in his neck strained. "Give me your report."

Kangwon looked around at the empty street, shuddering under their feet as bombs fell not too far away. "Here?"

Korea turned abruptly on his heel, leading him into the hallway of the Party Foundation Building. The lobby was dark, barely illuminated by the moonlight coming in the shattered windows. Kangwon didn't have a flashlight, and his Countryhuman didn't turn his on.

He inhaled, then told Korea about everything that had happened in an even, militant tone, skirting around the beating he'd got, and leaving out his talk with CCCP. When he told him about Gangwon getting torn away from him, he could hear his teeth creak.

When he finished, he stood silently in the dark. Korea was glowering at him, waiting for him to cave. He could feel his disappointment like a physical thing, seeping into his bones.

"Is Comrade Kim Ju-bong going to be okay?" he asked eventually, wanting to find out before he could go in on him.

"No," Korea clipped. "He was sent back to the south yesterday morning. He will likely be tortured and killed by Rhee."

Kangwon closed his eyes. He knew he wasn't just trying to get to him. He was right.

"Are Comrades Ri Il and Sip Yung-su okay? And Gangwon's comrades?" He held his breath.

"They should be executed."

"Korea, they were only following my orders." He kept his voice calm, not wanting to set him off. "Please hold me responsible, not them. I had to convince them all to let us go, and they didn't want to."

"That is the only reason they are still breathing," Korea said coldly. "That and their transparency with South Hamgyong when she encountered them while pursuing you."

Kangwon barely had time to breathe a sigh of relief before he continued, "But they will be detained until the war's end. They clearly can't be trusted to keep you safe."

Kangwon didn't argue. That was the best he could hope for.

"Thank you."

Korea's eye flashed. *"I did not do it for you."*

Kangwon looked down, his stomach swirling. "Right."

CCCP's anger had been more terrifying, solid and cold, impenetrable ice, unlike the fires that raged under his country's. It'd been unfamiliar, and so unpredictable. But Korea's was worse *because* it was familiar.

"You lied to me," Korea accused when he didn't speak. "You told me you would wake me up if something happened in the talks, and you didn't. I don't care if it was the General's idea. I know damn well he wouldn't order you, and I *did* order you to wake me. And now those forty-four thousand people won't make it home."

That was the concession. In exchange for their other proposals, their side had had to give up asking for the return of the forty-four

thousand ‘reclassified civilians,’ the people who might be reactionaries sent into the north as spies, or their own guerrillas that had been taken. And they *knew* some of them were their soldiers.

“And our comrades who have been cut down by Rhee’s puppets and America’s butchers won't get their justice.” The heat in his voice started to build. “And you said you would wake me up after three weeks, and you *didn’t.* You left me sleeping so you could run off and get yourself kidnapped. And for *what?”*

Kangwon could’ve told him that it didn’t matter if he left him sleeping. They both knew he would’ve made the concession anyway. They both knew he would’ve agreed to drop the massacre inquiries because that was what it would take to end the war, and they both knew he’d blame himself for it. They both knew he’d needed the rest, that the heavy shadows under his eye and his emaciated frame said he needed even more.

But he knew he wouldn’t listen. Kangwon had hoped to spare him the guilt of being the one to make the decision. But he could tell that now he just felt guilty he *hadn’t* made it.

“I didn’t want this to happen,” he said quietly. “I just… wanted to help.” His lips wavered, and he pressed them together, taking a deep breath. “We both did.”

Korea didn’t say anything, but he could feel his stare drilling into him, burning the way ice did. It made him want to curl in on himself.

Kangwon swallowed. He should just get down on his knees and start begging for forgiveness. But he had to know.

“Did we get an investigation?”

It was April 4th. The World Peace Council had ended two days ago.

After a long moment of silence, his Countryhuman said, “Yes.”

The province closed his eyes, heart clenching. “Good.”

"Gangwon is *gone,"* Korea snapped. "There is nothing 'good' about this. Even if your notes helped persuade the Council, you could have just handed them off. Instead you went at the cost of our nation's dignity, at the cost of us looking like a Soviet puppet, at the cost of your *brother.* And for fucking *nothing."*

"We didn't know it would be for nothing, Korea," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady. "We just wanted to save our people."

"You didn't need to go yourself!" Korea took a step towards him, voice ringing in the night. "What did I tell you about sacrificing yourself? What did I fucking *tell* you?"

Nothing Kangwon hadn't tried to tell him. But he knew he wouldn't take that well. His shoulders hunched against his will.

"You *told* me you wouldn't do it again, you *told me,"* his Countryhuman hissed. "And there weren't even lives involved this time!"

"There were Korea," he said, not able to look him in the eye. "Every day America's allowed to drop germ bombs on our country is another person that suffers or dies from illness. And every day the ceasefire draws out is one our soldiers die on."

"Then that just means you didn't heed your criticism." Korea bared his teeth in his face. "I *told* you you are important, I *told* you Korea needs you, now more than ever with the germ warfare being waged against us. *You* are our best investigator, *you* are the one that makes sure the Chinese team and ours are communicating properly, and *you* are the one that's able to work around the clock without resting to save our people, not in Norway, but *here.* But because of *you* we could have lost our best doctor. And we did lose one of our best nurses."

Not even his praise was enough to overcome the grief that struck Kangwon at his last words.

He lost the battle, wilting in on himself as he wrapped his arms around his chest.

“I’m sorry, Korea,” he murmured. “I just… I’m sorry.”

His Countryhuman didn’t soften at all, merciless as he delivered, “You should be.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

The provinces had all been joking when they said he was going to kill him. But Kangwon knew he couldn’t escape this unpunished. At the very least, he could expect being exiled to his province after the war, unable to see his cousins or Korea, or his brother, maybe even for a year.

The idea made him uneasy. If Korea was Reunified with South, he needed to be there to help him adjust. He knew he couldn’t tell him that, and he knew he couldn't ask to not be punished at all, but-

“Korea,” he ventured. “Please don’t say I can’t treat you anymore. Please. I get if you don’t trust me enough to rest again-“ And he was going to be kicking himself for that forever. “But please don’t let this be a strike. You need someone to take care of you. Please don’t stop me from doing that.”

He knew Kim Yong-hwan could try to do it. But *he* wanted to. He was the one who had nursed Korea back to health in the cave, he was the one he trusted at least enough to watch over him while he healed. He wanted to make sure his country was well taken care of with his own hands, like he’d always used to let him. He couldn’t lose that, and he didn’t want *Korea* to lose that.

Korea’s voice was icy. “You are right. I don’t trust you enough to rest. You are *never* going to trick me into a recuperative coma again.”

“I wasn’t tricking you, Korea,” Kangwon said, heart sinking. “I just wanted you to get better.”

And he’d never even allowed himself to sink fully into the coma.

“I was *fine,”* his Countryhuman growled, even though if he was, his province never would’ve been able to get him to even lie down.

Kangwon's fingers twitched, and he pressed his knuckles to his mouth as he pleaded, "Please, Korea, please don't cut me off. I wasn't trying to trick you, I wasn't trying to spare your feelings-" He had been, but he didn't need to know that. "I just wanted you to get better. I just wanted to try and get some justice for our people, and try and get America off of Gangwon's back so you could get us a ceasefire. I just…"

He took a deep breath, trying to keep it from shuddering.

"I just wanted to help save our country." His words almost came out smoothly. "Punish me however you have to for that, just *please,* don't punish yourself, too."

Kim Yong-hwan couldn't convince Korea to let her take care of him the way Kangwon could, especially when his Countryhuman could just tell himself she had more important things to do with the war, and see how exhausted she was. He knew if Korea forbid him from taking care of him, it was the same thing as refusing to let anyone do it.

Korea drew himself up, putting his face in shadow. "You lost *your brother*. He was taken by the enemy because of *you.* He will be Commanded and imprisoned because of *you.* He may be being tortured right now. And that is all because of *you."*

Kangwon pressed his lips together, hiding his nails in his palms.

"I will get him back," Korea swore. "But whatever has been done to him by then will be *your fault."*

His eye glared coldly at him out of the shadows.

"And there is nothing worse I can do to you than that. You have paid your price."

He spun on a heel, marching for the door, his voice lowering, but not softening. "Now get back to work."

The door shuddered in its frame as he left, leaving Kangwon alone in the office building as the bombs shook its foundations in the earth.

He exhaled shakily. His legs were suddenly weak, and he crouched to bury his face in his knees.

He'd gotten off light, he tried to tell himself. But it didn't feel like it.

He couldn't be upset at Korea for trying to force guilt into him over his brother, just like he couldn't be upset at North Hamgyong for it. He knew why they said it, and he wouldn't let it get to him.

It wasn't just on him. And even though part of it was, he couldn't carry that around with him and obsess over it. It had never changed anything for them, and it wouldn't change anything for him or Gangwon or Kim Ju-bong. Both provinces had made the wrong decision, and he'd… been too trusting. Or too optimistic.

But they'd wanted to do good. He couldn't blame himself for that. He hoped Gangwon didn't either.

He'd paid his price for taking a chance. But it was the same one that Korea had. And even if his Countryhuman had failed back then, he never would've been able to blame him for trying.

But just because he was managing to keep himself from being wracked with guilt didn't mean he wasn't churning with anxiety.

Something else Korea had said at that criticism session, where his province had promised to 'work on' himself like he was a machine so that he wouldn't sacrifice himself unnecessarily ever again, kept running through his mind. What he'd said about America.

'I don't trust that if you were captured again, he wouldn't hide your existence from South, execute you, and find some way to blame it on me.'

Even if it hadn't been his fault at all, Kangwon didn't want to lose his brother.

Finally exhaling, he picked himself up off the floor. He needed to go disinfect his wounds, bandage his hand, and get back to work. His notes had helped get their investigation, even if he hadn't been there to present them, but it would take time to organize it. Until

then, he had lives to save.

He knew it was too late for their comrade, but Gangwon would be fine. America wanted war with China, so he'd definitely have South Command him to find out if he was here. And since he didn't know he was, the only thing that would come of it was South knowing Gangwon was there. He couldn't be executed or disappeared and have it blamed on them.

But he could be tortured, and America could say they'd done it. Kangwon… He didn't think the Norwegians would deny it. Even the man that had let them go.

No. Like they'd said, he wouldn't do anything to him while it could be Commanded out of him. And an armistice was just an agreement to stop fighting, so the three months to arrange a real end to the war wouldn't allow it to happen either. And then Kangwon and Gangwon would be back together, and so would Korea and his brother.

South wasn't very confident. He didn't have much of a spine, and Kangwon was worried about America leading him further astray than he already had. He wasn't a bad person, but Kangwon was worried about him making choices that would *make* him one. Because he agreed with CCCP- no matter what influenced them, their people, nature, nurture, in the end, everything came down to choices.

But South was half of their country. He was Korea too, even if some of them didn't like it. And maybe Kangwon had had too much faith or placed too much trust in foreigners, or at least foreign countries, and maybe he wanted to criticize Korea for the same thought. But South *was* theirs. He was Korea's brother.

So even if their other Countryhuman never received his letter, he would try to trust that his brother was safe with him.

And try not to let it consume him if he wasn't.

—

North stormed down the street, trying to ignore the burning in his veins. But it was growing, spreading throughout his body, meeting with the burns on his skin to turn him into a ball of fire that yearned to properly ignite, to turn everything around him into ashes.

But there was nothing to consume, just the remnants of his city, already burned to the ground. The ones that had done it flew high overhead, safe from him.

As the small pieces of rubble on the ground clattered with the impact of another bomb just streets over, North couldn't take it anymore, reeling into an alleyway that had once been a street, and now wasn't anything but a narrow path between piles of rubble.

He braced his palms against a charred wall, chest heaving as he tried to remind himself that Kangwon was here, he was okay, that the barbed wire constricting his chest every day he'd been gone, unsure if he was being tortured or if his plane had crashed or if his train had been hijacked could unwind. His province was back, he was fine.

But Gangwon wasn't.

North snatched up a chunk of concrete, heaving it at a fallen wall with a snarl, watching it explode into a shower of grey shrapnel, a recreation in miniature of the blast that had decimated the home it had once been part of.

He immediately felt childish and unsatisfied, the burning unabated. It wasn't enough. He wanted to scream, to rage, to march south right now and tear Gangwon back out of- America's bloody hands before he could get his province's on them. He wanted to head across Europe and drag Oslo back here, to show Norway what it felt like to have one of your provinces taken from you. It had been too long since the European nations had had to fear that threat.

It was unfair. It was unfair that they could do whatever they wanted, violating as many laws as they pleased to detain Kangwon, to hold him, to ship Gangwon out while North couldn't even respond to an invasion and Liberate his country without it being a

crime that needed to be put down by the entire damn international community, it was unfair that they hadn't even notified him, like he didn't even exist, like the only Korea that mattered was the Korea *they* recognized, the only laws that mattered were the ones *they* wanted to, the only people that mattered were *theirs,* it was unfair that Kangwon, Hae, North Pyongan, his provinces that had still been able to keep what he couldn't for so long were having that taken from them by this war, it was unfair that if it hadn't been for CCCP, if it hadn't been for what he wanted from North, Kangwon would still be in Norway, that America almost certainly would have gotten what he wanted sooner than later and taken him, too, holding him over his head just like his captured soldiers and the forty-four thousand unlisted, and that *North* would have been the unreasonable one, the one who wanted to keep the war going, if he hadn't bowed his head and accepted it, unfair that *any* foreign country thought they should have anything to do with their Reunification, unfair that him and his brother had been Divided in the first place, unfair that Gangwon was going to pay the price when his only crime had been being loyal to his country, unfair that this war should have been *over* two years ago. It was unfair unfair *unfair* ***unfair.***

North pressed his mouth to his sleeve, fighting the urge to sink his fangs into his arm to muffle the useless scream bubbling in his throat. They itched in his gums, the same furious itch in every inch of his body, telling him to *do something* when there was nothing to do, there would've been nothing he could do.

A plane buzzed low overhead, one of the F-86 fighter-bombers, and he cracked his neck up, watching its shadow fly overhead, machine gun rounds spraying over several streets. It wasn't a route Kangwon would have taken to get to the hospital, but that didn't ease the tension in his chest, spilling into his throat. There were other people in the city, essential workers and others, huddling inside buildings with no roofs, living in bunkers and dug-outs hidden amongst the ruins. His people, reduced to the most pitiable of living conditions, already made to suffer more than they ever should have had to again, but still the Yankee pilots felt the need to make it worse, to strike fear into their hearts, to make sure they would never live to be happy again.

North took off running, pounding after the plane. It was faster, but they still reached the same destination- the rail bridge over the Taedong. The new one was partially submerged, but the visible tracks were interrupted by craters that still sent trails of smoke into the sky. The anti-aircraft guns boomed up at the sky, and North could see wreckage floating in the river where an American plane had already met its end. Their own MiGs were up there, targeting the B-29s, but it wasn't enough. It wouldn't be enough until every enemy plane was torn down and its pilot made to pay for what he'd done.

North skidded into one of the dug-outs by the shore, where several of the aircraft hunters were hunkered down, injured, reloading, or waiting to replace their flagging comrades. They startled as their Countryhuman came sliding in, rounds peppering the ground behind him.

"Comrade Korea?" a man said, blinking as his country shed all his weapons except for his pistol and blade.

"Give me that." North didn't wait for an answer, tearing the captured M20 Super Bazooka from his hands, along with an 88.9mm rocket that he took off his tunic to wrap it in, before leaping back out into the night.

He didn't need a loader. If he went down for this, he'd go down alone, like always.

The old rail bridge still clung to the shore, its skeletal frame decrepit, burned by the Yankees and dismembered by his own soldiers to build and repair the new one. North headed for this, charging past more aircraft hunters, just catching the call of "Comrade Korea?"

He didn't stop, clambering up onto the rusted metal with the rocket cradled in one arm, scaling one of the broken spans that had once made up the arches, until he was sitting high up in a jagged nest of twisted steel. He unslung the bazooka, balanced it on his knees as he loaded the single rocket into it, and stood. The moon was three-quarters and bright, making his white undershirt glow. Even if the pilots couldn't see who he was, he would make a

tempting target.

Proving him right, an F-86 started to wheel in mid-air. North had to shoot it before it finished turning if he wanted to survive this.

His prickling insides stilled as he lifted the bazooka onto his shoulder, carefully aiming. Time had slowed down enough that he felt almost unhurried. None of his provinces or people were in danger right now, none of them would suffer if he screwed this up. Just him.

'THOOM.'

The rocket roared from the muzzle with a blast that made his ear slits ring. North refused to scramble out of the way in case he'd missed, watching as it shot straight at the plane.

Just as the F-86 turned and its machine guns started to rattle, the rocket took it directly in an external tank. There was an immediate explosion, and the fighter veered sharply, spiralling down over the shore, where it crashed, lighting up the night with a fireball, a twin one blooming in the river's reflection.

It was a lot of fire. Like North had thought, the tanks had likely carried napalm.

Ssi-bal. He hoped the pilot had survived. He had wanted to tear him from his cockpit with his own hands.

He made his way quickly down the bridge before another plane could target him, jogging down the bank with the heavy bazooka jostling against his back, rubbing the burns there raw.

The wreckage of the F-86 was spread out over the riverbank like entrails. It had landed on its wing and almost tumbled in a sideways somersault, leaving parts of itself behind in a trail of destruction. North gave a the fuselage a wide berth, in case there were bombs left to detonate. He skirted the patches of fiercely burning gasoline jelly as well, making his way to the smashed cockpit, finding it also ablaze, the napalm having latched onto it when it caught in the air.

The pilot was still alive, ash-streaked and bloodstained. His fingers

scrabbled weakly at the damp soil, like fat, pale worms trying to burrow into the earth, in an effort to drag himself away from the liquid fire eating its way towards him. But his leg was caught in the innards of the plane, twisted at an unnatural angle and pinned between the mechanisms.

As North's boots stopped before him, he looked up, face contorted in fear.

"Help," he rasped, breath rattling in his lungs as he desperately stretched out a hand.

North's fingers twitched at his side, but he curled them into a fist.

This man had been here to drop that napalm on his people. To send his soldiers careening into the river with their clothes ablaze as the skin melted from their bones. North could still smell the stench of burning hair and flesh as the gasoline jelly rained over them on the way south, and he could see the children staying in the Kaesong neutral zone, bodies twisted and lumpy, like badly molded clay. He could see the ones that had burned.

This man had been here to do that. He had likely been responsible for attacks in the past. For the men and women in the hospital wards, eyes unable to close, bodies unable to move, only able to suffer until they died, while the pilots flew back south to smoke and brag and rape his women. They didn't care until it happened to them.

North didn't drag the man out to end him with his own hands or shove him into the fire. He wasn't like America or the Americans. He didn't enjoy this. He just stepped back, and watched as the hope faded from the Yankee's eyes, made dark by the night. As he started to beg and plead in his guttural language, as the heat from the flames brushed over him and he began to writhe with a desperate primal terror, as he slumped to the ground, the napalm stealing all the oxygen from the air, making North's own lungs tight. And as the jelly burned through the frame of the plane above him and he woke again, clawing at his clothes as the sticky fire ate through skin and muscle and sinew, and the fire reached him, howling and gibbering as it burned him up, not like an animal, but like a man.

North watched, feeling little and wishing he felt less.

If you were willing to inflict pain, you should be willing to receive it. He had never done anything to his enemies that he couldn't imagine happening to him. Or that hadn't already happened to him. He knew the cost of every bullet, every knife to the heart, every man he did his best to tear open. He was ready to face it if it happened to him. He was ready to burn.

The Americans weren't. They thought they could get away with all the suffering they dealt without it ever coming back, just like the Japanese that had once kept the Koreas trapped in their prison, so stupidly shocked when he ended their cruelty, convinced right up until the end that none of what they did to others could ever be done to them, like everyone that wielded violence to keep someone 'lesser' in check.

They couldn't. Not anymore. Korea might need CCCP to fight their battles on the world stage for now. But they wouldn't always. If America and the UN and Norway and every other Imperialist thought they could treat them this way after the war was over, they were *wrong.* They didn't have a monopoly on violence anymore, CCCP's atom bomb threat proved that. And if they tried to burn Korea again, then they had better be ready to burn too.

And if America hurt Gangwon any more than he already had, if he hurt *any* of Korea's provinces more than he already had, then he was going to be razed to the ground. Not his people. *Him.* Because Korea wasn't like them.

Korea watched as the flames consumed the plane and its pilot, until the bombers overhead retreated, and the anti-aircraft team came to congratulate him, clapping him on the back and cheering as the fire cast flickering shadows on them.

Before they could move him away from the pyre, North slid a hand under the star over his empty socket, nails scraping at the scar there, thinking of SH dragging herself back to him on missing toes, covered in bruises, Hae's missing tooth and the way she'd touched her cheek when telling him America had slapped her, the faint mark still on Kangwon's head from where it had been slammed off

the wall in the POW holding camp, and Jeju's broken whisper in the woods. And of course of the way Gangwon had been during the temporary retreat, shaking and pleading with him not to send him off, tears in his eyes when Kangwon had never cried before. How he'd came back to him with ruptured ear drums, choosing permanently crippling himself over being returned to the south.

His brother had better take better care of their province this time.

Eeeeeee anticipated chapter next. Frothing at *mouth.* Also yes China is likely watching from the shadows somewhere panting in excitement. It's what he does.

I was thinking and I wonder if the reason that America tends to have a very individualist, 'I don't care about anyone but myself and family' mindset (I'm not saying this doesn't exist anywhere else, it just seems very prevalent in America) is partially because of the sheer amount of suffering their nation inflicts on others. Obviously there are cultural reasons, too, because the basis of their society is built on more selfish European cultures, and also the amount of propaganda they're inundated with. But also when your country is constantly involved in bloody wars and genocidal sanctions regimes, if you want to keep believing it's good and you should be proud of it, you sort of have to say 'well I don't care about anyone else at all. This is good for us, so why should I care?' And then their propaganda just reinforces that. 'They deserve it, this is keeping your freedom and way of life, don't think about it, look how happy you are.' If they cared about other people they'd have to accept that they're part of the machine that causes endless suffering to those other people, which would make them unhappy. Very small minds.

Hmmmm. Topically, Norway's monarchy has close ties to the American government's pedophile ring, and the princess' son has several rape allegations. And yet the Parliament voted to keep them, and they have a very high public approval rate. *Is* Norway an inherently evil country? Much to consider…. (Sorry to any Norwegians. I am joking. Most likely. I don't think *you're* evil anyway.) I swear one of the themes of this story isn't 'Europeans are evil.'

No Choice

[image]

The lump in South's throat was making it hard to breathe.

As he stood in the sitting room of his house, Gangwon trembling nervously in front of him, he knew he had to speak. He was running out of time.

But every time he swallowed, his saliva only built up, unable to be choked down. When he finally managed, it actually hurt.

"Gangwon-"

The province lunged and South stumbled back, raising his hands in fear, ready for him to fulfill his brother's directive and-

He was running, sprinting for the hallway, darting out of sight. After a second, South followed, sandals pounding on the carpet.

"Gangwon!" He couldn't escape, he had Commands-

He didn't go for the front door, slaloming off the walls of the hall, careening around the corner and into the kitchen, slamming into the counter at full speed, yanking open drawers of plates and spoons and-

South's eyes widened as he came up with a knife, wickedly sharp under the white glare of the lights. His eyes gleamed with a desperate- was that really hope?- as he turned it to his face, opening his mouth wide.

Horror almost stopped South's tongue before he could save Gangwon's, but he just lately found his voice in time to shout, "Gangwon! **Stop!!**"

The province's hand froze in mid-air, fear flashing across his eyes as he stuck out his tongue, straining to get it even an inch closer to the gleaming blade.

His arms trembled in exertion, until South panted, "Gangwon, **drop it.**"

The province didn't move, and he remembered what the guy that had delivered him said about his physical examination. South repeated the Command louder, adding, "And **don't move.**"

The green fingers opened, and the blade clattered to the floor. Gangwon gazed at it in desperation, the shaking moving to the rest of his body, vibrating hard enough that the vase of wilting dogwood flowers on the kitchen table shook with him.

South darted forward, safely returning the blade to the drawer before turning back to the other man.

"Why would you...?" He trailed off, sighing and leaning against the cupboard.

He didn't really need to ask. For the same reason he'd ruined his hearing, for the same reason South Hamgyong had killed a man and fled into the frigid wilderness, for the same reason that woman in Pyongyang had gone back for her friend. For the same reason his brother was still fighting.

Because Gangwon was a Communist. And he was crazy.

His final hope that maybe he was different, that *maybe* he could finally have a province that loved him the same way the others loved his brother, him, not North or Korea but *him,* flickered and died.

Of course it did. His own brother hadn't even loved him enough to stay. Why would someone else?

Now all that was left was the panic that had sparked inside him when he'd heard Gangwon had actually been captured.

There wasn't much time.

With the province safely immobilized, South took a deep breath.

He didn't want to ask, didn't want to know. It didn't matter

anyways, it didn't-

"Gangwon. **Tell me- is Red China here in Korea?"**

Gangwon's eyes widened, the white engulfing his face. The tremors moved up the wall, the bowls lining the shelf clattering like they'd fall.

"Gangwon," South repeated, louder. **"Tell me- is China here in Korea?"**

Gangwon's jaw feathered, the cords in his scrawny neck standing out, a vein over his eye bulging as his teeth clenched so hard that South could hear them creaking.

"Gangwon!" He lunged at him, grabbing him by the bony shoulders as he shouted, ***"TELL ME IF THE CHINESE COUNTRYHUMAN IS HERE!"***

"YES!" The words tore themselves from Gangwon's mouth against his will, and horror overtook his expression. But they didn't stop. "I t-t-t-t-think so! There's someone that wears a mask and was with Korea and there's women and Kangwon s-s-s-s-*said-!"*

His jaw suddenly clamped shut, and South watched in repulsion as his teeth guillotined down on his tongue, blood immediately staining them red. He was ready to Command him not to bite it off, but the man's mouth didn't open again. He only shook harder, his hands twitching in place.

Emotions that South knew well filled his face. Pain, guilt, shame.

Fear.

That made two of them.

He released Gangwon, taking a numb step back.

America had been right. China was here. Not just his army. *Him.*

He couldn't fathom why. Was he really puppeteering North since CCCP wasn't allowed to? It had to be something like that. It was

illegal! He could get more embargoed, or, or-

Or punished.

"Starting without me, Southie?"

The voice behind him almost made South scream. When he turned to see America looming in the doorway, the urge welled within him again, blocking his throat.

His friend was smiling. It turned to a smirk as he looked to Gangwon, bloody and shaking.

"Looks like he wasn't being so cooperative. Colour me surprised."

If South felt like he wanted to scream, the province looked like it. He was pretty sure if it wasn't for the Command, Gangwon would be hiding under the table.

He wanted to.

He shouldn't. There wasn't anything wrong. He trusted his friend. America had said he didn't want war with China. He just wanted to know if he was here so Red China wouldn't get away with breaking the law. He'd said he'd never lie to him and he'd never leave him and South *trusted him.*

"So, what'd he say?" America strolled in, standing too close to Gangwon. "Did he see the chink?"

'Speak, South. Speak.'

America was going to notice how quiet he was. He was going to know something was wrong. And then-

***'Speak,** idiot.'*

South spoke.

"No," he said, hoping his voice sounded as easy to his ally as it did to him. "He says he doesn't think China's here."

He couldn't look at Gangwon, couldn't bear to see what expression he was making, if it would give him away. He could only stare up at America's blank aviator-stare.

America stared back, still grinning. "Is that so?"

"Yeah," South replied, his heart hammering even harder than it had that night in the warehouse. "I Commanded him."

The other man nodded congenially, stuffing his hands in his trouser pockets. "Why don't you ask him again?"

'Don't swallow.'

Trying not to sound like he was choking, South smiled at America. "What, don't you trust me?"

He said it lightly, half-jokingly, like his ally always did. But without the threatening undercurrent.

America grinned at him, his teeth perfect and white. "Of course I trust you, South. But commies can be tricky. And you're not the brightest bulb on the tree sometimes, kid. No offense. But you remember the whole 'escaping provinces' fiasco. Amongst other things." He arched a pointed brow.

South laughed sheepishly. "Okay, yeah."

'Don't stutter.'

"I'll ask him again."

He turned to Gangwon, tucking his hands into his pockets like America so he wouldn't grab his own arm.

"Gangwon. Tell me- is China in Korea?"

Gangwon stared at him, his eyes wide and confused, still shaking.

'Answer answer please answer please.'

"Oops," South said out loud, still sounding sheepish. "Sorry, I

forgot you're deaf. GANGWON." He felt sick. "TELL ME- IS THE RED CHINESE COUNTRYHUMAN IN KOREA PERSONALLY?"

Gangwon still stared, and South could feel his heartbeat in his head.

*'Pleasepleasepleaseplease oh God **please-'***

Gangwon's panicked gaze darted between him and the still-smiling America before he blurted, "No!"

South could have cried. His legs turned to meat jelly.

"N-N-N-No!" Gangwon repeated, babbling. "I d-don't think so, I've n-nev-ver seen him and K-K-Korea writes h-him let-t-ters, I d-d-don't-"

"Gangwon," South said loudly, before he could screw up. "**Shut up.**"

And because it was a real Command this time, Gangwon's jaw clacked shut.

South turned to America, smiling up at him. "See?"

America gazed down at him, grinning like a shark.

Did he buy it? Did he know something was off? Was South too nervous, his voice too thick? Could he hear his heartbeat? How long had he been in the house before revealing himself? Had he heard Gangwon earlier?

God, South wished he could see his fucking *eyes.*

Eventually, America spoke. "Yeah. I see."

He saw that South had told the truth? Or he saw that he was lying to his face?

"From what the provinces told us before, North lets them in on a lot of stuff," he said, trying to sound nonchalant instead of terrified. "And he's way too overconfident. I bet if Red China was here,

Gangwon would know."

America stared at him for another long few seconds. South's bandages were sticking to his skin, and his pockets were starting to fill with sweat. He wanted to wipe his palms on his legs, but resisted.

'Relaxed, relaxed. Or the sheep will start looking for a new shepherd.'

"Yeah," the man said finally. "You're probably right."

South made himself frown, trying not to let his lower lip tremble. "Are you okay? You look a little disappointed. But... this is good, isn't it? It means you really don't have to like, go to war with Red China or anything." He laughed at the inside joke.

America's grin shrank a little, and he tipped his head like a hound.

Had South said too much? Had he given himself away?

"Yeah, kid." The American's hand descended on his shoulder, and South tensed before it lifted again. Not a vise, just a pat. "It's great."

He looked away. He actually looked away.

South felt his eyes burn, tears wanting to fill them. He had done it. He had actually-

"Well," America said, with his gaze fixed on Gangwon. "I guess it's time to teach him his lesson then, huh?"

The relief that had rushed through South's body froze, iciness filling his insides. Gangwon's eyes widened.

"W-What?" South couldn't hide his stutter this time.

America's grin was brighter than ever. "Well, you might be telling everyone he was kidnapped by commies, but we know the truth, don't we? It's pretty clear." He gestured at Gangwon, blood still staining his lips. "Didn't I tell you you had to be ready for this someday?"

His smile fell, his brows crinkling. "Are you having trouble remembering things again, Southie?"

He *didn't* have memory problems. He had been trying to forget that on purpose.

'When Korea is yours, you're not going to be able to just talk them out of being commies. You know what I'm getting at, right?'

'...Yeah. I think I do.'

'So- do you think you'll be up for it?'

'Yeah, I'm up for it.'

South had only agreed because he had to. He'd been tipsy and hurting and confused from talking to Kangwon. And he knew America wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Just because he'd said he was up for it at the time didn't mean he'd actually have to *do* it-

As much as he tried to fight it back, the voice seeped in, whispering, *'Yes it does. And you knew that.'*

South's fists clenched.

He had. He had known he'd have to. Because America wanted him to. And if he said 'no,' then the punishment might be his instead.

"I remember," South said quietly, unable to look at Gangwon.

"Good." America clapped him on the back, perky again. "Then let's get him down to the station."

South's eyes stayed firmly focused on the ground as it changed from kitchen tiles to carpet to stone walkway to dirt road to pale wood to concrete floor.

The interrogation room.

He hadn't heard any voices in the police station. America had just led him and Gangwon- freed from the Command to stand still, but not the one to shut up- into the empty building. Had he cleared it

out? Did he have the authority to do that?

'Of course he does.'

South finally looked up and realized that the building *wasn't* empty. The provinces were here, watching him with wary eyes.

Had they ever looked at his brother like that?

Gangwon went straight to North Chungcheong, who sheltered him behind his broad frame, seamlessly accepting him back without question, even after he'd abandoned them.

"What did you do to him?" the violet man demanded. "Why are we here?"

Jeju trembled like a leaf, her gaze fixed on South's hand.

South stared at them, unsure of how to answer. He looked to America and realized that he was alone.

Ah. Right. His friend had helped him before, with Jeju. He couldn't now. His Military Government wasn't in control anymore.

A sick urge to laugh almost brought South to his knees, but he pushed it down down with everything else.

"Because you're all Communists," he said, and couldn't hear any inflection in his voice.

"Bite your tongue," South Chungcheong said haughtily, poised like a crane in the corner.

Like she had any right to talk. Like she wasn't one of the worst ones for making him think she wasn't, that maybe, just *maybe-*

"And..." South couldn't bring himself to finish, and Gangwon was opening and closing his mouth desperately.

"Gangwon," he said, hoping he wouldn't regret it. **"You can speak."**

"S-S-South, please!" The man rushed him, clinging to his shoulders like South had to his earlier. "P-P-Please d-d-don't, d-d-d-d-"

"Gang, deep breaths," South Gyeongsang advised with concern.

The green-skinned man sucked in a breath, then rushed, "Back during the Military Government, when I was caught fighting with our guerrillas, America had me locked up. He kept m-me in a cell for s-s-seven months all alone with no light and he did it on purpose!"

He stopped, panting, searching South's face for something.

Trapped in a dark, windowless cell. Alone.

It pushed at the edges of South's mind, the cot, the dark, the stinging of his back, alone, alone for the first time ever.

"I'm so sorry, Gangwon," he said, his voice tripping as he looked down at the shorter man.

Hope welled in the province's eyes, his grip slackening and a tentative smile twitching at the corners of his lips.

"But you kind of deserved it."

His smile turned confused, then vanished. "No. N-N-No."

Gangwon clutched at South's suit, shaking him violently. "N-N-N-*No,* K-Korea told me to say- t-t-told me to t-tell you- He s-s-said-said you would-" Tears started to flow down his green and gold cheeks. "They *killed* Bong-nam!"

"Gangwon." North Gyeongsang darted forward, pulling him back, eyeing South's right hand warily.

South had never deserved what had been done to him. He hadn't deserved to be locked up or whipped or isolated for so long in the dark, just because his brother couldn't stop causing problems.

He hadn't deserved to be left behind.

But Gangwon was a Communist. He had fought with them, killed with them. He had willingly stayed with North for over a year.

And he had called him 'Korea.'

South looked down at the thing in his hand that the provinces had all been staring warily at.

He didn't know when, but at some point, America had handed him a sleek leather whip. It sat heavy and slick in his hand.

"You fought with North," he said to Gangwon, trying not to look at the many tails. "You purposefully deafened yourself so you wouldn't be able to be Commanded back to me. You stayed with the Communists of your own free will. Unless..."

Maybe he didn't have to do this. Maybe there was a way out.

"Tell me you didn't." He looked at the man, at all of them, unable to keep the pleading note out of his voice. "Tell me North forced you. Tell the *world* that. He Commanded you, he *made* you. Taejon was his fault, *the war* was his fault, and you had no choice but to help him. It *wasn't your fault."*

His hands were shaking as he looked from face to face. They were all looking to Gangwon, trembling in the middle of them.

He realized it, looking up at his cousins, his expression helpless and terrified. Then it smoothed, and he looked back at South, dead in the eyes, and didn't stutter.

"No."

"No way," North Chungcheong immediately agreed, crossing his arms.

"No," the Jeollas said together, clutching each other's hands tight.

"No," North Gyeongsang said, and South Gyeongsang echoed him, after mouthing what looked like a prayer.

Gyeonggi's eyes were rounder than ever, but he, too, said, "Nope."

"No," whispered a quiet, broken voice.

South's heart sank.

"That's all of us," North Chungcheong said into the silence that followed. "South Chungcheong has nothing to do with this. She's not even a Communist and she never fought with him the first time."

"I do not need your defenses," his sister hissed.

"I'm trying to fucking *help-"*

"All provinces," South interrupted. **"Stand still."**

They all froze, eyes turning to him.

Unable to look at them, he Commanded, "Gangwon, **come here.**"

The man's glistening eyes opened wide, but he set his jaw, walking towards him, shaking, but not fighting the Command.

"Kneel," South choked out.

Gangwon knelt, his back to him.

"Stop!" North Chungcheong barked. "Do me, not him! I'm the number one commie here, I have a secret Worker's Party membership card, I helped them out even before the war! That agent before was mine! Punish me instead!"

South hesitated. North Chungcheong was bigger and sturdier. Gangwon had far more burns and was thin from being with North, and clearly exhausted. He'd feel a little less bad if...

"Gangwon is the one who stayed with North longest," he said calmly. "He's the one who fought with the guerrillas directly and stayed to help the Soviet puppet government. That's what he's being punished for." And he knew he was lying about the agent. "I'm not going to punish you for what someone else did."

All those times North had messed up and South had been hurt for it, too. He'd trash talk their guards, try to escape, kill the Japanese,

and South would be made to bleed for it to just because he was there, because he was his brother.

"I'm not Japan," he said firmly.

North Chungcheong's jaw set hatefully. "You could have fooled me."

He wasn't. Japan had locked them away for no reason, and he'd hurt South for no reason.

South had a reason. He needed to teach the provinces a lesson. He had seen that look in Kangwon's eyes as he rambled on about the Worker's Party and responsibilities and Kim Il-sung and North North *North.*

They were brainwashed by his brother, who was brainwashed by his General and CCCP and Red China. They wouldn't see reason through anything but force, just like all Communists.

And he could tell that America hadn't fully believed him earlier. But if he did this, if he showed him he *could* do this, it might convince him.

Gangwon could survive a few lashes. But if America abandoned him, South would not.

The arm holding the whip raised. At its apex, it paused, time seeming to slow, the looks of shock and disdain and hatred on the provinces' faces a frozen tableau that made him want to curl up and die.

From the depths of South's mind, a voice tried to speak. Kangwon's.

'I really don't think you're a bad person. But there's only so many bad choices you can make before that's what you become.'

But South had to do this. If he wanted to Reunify with his brother, if he wanted to win, wanted to *live,* then he *needed* to do this.

*'I **have** no choice.'*

The shock of the whip up his arm was sudden and alarming, just like Gangwon's cry, echoed by his cousins', and South felt an inane urge to apologize.

He didn't. You only apologized when you had something to be sorry for. South didn't.

Gangwon did. They all did, really. Even South Chungcheong. Especially her.

South hit him again. And again. When the black suit the province had been wearing tore under the lashes, he realized that he should have made him take off his shirt.

Was it too late to ask now? It would be kind of awkward. And the suit was already trashed, anyways.

And it hadn't even been that nice, anyhow. It had a Communist cut. It was actually probably good South had ruined it.

Plus, remembering how he had felt when Japan made him strip and kneel shirtless in front of-

No. He wasn't thinking about that. He couldn't remember how it had felt to be small and helpless as his knees ground into the floor and the whip cut lines down his back.

He couldn't take Gangwon's pained cries or the protests of the others anymore. He Commanded them quiet, not looking at them, or at anything.

They would understand when this was over. Once they were unbrainwashed, they would get that North was never going to have won and that this was *necessary*. They'd forgive South and thank him for helping them see the light, for saving them.

How many lashes was he giving the province? He felt like it was supposed to be a hundred, like had been done to-

'La la la.'

His arm was getting tired, so he switched to the other one, his

long-forgotten left-handedness working like muscle memory.

How had North not seen that knife coming? South had used to complain about being wrong-handed all the time, and his brother had always nagged him for focusing so hard on learning to use his right hand instead of what he was writing.

He probably shouldn't have thrown that blade out. America had given it to him to carry out his plan, after all. He hadn't said anything, but it was still rude to throw away a gift.

Gangwon's awful choking noises as his body tried to cry out in pain were honestly worse than the screaming. South unmuted him, and he started making sharp, short gasps that echoed in the dead silent room.

This wasn't that hard, really. Yeah, it was tiring, but it was rhythmic, too, like warm-ups for dancing. South actually found himself getting bored, lulled by the repetitive up-down motions of his arm, only interrupted by having to switch hands again. Even Gangwon's cries all started to sound the same, blurring into the white noise of the room.

South wasn't keeping count, but around when he thought he had reached a hundred, he kept going for another ten. Better too many than not enough. He'd bet America was right outside, listening in, after all.

When his arm finally came to a stop, he realized that a strange noise was reverberating in the hushed room. At some point, he had started humming.

'My love, if you abandon me, your feet will be sore before you go ten ri.~'

Gangwon was curled up on the floor, his head pressed to the ground between his knees. The back of his suit was flayed open, and so was his actual back. The black fibers were threaded into the open, bloody wounds.

South felt vomit surge in his throat, but choked it down. God, had

he looked so gross back then?

Now that he had stopped humming, the only sound was Gangwon's quiet whimpers as he shook, not raising his head.

What was South supposed to do now? What did you do after doing something like this? Just... leave?

'The subject has taken his punishment. If he is wise, it will be the last.'

"I... didn't want to do this," he said, trying not to cringe as the provinces' gazes shifted from Gangwon to him, sharpening into something other than worry.

"But..." South forced himself to look up, not at them, but at a point on the wall behind them, trying to blur his eyes like he was drunk so he wouldn't see their expressions. "I had to. Gangwon had to be punished. And if any of you ever do anything to help the Communists or North again, I'll have to punish you, too."

He wasn't sure he was speaking loud enough for Gangwon to hear. He guessed it didn't matter. He must have learned his lesson. South had.

"North can't win this war."

He was only telling them what he had known from the start, from the day that commie guerrilla had come to tell them they'd be cut in half. They had no right to look so mad at him.

This was *their* fault. Did they think South wanted to hurt them? He didn't! He never had.

They had *made* him. If they had just kept their heads down and been good like him-

"I'm going to win," he said firmly, finally meeting North Chungcheong's narrowed eyes. *"Me.* And then we're going to be happy. You'll see."

They didn't understand that he was trying to save them, and himself, and even North. But they would.

"Everything's going to be okay."

He released them from the Command to stand still, and repeated the one to not attack him. Still, from the way North Chungcheong quivered, he knew he was trying.

The others went to Gangwon, clustering around him, Gyeonggi touching his hand and South Gyeongsang cradling his tear-streaked face.

Gangwon didn't know how lucky he was. South hadn't had anyone to hold him. Just himself.

He turned to leave, then called over his shoulder, "All provinces. My brother's name is North and **that's how you'll call him.**

"Call me Korea."

He didn't bother looking back, knowing he'd just see more ungratefulness on their faces. Whatever. One day they'd smile at him like they did at North. He'd be the only one they *could* smile at. So what if it wasn't today?

He left them muted. He'd drop by their houses later to undo it, and interrogate Gangwon fully. He just didn't need to hear any commie-talk right now.

He shut the door on them.

America was leaning against the counter in the empty police station, under the crest of the Republic of Korea's police force. The outstretched golden wings framed him, and South wondered why whoever had designed it had to choose an eagle. A familiar grey box sat on the counter next to him as he idly spun a wire around a reel.

"Hey, kid," he said, grinning. "All done?"

"Yeah," South said, lifting his lips back. "All done."

His friend nodded in satisfaction. "Good. How do'ya feel?"

South shrugged. He didn't feel great, obviously. But he didn't feel as bad as he thought he would, either. He didn't even really feel like crying, which was really shocking.

Mostly he just felt numb.

"Pretty good, I guess," he replied, then realized his palms were sweaty and his mouth dry. "I could really use a drink, though."

"A' course, a' course, I'd say you've earned one, kid." America tilted his head to the room. "I'll send someone by to take the troublemakers home. Might want to think about paying off whoever you get to treat the example, though."

South shrugged again. "Why? I'll just tell them the Communists did it."

It might as well be true.

"Smart kid." America ruffled his head. "And hey, Southie."

He bent down, taking his shoulders as he looked him in the eyes.

"You can act all tough, but I know that was hard for you, kid. No one wants to do that kind of thing. But you know you had to, right?"

"Yeah," South assured him. "I know. It's why I did it."

"Good." America squeezed him reassuringly, standing up. "I'd hate to see you let yourself get torn up over a coupla commies. But if you did a good enough job with him, then they probably won't be for much longer."

He laughed and South laughed, too.

"Oh. Here." He held the whip out to America. Its leather thongs glistened wetly in the artificial station lights.

America waved him off. "Keep it. You might need it again."

South coiled it up, tucking it into the waistband of his pants,

arranging his jacket over the smear of red it left on his white undershirt.

"Can we get that drink now?"

"Yep. I'll treat you to the top shelf stuff." America picked up his wire recorder, not even bothering to try and hide it. The spool was already safely in his pocket.

South didn't bother saying anything. There was no point.

They left the station, leaving the stifling windowless room behind, along with the provinces. But South carried Gangwon's gasping cries with him, just like he had Jeju's.

He looked over at America, who was strolling along in the fresh spring morning, the broad grin on his face almost as bright as the sun reflecting off his void-shaded eyes.

South should Command Gangwon not to tell him about China. He didn't know why the province had gone along with him before. But if he was anything like Kangwon, it was probably to make South think he was on his side so he could get into his head with North's words. And now that South had done... that to him, he might try to rat him out for revenge.

America might find out someday. Maybe Gangwon would tell him after the war, or if Red China survived, he'd come clean.

But South doubted it. He was a Communist and a Soviet puppet, just like his brother. And since Gangwon was a commie, too, he could just tell America he was lying.

And besides, so long as it happened far enough in the future, the American might not even care. People didn't care if you found out they were lying after everything was over.

And Korea would be one by then, anyways.

America saw him looking, and turned his solar smile on him.

And South smiled back.

The bar was dark and empty. Another place America had bought out. Glass after glass of different liquids were set before him and South drank them all, scouring his throat with alcohol that could have been top shelf or made in a clay jar in a peasant's backyard.

He didn't really care anymore. He just wanted to drown out the smell of piss, stale liquor, and sawdust that had soaked into the wooden floor and claustrophobic walls of the bar. And the blood that had soaked into his hands.

Blisters had popped on his palms, and the chill of the drink was the only thing that soothed them. His burns had broken open, too, that ugly gash weeping scarlet tears that soaked his shirt. Wasn't a whipping only supposed to hurt the person being punished? South bet Japan hadn't got any blisters from lashing him.

"Y'know, kid, you can be a little impressive sometimes," America praised, the words going straight to the Korean's head along with the whiskey in his glass.

"Thanksh," he slurred, fumbling for the bottle. America helped him, filling his tumbler again.

"You can really put your drink away. Of course, you still don't hold it quite so well," he added this as South's sixth glass slipped from his hand, shattering on the floor.

"Someone'll clean it once we're done," the American said flippantly, fetching another glass from the bar, refilling it.

"Jusht like in Chingching, Chongjing, Chong-" South gave up on the Mandarin name, weakly flopping his hand. America didn't care anyways.

"Sure thing." He bobbed his head. "You were pretty impressive in the station, too. To tell ya the truth, I thought you might not be man enough for it. Thought you might come crying to me."

"I had to do it," South murmured, resting his forehead on the edge of the cool table. "Did you really... lock Gangwon up?"

"My guys did," America said off-handedly. "You said it yourself- he was fighting with the commies. And clearly solitary wasn't a good enough lesson since he went off and did it again."

He leaned forward. "But after what you did to him, I'm sure he'll know better next time. Not that there'll be one."

"He won't even think once," South murmured, making the other man chuckle.

"Righto. Here, have a cigar, kid."

Something that smelled thick and cloying was pressed into his hand, and South clumsily sucked on it. The smoke filled his lungs, sweet and sickly, and made him cough until his vision went black. America laughed, slapping him on the back until the boy fell face-first onto the table, the cigar burning a dark spot into the wood.

Silence fell, the only sound the whirring of the wire recorder behind the bar. It didn't matter. It had heard worse. And South knew America would never release something that had his voice in it, too.

South tipped his head up to see America watching him with his flat, dead aviators.

"You know, it's a good thing you weren't shaken up by all that," he said causally. "Because you're going to have to do it again."

The words reached through South's comforting brain fog, trying to drag him back to sobriety. It was only half-successful, which was half more than he wanted.

"What?" he asked, and he couldn't sound anything but tired.

America grinned, sharp and alien. Had he always had so many teeth?

"I told you before, didn't I? Once the Northern provinces are yours again, you're going to have to teach them a lesson. And their brains are so deep-cleaned that cherry-picking a martyr won't work this time. It will have to be all of them." He tipped his head to the side

in a way that raised hairs on the back of the Korean's neck. "Do you think you're still up to that? Or will you chicken out now that you've seen for yourself what it means?"

There was an edge of disappointment in his voice, like he'd thought South was better than that. And he was, wasn't he? When he had boldly declared that he was up for it that night in Gyeongmudae, hadn't he already seen for himself what it meant? Hadn't he been there when Jeju had been soundlessly screaming, tears running down her face like the blood from her back as America had stripped the flesh from it with each lash of the whip? He had known that one day, he would have to do that, too.

But it had been easier to say he was up for it when seeing was all. Now, he had held the whip in his hand, he had been the one to bring blood to Gangwon as he cried out over and over again, just as South once had. He would have to do that to Kangwon, to Hwanghae, to *all* of them.

He had been naïve before. He hadn't known the true extent of what he had to be prepared to do.

He knew now.

South's hand clenched around the handle of an invisible whip, his back stinging.

For the country, for stability, for peace.

For his brother.

"No." His voice was firm as he looked up at his ally. "I'm not backing out. If it gets my country back under my control, I'm up for anything."

Not that it ever had been or ever would be. But he would be alive. And free.

"That's just what I wanted to hear!" America laughed loudly, clapping him on the back. "That's my boy! We'll have you turned into a real powerhouse yet."

"Thanks," South slurred. "I can't... ever pay you back."

The words didn't come out right. They tasted bitter, staining his lips, and he washed them away with more of whatever was in his glass now.

America chuckled, the sound hammering into his skull like nails. Like the impact of a whip. "Oh, I'm sure I'll find a way to set us even. Until then, what's a li'l debt between friends? But really, kid, don't get too hung up on it. I'd help you out anyway." He grinned widely. "And why...?"

South thought about it for a moment, then- despite everything- chuckled in realization. "Because we're pals."

"Exactly!" America cried, raising his glass. "Because we're pals! I'll drink to that."

He did, and so did South, washing away the guilt that throbbed in time with his blistered palms with the smooth American whiskey. He told himself that it worked.

This had been too far. He knew it. There had been a line, and he had crossed it. North would never forgive him now.

But North had crossed the line first when he had crossed the 38th Parallel. He had crossed it when he left him. He was the one who had made this necessary. South only had to do it because of *him*.

He knew his brother wouldn't accept that. He'd always been allergic to sense.

This had been necessary, just like everything else. Like Jeju, like killing the prisoners, like burning Seoul.

America was selfish. He was narcissistic, careless, cruel, self-serving, manipulative, and violent. He was a liar.

And he was South's only friend.

He would never give up on Korea, especially now that his plans to start a war with China had been foiled. He would keep trying with

his planes, and his bombs, and his soldiers, just like he had been trying ever since before North and South had even existed.

It was too late for South to end the war. Maybe he could have, back at the Raktong. Maybe if he had chosen differently, if he had went with North back then, America would have shrugged his shoulders and gone home. Maybe he and his brother would be Reunified by now, and Korea would be free.

But he didn't think so. This, too, was necessary.

'There's nothing that can stop me now,' his friend had once told him.

There never had been.

"Y'know, Southie," America sighed, kicking his boots up on the table. "You really are one of the good ones."

"Yeah," South said as he took another drag on the cigar, managing not to cough this time.

America was his only friend. And it was better to be his friend than his enemy. It was the only way to come out of this alive. North would see that. When they were Reunified, he would see.

"I know."

I have been WAITING to write this. You can see the line and you have no choice but to cross it, but you're the one choosing to keep walking forward.

Behind the scenes production fact- it was originally supposed to be North Chungcheong that got whipped, as he'd volunteer for Gangwon and South would accept. But then I realized it was far more in line with both Gangwon and especially South's development for Gangwon to not want to hide from pain, and for South to, well, not want someone else to get punished for someone else's actions.

When people act like the DPRK is irrational for not allowing all foreign media (they do allow a lot of foreign media, including

American, for the record), I just think about the three S's. Chun Du-hwan's regime used Screen, Sex, and Sports to turn people towards entertainment and away from organizing and civil issues. This is 'just a conspiracy theory,' but most of the South Korean leftists I've seen online are convinced it's real, and it is also an objective fact that places like the US use entertainment to distract. Japan does purposefully invest money in the anime industry to export it and build soft power, and South Korea does the same with K-pop. Like whether or not Chun Du-hwan did it intentionally, intelligence services and capitalists *do* do it intentionally. There are emails in the Epstein files where it seems Epstein had a hand in microtransactions in Call of Duty because it 'prepares children for the economy,' goods and services for money, no other way. Sex is genuinely addictive, and provocative and sexual media has an effect, turning people away from societal issues to focus on their bodies, and turning women into just another commodity. Even for more progressive things, like gay rights, they get more caught up in sexual freedom over real freedom or societal progress. Sports give a nation a false sense of 'unity' while also providing an enemy, something to rally around and someone to hate. 'We might be rich, we might be poor, but at least we all support the Swallows, unlike those filthy Giant supporters.' When we focus on divisions like this, especially when an addictive aspect is added to it in places that allow sports betting, we don't focus on the real division of class. And Screen is the most insidious because it's both of these and more. Think about Hollywood shows that mention Israel in a casual way (there's lots of them). These are supposed to be humorous, 'harmless,' but they slip in that normalization of a genocidal settler state. Or the fact that if an American movie wants to have the US military assist with supply for it, they have to get their scripts approved by them (Forrest Gump had to cut a plot point about mentally disabled soldiers being sent to Vietnam specifically to kill them off, which is something that actually happened, Project 100000 for more), and weapons contractors frequently fund films. Why would the DPRK want to show a film that is paid for by a company that desperately wants more war to sell more weapons, or is overseen by the military that genocided over twenty percent of their population? Even if a movie producer

doesn't mean to, they are reinforcing their own worldview, one that is steeped in the propaganda they grew up in. 'Be the bigger person, don't fight back, you don't need to do anything about injustice because karma will work one day, rich people are just like us.' I've mentioned this before, but think about the amount of shows from any capitalist country that are supposed to portray a poor, struggling person, but they live in a huge apartment, never have food problems, and hang out with attractive people at fancy parties (Love Alarm as an example). Or the anime that have a cozy, slice of life feel when that is not the reality of being poor in Japan (Hitorigurashi no Shougakusei as an extreme example). If you showed those to someone from a poorer country that didn't know the truth of the nation it came from, they would think 'That's how their *poor* live??' And that's not at all true. There are people in the Seoul outskirts that don't have steady electricity. Most salarymen in Japan are miserable. And this is backed up by real proof- there are North Korean defectors that went to the South because of the media they saw, and when the reality isn't anything like it, they want to go back, and can't. Or think of all those shows about the British monarchy or rich wealthy families. It makes us sympathize with the rich, to think 'Oh, they have problems, too,' when their problems are nothing like ours. The amount of people that watch the animated Anastasia and say 'Oh that poor girl, she should've been able to go back to Russia and become queen,' and don't think about the millions of children that never got to grow up under her parents' rule and wouldn't get to grow up under hers. The shows and movies that glamorize wealthy lifestyles tell people 'this could be you! Look how sparkly and happy you could be!' and make them want to pursue that lifestyle, without showing the exploitation of working people that is the only way to attain it, and that less than one percent of people will ever achieve. 'Don't focus on the problems in society or how they could change, focus on how *your* life could change, how you could be like us. Or just forget about your problems and consume this.' Ironically, the DPRK's production of mostly 'propaganda' films (ignoring the fact that all media is propaganda of a sort) is actually less 'brainwashing' than the media production of capitalist countries. Their media usually

contains the message of 'revolution and revolt are good,' they all bring attention back to 'we got here through fighting.' Even if it's in support of their system (and most media is in support of the system it's made in, even just passively), it also instills the values of resistance and fighting for change at all costs. While media in South Korea, America, Japan, the imperial core in general is very carefully crafted to *keep* people from fighting, to distract, to make the audience idolize lifestyles they'll never attain and that don't truly exist, and to indulge in fictional worlds and their problems and forget the real ones. Fiction *does* affect reality, and the people in power know this. That's why they spend trillions of dollars to make sure artists make the media they want.
The DPRK let Shrek in as Shrek is a superior film with nothing but good messaging. You thought this was a pro-DPRK paragraph, but no. Pro-Shrek.

Backstage Helper

[image]

So long as SH kept busy, she'd be fine. She wouldn't think about how America was definitely going to keep stretching out the peace talks even now, or how smug he must have been to get his greasy fingers on Gangwon again, or how he was saying he'd been with them against his will, or what her cousin could be going through right now or how North Hamgyong didn't even seem to *care-*

She slapped her brush into the wall until it made the shape of a bucket full of the chemical water she'd used to scour the bunker clean and that she'd been really tempted to shove that stupid man's head into when he'd said she was 'trying to be a woman again.' Like it was only a woman's task to make sure none of the bacteria from Korea's fever stuck around, and that they were all healthy. Like she *wasn't* a woman.

He was just an idiot and she should *know* by now that everything he said was just to get a rise out of her. But it still made the dark thing rage. If Liaotung hadn't been there to interrupt…

She painted the chemical water acid green, like it could melt skin from flesh. Not exactly realistic. But satisfying.

In the dressing area, SH slid off her choson-ot, the red, gold, and green one she'd wear for the May Day performance at the end of the month. She always tried not to look at her body when she was naked, but her province was being hit hard today, and as she gave her bandages a cursory glance, she couldn't stop her eyes from flicking to that little circle just above her collarbone.

Because of her unnaturally white flag base, she didn't scar the same darker brown-pink colour her people tended to. The scar was a light silvery-pink instead, like a blush-coloured rose blooming in snow.

But the comparison was too pretty for it. It was an ugly

indentation in her body, the edges crimped and wrinkled, her pores erased by the smooth, shiny scar tissue. Just another mark on her body left by a man.

Her fingers traced over it, the wall indenting like her flesh under the force of the thing that slammed into it.

"Comrade SH?"

SH startled, yanking her hand away as she looked over to see Pak Yun-hui watching her, already changed out of her practice outfit. The province realized she was lagging behind the other women of the Song and Dance Ensemble and swiftly shed the rest of her choson-out, pulling her uniform pants back on over her slip.

"I'm sorry," she said, laughing in embarrassment as she reached for her undershirt, draped over a folding screen. "I was just lost in thought."

Yun-hui looked away, her cheeks dusted pink. But her eyes were pulled back to SH.

"I've noticed that scar before," she said, gaze fixed on it. "Where did you get it? Ah, if Comrade SH doesn't mind sharing."

Yun-hui obviously knew that she'd been used as a weapon against their own people by America (and South, someone might deny), from when word had been spread about the Commands making her harm people against her will.

But she wasn't supposed to talk too much about how North Hamgyong had been the one to put a stop to her. That hadn't been spread at all. If it was just him not wanting people to judge him for it, that wouldn't have stopped her. But it came from Korea. And she did grudgingly understand that painting another province in a negative light was bad for their cause.

'He probably wouldn't even care anyway.'

Instead of letting her lips press flat, SH smiled. "The enemy," she answered, buttoning her undershirt up over the scar.

North Hamgyong would probably be proud if people were upset that he'd shot her. They *shouldn't* be upset because he'd just been doing what he should- removing her from America and South's arsenal. And what she had wanted him to.

But she knew that wasn't why he'd be proud.

No. That wasn't the right word for it. He'd be smug if their people disliked him for shooting her, because he just *loved* when someone couldn't stand him. It was his life's mission.

But he wouldn't be proud of failing.

'I wish I hadn't-'

"Well," she said brightly, loud enough that Yun-hui jumped. "I'm going to go put up posters now."

The woman brightened. "Does Comrade SH want help?"

Usually she'd love to say yes, to invite her and a few other comrades so their chattering would drown out the dark thing's growling.

But it was too loud today. She just needed to paint.

She didn't see the underground theatre or the stone steps or the posters lining the lobby as she left Moranbong Theatre. Only the streamers of maroon and old glory and snow that she covered up with splatters of scarlet and brown- America's flag, trampled into the mud.

Once the war was over, her and North Hamgyong would be busy in their own provinces rebuilding, then with their courses. She might never have to see him outside of Supreme People's Assembly plenary sessions, where they wouldn't have to talk. And since he wasn't in the Party, she wouldn't have to see him at congresses either. If she was lucky and resourceful, she could go a year or two without having to speak to him at all. Joint meetings between the Ministry of Light Industry and the heavy industries he was involved in might be an issue. But usually those didn't need every single person involved. And it would be nice to see him seethe over being

forced to be polite to her if they were.

And after the 4th, they were closer to the war being over than ever. Well, in almost two years.

'It's Yeongsan! We're almost there, Korea!'

'Look out Busan, here we come!'

Painting. Painting painting painting, trying not to let the brushstrokes form gold magnolias with their petals torn off by striped fingers.

As absorbed as SH was with the wall, she still saw the woman loitering at the foot of the cracked stairs outside, the only thing left of the aboveground theatre, and the way her head turned like she'd been waiting for her.

She was a bit shorter than SH, and older, with light wrinkles etched at the corner of her pretty deep brown eyes, but hair that was still as dark and silky as magpie feathers. And she was dressed in a blue blouse and trousers with a medical coat over them. The province recognized her from the few times she'd ran into her at one of the Yankee drop zones in Pyongyang, looking for fresh insects with their team and the Chinese one. And the one time China had introduced them.

"Comrade Zhao Jingjing," SH said politely, looking around. "Can I help you?"

She didn't see any of the men from her lab team, or China (which didn't mean much).

"Comrade South Hamgyong." The older woman dipped her head. "I hate to cause you any problems, but I'm afraid I've got myself a little lost. Our Comrade Mao said if that ever happened, we should head to the Moranbong Theatre, and the lovely Provincehuman that performs there sometimes might help us."

SH puffed out a breath. *'China.'*

She didn't actually perform enough for it to be mentioned. May

Day would only be her third time, and that was counting playing Korea's assistant on Foundation Day. But he kept insisting she was an actor.

It was good advice, though. Even if she was working on sowing in her province (which she should be doing now, if Korea hadn't refused to let any of them leave the capital area until he was more sure America and Norway weren't going to try anything; it was a good thing she'd planted that garden because Hae was turning in circles over not being able to finish up planting in Sincheon), there was a high chance Hwang, Kangwon, or even China himself might show up.

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to know where the labs are," SH said regretfully. And most of them were across the Chongchon, she was pretty sure. "But I'm sure I can find someone to take you."

"If you get me to the bend in the west river, I can find my own way back," Zhao Jingjing assured her with a pleasant smile.

It was nothing but friendly, and her eyes were warm. But something about her voice rubbed at her the wrong way. It was rich and throaty, and the province could tell if she raised it in song, she could make an audience weep. But there was something in the refined way she spoke, lingering for a beat after SH had finished talking, like she was savouring her words, that put her hackles up.

She made an effort to smooth them. She hoped she wasn't letting Korea's paranoia get to her. She still wasn't so sure she trusted China's intentions, but she refused to mistrust any of the women or men that came here to help them. Especially when Zhao Jingjing was putting herself at risk of getting sick with her work.

"Alright," she said, making sure her own tone was pleasant. "Follow me."

They set off into the city ruins. The bend in the west river- where a bridge had used to cross the Pothong and sometimes still did if you got there before the newest air raid- was past the Mansudae area and the old missionary area turned schoolteacher's residences turned smoking hole in the ground. They could have went

southwest, cutting through the city center to save time, but SH took the Chinese woman straight west instead, through the outskirts.

Social order had been restored to Pyongyang for awhile now, and there weren't many people left anyways, plus now that her toes had 'healed,' she was confident she could keep both of them safe. But she still decided to be careful while she had the foreign woman with her. Even though it would feel good to put down any reactionary man that tried something, it would cause problems for Korea.

"Comrade Zhao Jingjing," she began politely as they crossed the remnants of the trolley line. "Was it your germ warfare investigation that brought you out here?"

"Call me Jingjing, please. A comrade of Comrade Mao's is a comrade to me." She smiled, her eyes squinching up. "And I hear I'm not much older than you."

SH didn't mind getting familiar with women so quickly, even if it was a little sudden, so that didn't bother her. But the way she didn't interrupt her immediately to correct her made her realize she had been avoiding interrupting earlier, too. The little pause before she spoke had been her waiting to make sure she was really done.

It wasn't like SH got interrupted often (outside of her family, a certain person especially). Even where a man might speak over another woman comrade, her being a province usually got her enough respectful silence. But it felt strange for a woman so eager to drop formality to be so polite in that way.

"In that case, you can call me SH," she returned. "So is it your investigation that brought you out here?"

Jingjing laughed sheepishly. "No. I was visiting the Quarantine Hospital, then got turned around when I came back to the city. I'm not used to Korean layouts."

"Not that this makes it any easier." SH gestured to the shell of the old Weather Bureau building, and the residential area beyond it.

Her fingers curled in, nails stabbing into her palm, and she painted a typhoon on the wall, one big enough to wash away the entire continental United States and everyone in it, to leave every single one of their cities in the same condition, to make anyone left have to be careful in *their* own homes.

"So how do you and Comrade Mao Zhilong know each other?" she asked brightly before Jingjing could say anything.

She had overcame her own fear of interrupting people a long time ago. Plus Korea would want her to sleuth around for more details on China's backstory since North Pyongan wasn't frisking Liaoxi anymore.

"We've known each other for awhile," Jingjing answered as they skirted the flattened residential district, waiting for supply trucks to pass on the road north before they crossed. "Since I was a girl."

"Oh?" SH prompted.

"Mm," Jingjing said casually as the convoy passed. "We met at a party. I was a whore."

SH stumbled on her own feet, almost falling into the road before catching herself.

"Oh," she said after a moment, turning her face away as she hurried across the street.

Jingjing didn't seem bothered by her reaction, catching back up to her side. "En. He took me home, and we've been… close ever since."

SH felt a creeping dread. "When you say you were a girl…"

Jingjing stopped, her lips twisting in thought. Then she sighed. "He'd want me to be mysterious about it, but I don't want you thinking badly of him. It wasn't like that." Her expression turned a little wry. "He's far weirder than that. But in a good way."

SH had been going to protest that there wasn't much weirder than 'that,' before realizing that men like that were probably too

common to be considered ‘weird.’ Despicable and deserving of a slow death, but far too common.

It was a bad thought, and she painted over it. It wasn’t the majority. Just too frequent. And as their society progressed, it would get less and less frequent. Or else.

“Of course, there were a few years where I was dreaming that he’d sweep me off my feet and steal me away from the brothel to get married. Silly little thoughts from an unhappy girl.” Jingjing said it with a smile, fond for her foolish younger self. “But he made it clear that was never going to happen. He’s been a brother to me for much longer.”

SH… believed it. Even from their brief meeting before, she could see that China treated her differently than his provinces, almost leaning protectively towards her. And Jingjing acted younger around him. Her lisp was lighter now, and she suddenly didn’t seem like the type to giggle the way she had when they’d been introduced. It wasn’t something she was used to her with her family, but she’d met plenty of women that were mature on their own, then either turned shy and quiet or filled with childish enthusiasm around their older siblings. SH wasn’t sure if it was because of how family dynamics worked in a normal household, or if it was just because those women actually *liked* their older brothers. *Not* that North Hamgyong was older than her.

But she couldn’t imagine what else a man would want with a child… prostitute. Knowing China, it probably somehow was weirder.

“I wasn’t always in the brothel,” Jingjing said, continuing to walk and also unfortunately continuing to talk. “But my mother died, and my father sold us to it. The old story.”

“Where were you from?” SH asked, trying to distract her.

“A little village,” she answered as they neared the riverbank. “But the brothel was in the city.”

Before SH could ask which city, she looked over.

“Have you heard about what our Communist Party is doing for prostitutes?”

SH tried not to wince. “No.”

Jingjing smiled. “The Beijing brothels were all closed in March, in a big wave, before our People’s Republic was even founded. They were taken to reform centers, given free examinations and shots, and treatment for the sexually transmitted diseases they caught.”

SH couldn’t hide her wince now.

That was another threat that had loomed over her in the cage. She knew some of the men that paid for her had been sick. She could smell it on them, and see it in the fluids they left behind before she fled to the bath, scrubbing and scrubbing even though she knew she couldn’t wash where she needed to. Her disjointed common sense hadn’t let her know at first that her biology would protect her from disease, but Japan had. And since he knew, it didn’t matter how sick the men were. The only thing that mattered was if they could pay.

Even after she’d been able to fetch that scrap of common sense, she would still run her hands obsessively over her skin, far more often than her pregnancy checks, searching for a wart or sore that hadn’t been there before, waiting for the same pungent smell of disease to start seeping out of her, for the body around her to start rotting like theirs. She hadn’t known how it would work, if she would revive after it killed her only to start rotting again, if she’d be trapped in that cycle forever and-

The dark thing growled, and she punctured the memories with a painted needle, long and thin.

“They sent in specialists to teach us things, too,” Jingjing continued far too casually. “Not just household skills to find us a husband, but life skills. I had a little boost, since Comrade Mao taught me to read, and I’ve been secretly studying for years, but I’m not the only one that ended up going into school to become a doctor.”

She looked around, then whispered, slightly abashed, “Though between you and me, there *might* be a little nepotism involved with me getting a learning experience like this.”

SH could imagine. At least China’s nepotism got a woman into a job that would give her future prestige, and not a man into power.

“The other brothels were closed a little later, but they should be gone now,” Jingjing proudly explained. “I’m sure it will take a few years to stamp private prostitution out everywhere, but the Party is committed to it. And so is Comrade Mao.” She tipped her head, long braids sliding across her shoulders. “Both of them.”

“I’m glad,” SH managed.

She was. It was great news for Chinese women, and they’d done a lot of the same things here. Though they weren’t so open about it. Most Korean women just wanted to go back to their families or start new lives, and forget.

So she was glad. She just wished Jingjing would stop *talking* about it.

“Me too,” the older woman said, and her smile died a little, her eyes drifting to the slate waters of the river as her feet came to a stop. “I was in there for most of my life. My sister and I had death contracts, since our father didn’t have any money, and I had no one to buy me out. I should have been thrown out once my value faded.”

‘Thrown out.’ Like Jingjing was a silk robe whose threads had started to fray, and whose owner had no problem tossing her into a garbage heap.

SH had been eternally young and fresh, unable to conceive a child or contract a disease. Her value could only fade if one of her ‘clients’ did something to make it. She had been the perfect… She had been what most pimps or madams dreamed of.

But it didn’t take much imagination to know what happened to most women when they lost their looks. With no skills, no

connections, and the only thing that gave them ‘value’ gone, they were forced to turn to the one thing they knew, now alone, without the threat of being fined hanging over a man’s head to stop him from going too far or taking too much.

Like Eonni.

“But Comrade Mao had taught me well,” Jingjing continued, not looking at SH as she painted. “I could read and write, and knew proper tea ceremony. I could perform. So I was kept around to teach the younger girls, to raise their price.”

Younger. SH’s heart squeezed. As young as she had been, she knew she was above physical age for many girls that were sold to brothels. They were better at it when they were taught young.

“It was good for them,” Jingjing said, more to herself. “They would have been where they were anyway. At least I was able to make sure they’d be kept around longer, and give them someone that loved them.” Her dark eyes shadowed. “But it was still worse than all those years I was being sold.”

“You’re being very open about this,” SH said, her heart pounding unsteadily, politely trying to tell her to *stop*.

If Zhao Jingjing had needed someone to vent to, like the women violated by the Yankees and reactionaries, she would have let her. It didn’t matter that she was Chinese- she was a woman and a comrade.

But she didn’t sound ashamed or distraught. Just vaguely sad, like it was a far away memory, even though she could’ve only been out for three years, less if she wasn’t from Beijing.

“I’m not ashamed of it,” Jingjing said, looking back to her. “Most of my choices were made for me, and the ones I did make weren’t really choices. It’s not like I can change what happened. And in the end, I’m luckier than most. I had a brother and sister that loved me, I’ve got to raise dozens of children even when I can’t have my own, and now I’ve lived to see my country free, and have the chance to fulfill my own dream.”

She smiled, her eyes squinching in a way that made it look like China's, if he smiled with more honesty.

"You're not mad at all?" SH asked quietly.

Jingjing laughed. "Of course I am. I'm furious that happened to us. I'd track down every single man that ever walked through those doors and kill them with my bare hands if I could. Though maybe don't tell my medical school that." She shook her head. "But I can't, obviously. So I'll just follow the Party and help them take away the right those men had to buy women, and the right of other women to sell them, and make sure they never can again.

"My body and my past might not have belonged to me," she said without even a trace of regret. "But my mind and my future do. And I'm not going to let the people who took those things away from me take that, too."

SH opened her mouth to respond, and was horrified when a sob came out instead. She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes burning as tears started to well in the corners, and she turned away from Jingjing, trying to hide her reaction as her chest convulsed.

"Are you okay?" the other woman asked, concerned and a tinge guilty.

"I'm- I'm fine," SH managed to choke past her palm. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I just- I've been helping women who were- who were abused, and- I'm sorry, I think it just caught up to me all at once."

She'd worked so hard to never let the tears she wanted to let out fall last year, with Jin-suk or any of the others, holding them back to give them the confidence and comfort they needed. Now it felt like they'd all welled up at once and were trying to force their way out in a flood.

Jingjing softly patted her shoulder, then pulled her into a gentle hug, stroking the back of her head, careful not to disturb the bandages. It wouldn't look good if anyone saw their province being comforted by a Chinese comrade, but for a moment, SH leaned into her, hands pressed over her face.

She didn't want to cry, she still didn't. The dark thing was unnervingly quiet for a moment, but she still closed her eyes, painting burning buildings and men labouring away, forced to make up for their crimes of using women as commodities, until her breathing steadied.

"I'm alright," she said, stepping back with herself under control. "Sorry about that."

She said it as chipperly as possible. Jingjing's eyes saw through her.

"That's good," she said empathetically, though she didn't know that's what it was. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm alright," SH assured her again, injecting more cheer into her voice.

"I hope you will be." Zhao Jingjing looked down the river, then back at her. "I can find my way from here. Thank you so much for your help, comrade."

She smiled, bowed her head, and strode off down the riverbank, her white coat flapping behind her.

SH fretted, hoping she hadn't made her feel awkward. She'd been the one to bring up a topic most people wouldn't consider appropriate with a near-stranger, but SH still should've been able to control her emotions better.

Then again…

SH wanted to linger to see if Jingjing would cross the bridge, like she suspected she would. But she knew if she did, she'd start thinking about little girls sold off by their fathers, growing up raised by women who had once been sold off by theirs, forced to groom them into perfect commodities if they wanted to save them from rotting away in an alleyway, the way they had been groomed, all of them trapped in a cycle they'd had no choice in, that men and women who had betrayed their womanhood had forced them into. Their earnings, their bodies, their futures, their *lives* all wrapped up

in someone else's hands, who only cared how much money they could make them or how good they-

Work! SH couldn't stand around, she had to get back to work. Not hanging posters, she needed to paint, to quiet the dark thing with a bloody armistice paper on the wall, and burgeoning fields and hardy peasants on real canvases for the April sowing.

She cast one last look at Zhao Jingjing, making her way along the river with a spring in her step, then returned to the theatre, already desperately painting.

—

Pak Yun-ho had died. At oh nine hundred on April 2nd, he'd woken up weak, with a headache, fever, and chills. Following Kangwon's orders, he'd gone straight to a doctor. Two days later, at twenty-three thirty, as Kangwon was almost back to Pyongyang, his body temperature had plummeted, and he had passed. The autopsy a couple days later found the effects the illness had on his body were consistent with secondary septicemia after a bubonic plague infection. Pasteurella pestis had been found inside of him, just like in the guinea pigs the lab had infected with the fleas retrieved from Kumsong-ri.

It had just been him. The sanitation efforts in the rest of the village had been enough to keep everyone else safe, even his sister who lived with him. A flea must've bit him on that first day after all.

Kangwon knew he couldn't have done anything even if he was here. Despite what Korea had said, he didn't have any capabilities that their other doctors didn't, besides more experience and perseverance. And that was a more needed quality for a patient than a doctor.

But still…

He sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

The investigation was coming soon, but not soon enough. The

Executive Committee of the World Peace Council had to find enough doctors and scientists from around the world that could be trusted by both them and the other nations to be considered neutral for the International Scientific Commission. Their quality couldn't be low, and they couldn't rush. It could take a couple months.

'Just have to keep going.' It was all he could do.

They were handling the epidemic well. He had to keep reminding himself of that. For a country that'd just left feudalism, had all their sanitation measures and hospitals destroyed, and were being actively attacked by biological warfare, they were doing *really* well. A few hundred dead out of a few thousand sick was great. And only a few thousand sick was even better.

He was just too close to see it that way. Just like he was too close to…

Gangwon was fine. He would be fine. Kangwon just had to keep believing that.

The door slid open, and he looked up, expecting SH and whoever she'd brought tonight to use as an emotional buffer between them while he took her blood.

But surprisingly, it was just her.

"I'm not used to seeing you alone," he said. Usually she brought either Hae or Hwang, someone to keep him talking to them.

"I'm smart enough not to drag Hae out of the fields while she's planting," his cousin replied.

She sounded so low energy he had to ask, "Are you feeling okay?"

"Just take my blood, please," she sighed, getting comfortable in the chair. "If I'm not infected."

They were in the military hospital lab, but he'd looked at her results earlier.

"You're clean," he assured her. He'd already set up the IV while

waiting, so all he had to do was slide the needle into her skin, careful to avoid the new blisters. Her province must be getting targeted today, too. “And your blood looked great.”

Things like dehydration or starvation could make blood darker than it should be. Korea’s was always a little too dark for comfort, but not enough to keep him from using it. SH’s sample this morning had been a red even brighter than her flag’s magnolia. She kept her body well taken care of, at least.

“Vampire,” she murmured.

“I still don’t know what that means,” he said sincerely.

“Neither do I.” Her brief smile faded.

She must’ve seen him opening his mouth, because a second later she asked brightly, “Has North Hamgyong been by for his donation?”

“Yesterday,” Kangwon confirmed.

“And did he say sorry?”

He gave her a wry smile, leaning back in his chair. “What do you think?”

SH shook her head irritably. “I’ll say something to him.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” her cousin said. “I’ve already got to deal with the germ warfare. I don’t need any injuries we can’t let other doctors treat.”

She glowered at him. “I’m *mad* at him, Kangwon, not planning on maiming him.”

He didn’t know about that sometimes. For either of them.

But he still said, “Sorry. Just a joke.”

She huffed, looking at her IV. Kangwon eyed it, too, watching her blood flow faster down the tube.

"I really don't mind," he told her. "I know he didn't mean it. And I know he cares about me and Gangwon."

"Then why doesn't he *say* it?!" SH burst out, the words having definitely been fermenting. "How can you be okay with him being so terrible?"

Kangwon shrugged. "That's just the way he is."

"Why is it the way he is?"

Her cousin raised his brows. "Why are you the way you are?"

"Kangwon," she said tightly. "Please don't start."

Since he didn't want her to rip her IV out and waste her blood, he dipped his head.

"It's just so *annoying,"* she seethed when she felt like he wasn't going to 'entrap' (try to help) her again. "He acts like just because we're supposed to guess what he really feels, it's perfectly fine to be awful to us."

"You know, usually when North Hamgyong says you'll accept something from Korea but not him, he's comparing nonsense," Kangwon began delicately. "But he was kind of right about that one."

SH glared at him. "He wasn't. Korea's never awful. He's just… harsh."

"Very harsh," he agreed.

'Whatever has been done to him by then will be ***your fault.'***

His cousin huffed. "You know what I mean. I don't like it, but he's only like that when he's… you know."

She vaguely waved a hand.

Yeah. Kangwon knew.

"North Hamgyong is like that *all the time,"* she stressed. "He's not just lashing out because he's- angry. He's just *like* that. Especially to *me."*

Kangwon couldn't argue with that. North Hamgyong was a blunt person that didn't care how you felt about him saying something most of the time. If he did, he wouldn't apologize once it hurt you. During his bloodlett- donation, he'd just shifted around, then muttered that Kangwon was an idiot before they'd gone on to talk about the probing actions at the frontline. That was as much of an 'apology' as he'd ever get. If he tried to push for a real one, his cousin would just get more offensive. That was just how it was.

But they could have normal conversations. Before the war, they'd gone surveying for factory locations and talked about sports and industrialization and whether or not Kangwon could take down a tiger the same way he took down deer (their verdict had been yes, but he never would because they were a treasured Korean animal, and their populations were already declining).

North Hamgyong didn't have those conversations with SH. Even during the Occupation, when things between them had been way less tense than now, they'd only ever spoke with the others around, almost always bickering. Rare private conversations usually ended in both of them storming back, the male Hamgyong glowering darkly and the female with a fixed smile on her face.

Kangwon wasn't sure they talked at all now. And even their conversations in front of the rest of them were pointed jabs.

"You know he doesn't mean the stuff he says."

"Why is it on *me* to know that?!" SH demanded, fingers throttling the chair armrests. "Why is on me to guess what he's thinking or pretend I know what he feels when everything he says and does is completely to the contrary? If he really cares deep down, then why can't he just say what he means? Why can't he just be *nice?"*

Kangwon didn't really have an answer for that. The same reason he wanted to die when Korea looked at him in disappointment, or Hwang's lips pressed together when he was talked over, or SH

herself would rather yank her tongue out than get help. None of them had made the choice to end up that way, but it also wasn't just how they were formed. Their people couldn't be blamed for those parts of them, he didn't think. Their 'nurture' could.

His cousin looked down, her jaw feathering. "He wasn't always like this."

"What was he like?"

SH and North Hamgyong never talked about their pasts. SH had told them she'd set out from Hamhung to find the other Hamgyong right away, and how they'd stayed in Chongjin, then moved to Hungnam. But nothing else. They never reminisced or told stories about that time that would even let him guess what they'd been like. And Hwang had told him recently that he hadn't been able to get an answer out of either of them about it.

Neither did Kangwon.

SH stared at the linoleum floor, then shook her head. "What does it matter? He's not like that anymore. He's just terrible. Am I supposed to act like he isn't just because he didn't used to be? Am I just supposed to just keep on shutting my mouth and accepting it because he's a- my brother and I'm supposed to know he 'doesn't mean it?'"

"No," Kangwon admitted, because it would be unfair, especially for SH. "Shutting your mouth and pretending you never had any problems is just making your reaction now worse." He leaned forward a little. "But you two stabbing at each other doesn't help either."

"What else am I supposed to do?" SH asked, tossing her hands a little.

Kangwon adjusted her IV, giving her the same advice he'd tried to give her brother. "Talk to him, maybe?"

"I *try.*" She thwacked the chair lightly. "But every time I do, he just insults me."

"And you insult him back." Kangwon had the benefit of hearing the siblings out frequently (SH might hate talking about her trauma, but she could complain about her brother for hours, the same way North Hamgyong could complain about her), so he got the absolute best and worst depictions of both of them. He felt like it left him with a pretty neutral view, plus with what he'd witnessed for himself on top of it.

"Because I'm not just going to let him think he can say whatever he wants to me," she snapped. "Even if *you* all do."

Her blood bag was full, so Kangwon got up to remove the line, moving slow so she wouldn't be able to run away too fast.

"You can't work out your problems honestly with him if you can't be honest about the ones with yourself," he said, knowing he was treading back onto unsteady ground.

"Kangwon," she warned.

He held up a hand. "I'm not getting into it. But it's true. Neither of you are the most well-adjusted people-"

"I am *perfectly* well-adjusted," she hissed, clenching her fist so hard that blood spurted from her arm before he could put the patch on it.

A biohazard he'd have to clean before he left. Nice.

He ignored her. "-and when you both refuse to work on yourselves, you can't work on your relationship. Sorry, cuz." He shrugged as he wheeled the pole away. "But it's the truth."

Especially when their personal problems were so wound up in their problems with each other. Kangwon didn't need to know the specifics of their pasts to know that.

"Then I guess things are always going to be like this," she said icily.

Kangwon sighed inwardly. Outwardly he said, "And I'll make sure you both get good medical care when you eventually beat each

other half to death."

SH narrowed her eyes at him, then slumped back in the chair, rubbing her arm. "Sorry. The bombings are bad today. I didn't mean to use that tone."

"I know," he assured her, holding the bag of her blood. "And you do know North Hamgyong doesn't mean the things he says."

Her eyes fell. Her lips parted, then touched again.

Kangwon patted her on the shoulder, and she straightened up, getting to her feet.

"Sorry," she said, back to being peppy. "I think the bombs and blood loss are getting to me."

"Make sure to drink lots of fluids," he said, accepting her explanation.

In the end, he didn't think North Hamgyong's reason for lashing out was any different than Korea's. Chagang had been right about their Countryhuman, and he was right about their cousin.

'He is more scared than angry.' Korea was just better at hiding that fear, most of the time.

He knew SH didn't want to hear that. And she was right- her brother could be awful, especially to her. Just because Kangwon could understand the cause and accept it, didn't mean she had to.

"I will." She didn't leave right away, her mouth twisting. "Can I ask where the labs are?"

"Need-to-know basis," Kangwon answered.

"Just vaguely," she assured. "Are any of them over the Taedong or on the south side of the city?"

"We've got a few over in our provinces, so I guess that's over the Taedong."

“Within walking distance?”

He shook his head. The couple Pyongyang labs- not counting the ones in the hospitals- were either in the northern or western hills. The areas east and south of the capital were mostly plains, leaving no good place for the kind of security they needed.

SH squinted. “So theoretically, if someone visited the Quarantine Hospital, they wouldn’t have to come into the city to get back to the labs?”

“Not unless they had to. You know how hard it is for most people to get travel passes to get into the city right now.”

It was too dangerous. To keep people safe, they had to keep to the hills. The provinces had a lot of freedom in that regard. They needed papers to stay overnight in private residences or get transport like everyone else, but as long as they had their identity cards, they could get into their civilization centers. And if it was an emergency, they could still get rides, so long as they reported it after.

“Hm,” SH hummed, and he asked, “Why?”

“No reason,” she said brightly. “Do you want me to bring your rations for you tomorrow?”

“Please don’t,” he mildly requested.

Under the order from Supreme Command for the KPA to economize as much as they could, everyone from officers to soldiers stationed at headquarters were down from a kilogram of rice a day to eight hundred grams. Only active soldiers got more than that. The provinces were special- SH’s garden had thrilled Korea (as much as something could), and once it bore fruit- well, vegetables- they’d be down to six hundred and fifty grams.

Basically Kangwon was saying he didn’t want the little bit of food that kept him running to be poisoned.

“I think I’ll bring your rations for you tomorrow.” SH smiled, walking away.

He'd just have to trust she wouldn't want to waste food, and it'd be North Pyongan making them.

"Hey, SH," he said before she could go.

Reluctantly, she looked back. Her mouth was still curved, but her almond eyes were wary.

"I'm not bringing it up," he reassured her, wishing he didn't have to. "Just wanted to say however you comrades used to be, I'm sorry it changed."

He'd got to experience growing closer to his brother. Now that he had, he hated to imagine the opposite.

She crossed her slender arms over her chest. "Maybe it didn't. Maybe you're right, and this is just the way he is. Maybe it always has been."

"I don't think you believe that," he said gently. "I know your relationship is a lot more complicated, but I miss my brother a lot. And I know when you got taken to the POW camp, North Hamgyong missed you."

She smiled bitterly. "He didn't actually."

"You're siblings," Kangwon said, giving her words a disapproving look. "There's only so much I can do for you two, especially if you're not going to take my advice. Work things out with yourselves so you can work things out between yourselves. Please."

Her eyes downcast, and he added, "You know he cares about us. He cares about *you."*

The edges of her lips turned slightly sad.

"Sometimes I don't think I do know that," she said quietly, then slipped out of the room before he could say anything else.

Kangwon sighed. By the time he was in the hallway, she was gone, and he set off to store her blood before he cleaned the splatter off the floor.

Sometimes he wondered what they'd all be like if they'd been formed the way they should've been, in a free Korea. Who they'd be. The old Hamgyongs had been sworn brothers, bloodthirsty savages the way the Japanese and Qing told it, and valiant warriors the way their surviving histories- according to Hwang- did.

The truth was probably a little different from even that, though. They'd still been nobles. The invading Japanese and Chinese wouldn't've been the only ones to end up on their swords. And they'd stopped taking up arms in their later years, not fighting Japan the way they should've.

But pretty much every version, and Kangwon's common sense, said they'd been close.

Had that been built on their almost five hundred years as one person? Or had it happened as their own people, as Hamhung, Kyongsong, and Kapsan when they'd been shattered, or North and South Hamgyong when they'd been reformed? In a better world, would that closeness have carried on in the Hamgyongs he knew?

And even if their predecessors didn't affect them, could South Hamgyong and her brother be close anyways, if it hadn't been for... everything else?

There wasn't much use in wondering when this was the world they lived in. The world where they'd been Occupied and Divided, growing up in ways they never should've. The world where his cousins couldn't have one conversation with each other or face who they were and what had happened to them. And the world where Kangwon had gotten his brother taken. They could make a better world for the future, but they couldn't change the past. He couldn't know if they could be different, just like he couldn't know if he could've saved Pak Yun-ho. All they could do was accept what had happed, and just keep moving forward.

He just wished his cousins would.

SH in her head: North Hamgyong's going to need a full-body cast when I'm done with him.
SH out loud: How dare you imply that I would *ever* hurt him.

After waking up, I realized I had a bite mark on my arm. I was very confused until I vaguely remembered I had a dream that annoyed me so much that I woke up and bit myself very hard before going back to sleep. I can't remember the dream at all and I don't know why I would do that.

Tiny Zhao Jingjing <3 (this is part of a larger picture I will post someday).
Her lipstick isn't smeared for gross reasons. If you look carefully you can see the edges of her face are lighter because someone vigorously scrubbed the powder and make-up off her. Like when you grab your cat's face in both hands and… I can't think of a way to describe this. I call it kajiwaji, but that's a nonsense word that means nothing. I grab my cat firmly on both sides of the head and go 'kajiwaji kajiwaji kajiwaji' as I move them back and forth really fast. That's what 'someone' did to her. But without the kajiwaji-ing.

Kim Il-sung gives a vibe that he is righteously committed to women's rights. He can't go ten minutes without mentioning them (exaggeration, but not by much). Every one of his war speeches is 'we need more doctors, and most of them should be women. We need more teachers and factory workers, and most of them should be women. We need to make sure more women and young people are in positions of power. Women do NOT belong in the household, they belong in the workplace, do NOT let your husbands make you eat the bread of idleness. Dear men AND WOMEN guerrillas. The Chinese sons AND DAUGHTERS are here to help.' He is spiritually driven to mention women's progress by his deep belief in it. Meanwhile Mao always gives off a vibe that sexism annoys him on a personal level. To his first wife: 'This arranged marriage is stifling both your rights and mine. Goodbye.' *seeing prostitute get beaten while man yells that even once the Communist Party takes the city, they'll want prostitutes, too* Mao, incredibly irked: We need to abolish prostitution.
Neither of these things is lesser than the other. But they are both heartening and deeply amusing to me.

I don't want to talk about the elections. I dream of a sacred

war of justice.

At Your Fingertips

[image]

North was starting to hate driving.

He had… thought it was useful before. To be able to get across their country in only a few hours, to go from city to countryside in a few minutes, seeing more of his people and land in a shorter time than he would have if he was on foot. The convenience of roads and motorcars wasn't something guerrillas were used to.

But now the vehicle was just a bigger target, another wasted resource if one of the planes on the edge of his hearing came closer.

And it gave him time to think. He had enough of that. Endless time to think when all he wanted was to *do something*.

As he drove out of Pyongyang, his mind was already circling, chewing at the peace talks like a dog trying to gnaw its own leg off.

The concession wasn't the worst thing that could have happened, he knew that. Before it had been made, it had been agreed upon that civilians that ended up across the armistice line from where they were from would get the help they needed to return home. So long as the forty-four thousand remained classified as civilians, they should be returned someday.

And they'd exchanged it for two more important demands. The men and women from the south that had joined the KPA officially would be allowed to return to their homes directly, if they wished. It made North prickle, knowing many of them would be at risk before an official end to the war was made, but it prevented them from having to be repatriated to the north, discharged from the army to become civilians, then sent back to the south, clogging processing for actual civilians. And it was up to personal choice. It was another way to help the Yanks save face by allowing them to not have to say outright that they weren't going to ever hand over the list of names, but it would get people where they needed and

wanted to go. Even if some were forced to say they wanted to go home, they would be left with a fifth column behind enemy lines, in case America or Rhee tried anything.

And, more importantly, their proposal for full repatriation had finally been accepted. The specific figures for the last lists of soldiers- eleven thousand of America and his puppets' prisoners in North and China's hands, and one hundred thirty-two thousand of theirs in America's- would all be sent back to their armies, not counting the southerners that chose to go home.

The senior American staff office had agreed, only adding that the lists should be revised for the POWs captured after the December lists, accidental duplications, and a few thousand prisoners they'd found to be from the south in the meantime. Since North's negotiators had already proposed revising them before the secret talks, there was no issue with that.

But neither of those felt like a victory to North. There shouldn't be any 'side' for the southern KPA soldiers to choose to stay on- only Korea. And their 'proposal' for full repatriation was just proposing that America follow international law, the damn laws *he* had helped create. It was a victory that they'd made him accept, North knew that. But it shouldn't have been.

And he knew some of those forty-four thousand, most of them, were his soldiers. And since he knew that, it made America's reasons for wanting to hold them suspect.

His Premier had told him the same thing he'd apparently told South Hamgyong and South Pyongan- that they would get their POWs back after the war was over, and shine light on what had been done to them then. But it still felt a betrayal to their comrades.

North's eye narrowed at the muddy eastern highway.

He wasn't irked with the man anymore. He hadn't asked *him* to wake him up after all, and he had told him to do whatever he could to get an armistice. And he'd also caused enough trouble for him by making him come by to clean his burns while he was out.

But he *was* still irked with Kangwon. More than irked. If he'd been awake he could have- He didn't know. But he could have done *something.*

Now, like Kim Ju-bong, another loyal soldier lost, he knew not all of their soldiers would ever make it home, whether it was to the north *or* south.

It was done, he tried to tell himself. It was done and a ceasefire was creeping closer. They'd recessed to revise their lists on the 4th, the day after Kangwon had been returned to him. The statement that all prisoners would be released and repatriated at the time the ceasefire was affected, and that the lists should be agreeable to both sides had been added to the armistice draft, and the understanding about southern KPA prisoners being allowed to return home had been agreed on.

The American had tried to add the caveat that prisoners that resisted repatriation by force shouldn't be returned, but they'd managed to successfully reject it. It would be too easy for America to say prisoners had resisted when they hadn't, or when they'd been coerced into resisting, like some of them had been forced into signing the blood petition.

Some likely would resist forcefully, those that had joined Rhee's reactionaries in terrorizing their fellow prisoners. It was important that North got these ones back, too.

Though he disliked the idea of returning their own prisoners from Rhee's army that had repented in their camps, and would also resist, hopefully the oversight from nations that weren't America's puppets would keep them safe. Numerically, there were far less of them than KPA and PVA soldiers that America could lie about.

Once again, he was forced to play numbers games with his people's lives. Some for the many, many for the majority. His brother had been the first sacrifice. He had foolishly thought that once he got him back, it would be the end of it.

North's hands tightened around the wheel, blisters popping on the backs of his hands. His foot pressed down harder on the gas, the

engine growling in response.

Even now that they'd almost settled the issue, America was *still* dragging it out. His men had asked for a week's recess to revise their lists. North and China's had finished in a few days. And now the Yanks had asked for another eight.

Yes they had far more prisoners. But it was still far too long just to take names when most of them were all ready curated. And if they had just started when North and China had mentioned it two weeks ago, it would have been done by now. Instead they were just adding time for more prisoners to be captured, more revisions to have to be made. America knew he couldn't win, so he was trying to save his ego by acting like he had all the time in the damn world, making them wait.

North *despised* waiting. Waiting for their people to free them, waiting for his wounds to heal, waiting for South to realize that if they didn't free themselves from that shack then they were going to die in it. Waiting to be Divided, waiting to be Reunified, waiting to strike back. Waiting for America to realize he wasn't ever going to get what he wanted from them and to just *admit* that, waiting to get Kangwon back, waiting to hear that Gangwon was being Commanded to back up the lie that North had been holding him hostage that America was spewing, waiting to see all his provinces again, waiting to see his-

"Going rather fast, aren't we?"

North slammed his foot on the brake so hard he got whiplash as the Jeep screeched to a halt. The person behind him got off worse, going flying off the side of the vehicle, landing on his back on the road.

"And you say *I'm* bad at driving," China quipped, arching his spine in a stretch before sitting up.

All of North's building fury had been blown away by pure bafflement.

"Where the fuck did you come from?"

His ally sat up, dusting at his pants. “I was clinging to the back of the Jeep. My Jeep, some might say.”

There *was* a small hitch to stand on. But-

“You couldn’t have got through the checkpoints.” Even if a guard recognized him as Mao Zhilong, he still would’ve had to get North’s permission not to show his face.

“Oh, I was clinging to the underside of the carriage.” China said this like it was normal. “I came out after.”

North had never once stopped. He shuddered as he imagined the man latched on to the bottom of the moving vehicle before scuttling out onto the back somehow.

“What are you- a lizard?”

“Of a sort.” China hopped into the passenger seat. “You should tell your guards to check underneath every vehicle.”

They usually did. But who on earth would stowaway on North’s Jeep besides someone who had something *very* wrong with him?

“You’re lucky the road isn’t muddy here,” the Chinese man said, brushing more dust from his uniform.

“You mean *you’re* lucky,” North grumbled, wishing he had been driving through a muddy stretch. China had probably purposefully chosen a dry one to come out.

“So.” His ally settled in. “Where are we going?”

“I am going to a village.”

“I guess we’re going then. Unless you want to kick me out and make me walk back to Pyongyang.” China’s voice grew smaller. “Alone. Vulnerable. Where anything could happen to me.”

North grit his teeth.

There hadn’t been any new accusation against China since

Gangwon was taken over a week ago. But that didn't mean he was safe. With no proof but the Commands, which could be argued against in court by saying South had Commanded Gangwon to lie, America might be biding his time, working off his knowledge that China was here to try and ambush him. That could be another reason why he had asked for an extension to make the list.

Though it did seem unlikely. Kangwon was an idiot, but North believed him when he said his brother didn't know about China. And China was an idiot, but he seemed to believe that, too.

Or at least North was still stuck with him.

Still, it was best to be safe. Reluctantly, he pressed the gas again, heading on to Malhwi-ri. The letter he'd received was too important to wait any longer.

"By the way, let it be known that the first thing you did after recovering from your grievous illness was 'borrow' our Jeep," China said, leaning back, content that he wasn't going to get booted out. "And now here we are again. I'm glad the fever didn't affect your habits."

North side-eyed him, remembering the song that had woven through his fever dreams. He opened his mouth, then closed it, adjusting his hands around the wheel.

China had apparently kept himself scarce. Kangwon said he hated sick people. He had no reason to believe that wasn't true.

"I preferred it when you were avoiding me."

The other country had also been scarce since North had woken up.

China clicked his tongue. "I wasn't avoiding you. Just because you didn't see me, doesn't mean I haven't been around."

He gave him a sly sideways look that North studiously ignored.

"I was just lying low to avoid receiving the same reaction as your provinces," he continued airily. "But I've decided I've escaped your wroth. For now, anyway."

North *was* irritated with China, especially after he'd realized that the only way Liaotung would have been able to go get SH to try and head off her moronic cousin was if she'd been awake early for some reason, and loitering around Moran Hill. And Kangwon had confirmed he'd ran into the Countryhuman, looking like he wanted to bite his own fingers off as he said it.

And North was annoyed with himself for being conflicted on how to feel. He hadn't been able to confront him immediately, too preoccupied with catching up on what he'd missed, playing PR with Norway, trying to navigate thanking CCCP without making him think he felt like he owed him, and to apologize for the trouble his province had gotten him into with the UN without actually apologizing. Now when he tried to get angry over it, it collided with the fact that Kangwon said China had stopped short of commanding him not to go, or physically restraining him, and fizzled out.

"You knew he was going to leave," North said flatly.

"I knew he was feeling uncharacteristically anxious about something when he took my blood," China corrected. "At the risk of ruining my mystique, I don't actually know everything. Your comrades are very tight-lipped when it comes to your provinces. The moment I learned, I sent mine off."

"And you let them go."

"En," China easily replied. "I wasn't exactly comfortable detaining a foreign province without genuine reason. Unlike some nations."

Before North could snap at him, he turned his head, his eyes unsmiling as his voice lost the airiness.

"I am sorry your province was stolen, Chaoxian. I know what that's like."

North didn't know if he was talking about Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, or something else. He didn't talk about his past, and Liaoxi and Liaotung only ever danced around it, even now that one was… courting North Pyongan.

"I did everything I could without crossing any lines in our relationship," China continued seriously. "You haven't put your provinces under my command-"

"And I'm not going to." North bristled, even though he was well aware he'd been ordering the Chinese provinces around almost since the day they'd arrived.

"I'm not asking you to," China assured. "But because of that, I let my comrades go into danger I knew they shouldn't. And that hurt you."

He shifted more towards North, who slowed the Jeep slightly, cursing his missing eye for making him have to turn almost completely to see him.

"So I want to ask- if something like that were to happen again, *would* you want me to stop them?"

North opened his mouth, looked away, then looked back and demanded, "Did you let Gangwon go because you wanted a ceasefire?"

"No," China said immediately. "I'm not the biggest fan of the Western nations thinking they can demand our own provinces whenever they please. And this war is for your country- I wouldn't compromise one of its provinces. We get this armistice on terms that please us both, or not at all."

North looked back at the road.

"And if that isn't enough to convince you," China added after a moment. "While I'm sure your Kangwon thinks his brother doesn't know anything about my presence here, that doesn't mean I'm sure your Gangwon knows nothing. I wasn't able to get close to him without giving myself away. It was a risk to me to let them go."

North's jaw worked. "If you thought Gangwon did know about you, would you have stopped him?"

"Yes," China answered without pause. "I've told you my country comes first, just as yours does to you."

The idea of the foreign Countryhuman restraining his provinces made him bristle, and it should have made North even more wary. But instead it was reassuring. Of course China's considerations towards Korea would always be less important than his own country, just like with CCCP. As it should be.

"…Yes," North decided after a moment, already regretting it. "If one of my provinces is about to do something stupid, and I am not in a position to stop them, you have permission to. But *only* if it is to save *them."*

He took his eye fully off the road, giving China a glare that let him know his country *did* come first to him. He wasn't giving him permission to stop them from doing something for Korea if it hurt China.

"And don't do it in public," he added.

He felt uncomfortably ashamed, the same way he had when he'd ordered CCCP not to be so handsy in public. The Soviet might have no patience for unnecessary actions, but he seemed to find patting North's shoulders necessary. He could tolerate it in private for the sake of their camaraderie (he could *not* tolerate the hugging *anywhere),* but not in front of his people. The shame came from feeling like he shouldn't tolerate it in private either.

But in this case, he couldn't lose another one of his provinces, both for the ceasefire and for his own… pride. If the price for that was China dragging Kangwon or whoever off kicking and screaming, then that was acceptable.

"And I'm not responsible for any harm they inflict on you while you try," he threw in.

He wasn't going to tell any of them what he'd just given China consent to do. If they were smart, it would never have to come up again anyway. So if South Pyongan or North Hamgyong saw the foreigner restraining one of their cousins or siblings, or the restrainee fought back, it was *not* his fault if China got his mouth bloodied because of it.

“Reasonable terms,” China agreed after a moment, then tipped his head, his voice lowering. “And what about you? Do I have permission to pin you down and stop *you* from running off the next time you try?”

*‘Ah **hate** when Korea runs off.’*

North’s knuckles whitened around the wheel. “…No.”

“Alright,” China agreed, his tone returning to normal as he leaned back. “I’m always up for another sight-seeing trip anyway.”

The Korean grimaced. "When did you start thinking that just because I am tolerating you staying here that I want to be around you?”

“Probably around the time you started letting me sleep in your room,” China said flippantly, stretching his legs out. “It’s been disinfected, by the way. And my materials have been moved back in.”

“And I am going to keep sleeping in Jonsung complex.”

Or ‘sleeping.’ He had a million reports to catch up on, and correspondences to read. Not every one needed a personal response- he’d been mortified to find out several villages had scraped together enough funds to purchase cheap paper and mail him letters essentially cheering him on- but the ones that did needed to be responded to quickly. This one had already been sitting too long.

Far, far too long.

North asked abruptly, “Have you made any progress on your handheld radios? Or did I give you that radio for nothing?”

China perked up. “You’re actually interested in my project?”

North couldn’t deny it before he was babbling on about needing to disassemble everything he’d already worked on to refit the parts he'd salvaged from the reactionary radio, and the challenges over getting them working again, turning the question he’d asked just to keep his mind off things into an hour-long ramble.

He sounded far too happy about it. He'd been thrilled to get the radios working in the first place, but now he sounded just as thrilled to take them apart again. Going to all that work for nothing would have just pissed North off. He would have found some way to fit the parts without ruining everything he'd worked for. If he knew anything about technology.

"I think I've got them up and running again," China said as they drove through Koksan. "I've just been waiting for someone to help me test them."

He eyed North suggestively.

"Find someone else," he clipped. "I'm busy."

"Busy wearing circles into your office floor while we wait for America's pencil-pushers to learn how to write." China caught his sharp look, and his eyes squinted up. "That was only a metaphor. But your reaction tells me that's exactly what you were doing."

North grimaced.

He was up to date on everything urgent, and while he had decided the ceasefire talks wouldn't keep him from the frontline if he was needed, he still wasn't. There were only small holding battles, along with probing actions to make sure America's forces knew no matter how long they took to get the list updated, the KPA and PVA wouldn't flag. And the eternal aerial and naval bombardments, of course. And they didn't have enough bazookas for North to make a dent in those.

But he still needed to do *something.* Today's trip wasn't enough.

"I hope you don't get those radios working," North said bluntly. "I don't want to talk to you any more than I already have to."

"So that means you'll take one if I do get them working?"

North didn't dignify him with a response, letting him ramble as they kept driving.

China's eyes were glowing again, the way they did when he got

excited. North made sure he kept him firmly in his blind spot.

'We can't trust any of them.'

North Pyongan had came to speak to him about that. He was pleased he wasn't just bowing down to everything he said now, but he had still told him to shut up.

It wasn't that he didn't trust China. Or no, that was exactly it. He had told his Premier that he wouldn't trust a foreign country, and he still wouldn't. He couldn't. He had accepted that he was here to… pay the debt he felt like he owed Korea's people. It couldn't be the only reason, but it was one of them. He knew he wouldn't try to kill him in his sleep, and he could depend on him to watch his back in combat.

But it didn't matter. No matter why he was here or why his army was, they wouldn't be if there weren't geopolitical interests involved. He had said this war was for North's country, but that wasn't true. They would never risk their soldiers if they didn't share a border with him, just like CCCP wouldn't have been so helpful if he didn't have to worry about having a puppet Korea on his east.

And North wouldn't have wanted them to. If he was in a position to help another country in Africa or Southeast Asia, who didn't have a direct affect on his country, he... might. But he knew that he couldn't expect that from another country.

He caught his gaze drifting, and fixed his eye firmly on the road again.

He… didn't have a problem with China or CCCP, personally. Aside from the clinginess. And the touchiness. And the Soviet's occasional overbearing attitude (he knew *he* would have stopped Kangwon and Gangwon from going without permission because he saw them as his 'sons,' which meant he thought he had a 'right' to). And how annoying and nosy China was. And how he never took no for an answer, refused to leave, inserted himself everywhere, took almost nothing seriously, constantly lied, had to be *still* lying about his real motivations for being here, and-

Anyway, North didn't *like* either of them, but he could tolerate them as comrades. They were both…

Maybe if they weren't Countryhumans, they still would have come to Korea's aid as guerrillas, not because they shared a border or to combat America's camp, but just for the sake of Socialist fr-camaraderie. Maybe he could accept that they were both that sort of person.

But they *were* all Countryhumans, and so they would never know. Their countries would always come first. That was why CCCP had kept his promises, and why he'd retrieved Kangwon. That was the only reason North could assume China was here. That was the reason why personal relationships between countries could never work.

He didn't mind that. It was better that way. Like he'd said, it was how it *should* be. But it did mean that Korea could never truly trust their comrades. If they became inconvenient or harmful to their interests, the other countries would turn their backs on them. It wasn't something to feel spiteful over, and he didn't *mis*trust them the same way he did America, Japan, Britain, Norway, and their ilk. He was just fully aware that Korea would never come first to anyone but Koreans.

But he couldn't explain that to his provinces. They'd just give him those looks, like they were sad he thought that way when it was just the truth.

At least some of them still believed it wasn't, even after he had tried to get it through to them. He didn't *want* them to distrust their comrades, he just… Didn't want a repeat of the Pak Chae-eun or Norway incidents. He couldn't afford to lose good soldiers.

'Any more good soldiers.'

At least China didn't pretend that he would never turn on him, or that they'd always be aligned. CCCP seemed to think that North was already a part of his family, no matter how much he rejected it, and that they would always be walking the same path.

North knew *he* would be. But he couldn't trust that anyone else would. Comrade Stalin and Comrade Mao were fine, but not all of their cabinets were, and whoever came after them might not be. China's recognition that they might be enemies one day was more trustworthy than pure comradeship.

But he still didn't like him.

It took a few hours to reach where they were going, made even longer by North having to pull off the road to hide the Jeep in the hills while enemy reconnaissance planes and bombers flew overhead.

They had to be careful. They were only a few dozen ri from the frontline, and Kangwon province had been being hit hard for the past few days. It was being hit now. North could feel the nerves he still had left tingling, struggling to feel something with their deadened endings, while his hands burned around the wheel. And the edges of that stupid gash felt tight.

Most of the damage was coming from the naval bombardment, and the Taebaek Mountains acted as a buffer between them and the East Sea, where the battleships were pelting the Kosong area, trying to break their line. But the heavy clouds and fog of the past few days were gone, leaving the sky clear for bombers as well. And since most of the local factories had been moved underground, deep in the craggy foothills and formerly thick forests of the Taebaeks, now the only targets left were anything that looked even slightly like part of their supply line, and the villages.

There weren't many of those left, only the ones wedged between valleys and ridges where the bombs couldn't reach them as well, and the remnants of towns.

North's destination was one of the latter- Malhwi-ri. Later this year, they were going to change the village's name to Kumgang, and promote it to a town as the seat of the new Kumgang County, which would be formed out of Hoeyang County and the parts of Rinje and Yanggu Counties they held.

North had gritted his teeth at the decision, though he knew it was

just to make management easier while they worked out the ceasefire, a proper end to the war, and Reunification. And it made sense to turn one of the most scenic mountains in Korea into its own county, especially with how they'd been planning to increase tourism to it before the war. That was the only reason they were doing it.

The village still named Malhwi-ri was on the Kumgang River, close enough to the front that China asked if he was running off again. It sat between the peaks of the Taebaek Mountains, surrounded by floodplains and wide sandbars. Before the war, it had been picturesque, nestled under the shadow of Mount Kumgang, and filled with the scent of snow and pine, and the rich, silty smell of the river.

It was mostly gone now, reduced to houses that hugged the hills, far away from the craters that had taken out the mills and bridges. North didn't bother going into the remains, heading straight for the foothills that rose across the river. The water was swollen by spring runoff, but he found a fisherman to take them over on his boat, giving him the last of last month's salary to him. Because he had been unconscious, he'd had a surplus.

After a half hour's hike into the hilly woods, North left China at a stream, threatening him with death if he wasn't right where he left him when he got back. And that he'd make him walk next to the Jeep all the way back to Pyongyang, which might have been more effective.

The Taebaeks were a frequent base during the Occupation, especially Mount Kumgang, where Korea's Army had stayed in those early days. North was able to find the dug-out he was looking for solely using the directions and sketch provided by the Party member that had scribed the letter for its sender. It was sheltered under a hill crowned by a copse of beech trees. If North had to guess, it was an old fox den that had been dug out, the walls supported with rough lengths of wood and chunks of stone before being covered with dirt again. Some of the materials had definitely been repurposed from destroyed houses in the village.

Good. Some places had more difficulty than others following the

housing material provisions. At least a veteran had a sturdy place to live.

The weeds and saplings had all been cleared out from under the beeches, and he could see patches of fresh dirt where stones had been painstakingly pulled from the earth, soil smoothed over where they'd been, leaving nothing to trip on.

A faded green and blue bojagi hung over the mouth of the hole. It would be dark inside. Though he supposed that wouldn't matter for the occupant, if she was alone.

He padded closer, standing outside, reluctant to call out. He should have just sent a reply back, and told her the war would be over soon.

He quietly inhaled, and a voice suddenly called out, "Is someone there?"

It was tinged with fear, so he had to answer right away.

"It's Comrade Korea."

There was a shocked silence, then the sound of hands patting the dirt before the bojagi was swished aside, revealing a young woman.

Her dark brown hair had grown out of its bob, pulled back in a simple bun. It wasn't the only change. Pockmarks covered her angular face, little pits in her otherwise smooth skin. And her eyes…

"Comrade Choe Jong-mi," he greeted her, not letting the clenched fists behind his back colour his tone.

The stretcher woman he'd once dragged out of a cloud of white phosphorous looked vaguely up at him, her eyes wide. "I didn't expect you to come in person."

Her voice was no longer fresh and vibrant, the way he'd heard it for the first time on Liberation Day two years ago. But it did sound the way he'd heard it last. Not broken anymore, but ragged, even raspier than his. It had been because of the white phosphorus after

all.

But he knew the reason it was smaller than he remembered came from more than that.

"I would have came sooner," he said. "But I was preoccupied with the war effort."

He couldn't tell her he had been sick. That wouldn't help her with what she was looking for.

Ssi-bal, he never should have let Kangwon convince him to rest. Never again, even if he got down on his knees and begged.

"Of course," Choe Jong-mi said quickly. "That's why I didn't expect you to come. Do you want to come in?"

"If you're alright with that." North couldn't imagine how she would be.

"Are you kidding? Jong-ok's stomach would explode if she knew I got to host you."

It was a joke. But North could hear the way the damaged edges of her voice started to bleed again.

She shuffled back, and he pushed past the bojagi, joining her inside. He hesitated, then cursed himself, letting it fall into place. It was just a curtain.

The dug-out was a small, round room. A thin futon and a blanket were pushed up against the far wall, and an assortment of clayware lay on another bojagi next to it, along with a shovel and a few folded clothes. It was cramped, and would be claustrophobic if the other occupants were here, but neat. And though dug-outs were usually too small to stand in, North found that he could actually could. And it *wasn't* because he was short.

Her parents must have worked hard to make sure she had room to stand up, just like they'd worked to clear away hazards from outside, giving her a small bit of freedom.

But since Choe Jong-mi was sitting, he sat, too, cross-legged on the dried reeds covering the floor. She asked if he wanted tea, and reached behind her, patting around as she looked for something before he turned it down.

"You're settling in well?" he asked.

She dipped her head. "As well as we can."

Osaek-ri had been above the 38th Parallel, but below where the frontline was now. After her family had fled in the face of the Americans and Rhee's army, afraid of facing retribution with both of their daughters in the KPA and one of them in the Party, they'd stayed in the Second Corps operation zone, before relocating here after the KPA's return.

Choe Jong-mi was incredibly lucky that she'd managed to reunite with her parents. The only reason she had was because the soldiers that had been escorting her and the other wounded north hadn't made it to the Parallel in time, and been forced into the Kangwon mountains, where she'd encountered a guerrilla after the area had been Liberated that had met her father and mother. Many soldiers had came home to find their families gone, and even now hadn't found them again. Whether it was because they'd fled south, fled farther north, been taken by Rhee's army, were hiding in the hills, or were some of the unidentified bodies found in mass graves… Either way, this daughter had been lucky.

She was also lucky to be alive.

"Are your parents healthy?" he asked.

She nodded. "They're out getting firewood and water."

North's jaw tightened. "Are they nearby?"

"Within screaming distance," she told him. "I try to tell them I'll be fine if they go farther, but they won't listen because, well. I'm sure you can see I really wasn't just getting someone to write for me because I'm lazy or illiterate still. Not that I can."

Her lips lifted bitterly, then fell. Above them, her eyes stared

sightlessly. The lids around them were wrinkled and misshapen, red lines fencing in scarred yellowed patches on her tanned skin. Her pupils and irises had turned a cloudy white, thick scar tissue running across the bloodshot scleras. In her right eye, the pupil had burst and ran like an egg yolk into the ring of brown around it.

It wasn't a surprise. The Party member that wrote her letter had told him that was why he was scribing. Her vision had started to go on the march north.

North's jaw feathered, his knuckles tightening on his thighs. He opened his mouth, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Can you see anything at all?" he asked instead.

"Cloudy shapes out of this one." She pointed at her left eye, then her right. "But only shadows out of this one."

The idea that she was alone in this small space all day, unable to see if anyone came to attack her, made North clench his jaw. And the fact that she was choosing to be alone in here with him, with him between her and the exit when she couldn't see him at all, while comforting to know that was how much she trusted her country, also made his chest grow tight.

He tried to shove away the idea of being trapped underground in a world full of only shadows and clouds. He was imagining it. She was living it.

"You shouldn't be alone," he decided. "I'll arrange to have a Women's Union comrade watch over you."

"No, no," she hurriedly said. "I don't need that. I didn't write because I wanted to cause problems for people, I just…"

She trailed off, looking down at her clasped hands, even though she couldn't see them. North kept his own eye from flicking down.

Aside from her talk of what had happened to her and her family, and where they were, the first half of her letter had been simple.

'I'm sorry for writing. I know Comrade Korea must be very busy. But

my parents have been telling me to write you and ask when the war will be over. They want to bury Jong-ok properly. I know you can't just end it tomorrow, and you don't need to write back at all. But if you do, could you please just reassure them it will be over soon? I'm sorry for the trouble, but please don't blame them. They just want…'

"You just want to bring your sister home," North finished, and she nodded meekly.

"I know it can't happen right away," she said quietly. "But… I hate seeing them like this. One daughter dead and the other…" She gestured to her face, her lips pressing together in a wavering line as she tried to smile. "I'm supposed to take care of them, but now they're stuck taking care of me again. And I-" Her mouth crumpled in as she squeezed her cloudy eyes shut.

"I miss my sister," she whispered.

North looked over at the bojagi while she pulled herself together.

"I'm alright," she said after a moment, her gravelly voice choked. "I'm okay. I know it's been a year and a half, but… We were close."

"The grief will never leave," North said flatly, before cursing himself. She didn't need to hear that.

"No," she quietly agreed. "It won't."

Her Countryhuman inhaled silently, then said, "You can tell your parents the war will be over soon. I can't tell you the contents, but I can say that the secret sessions of our negotiations are going well. Soon we will have an armistice, an official end to the war, and eventually Reunification. And then I promise you, I will make sure Choe Jong-ok's body is returned as soon as possible."

He could still remember where she was buried, at the foot of that pine tree on the edge of the field by the Raktong.

"Thank you," Choe Jong-mi murmured. "Thank you so much."

North knew it wasn't enough. He could hear her thinking it, accusing him past the clouds in her eyes. He had promised they

would return soon a year and a half ago, and here they were, her living in a hole in the ground with her parents, far from their real home. And her sister was still buried in the earth over a thousand ri away.

He opened his mouth, shut it, stood. “I can go find your parents to tell them in person.”

“It’s alright,” Choe Jong-mi said, carefully getting to her feet, her tentative motions as she did even that simple thing making his muscles tense. “I don’t want to be any more trouble.”

The bold woman that had teased her sister at the Raktong wouldn’t have apologized like that.

“Do they still burn?”

She reached up, touching her fingers to one of the scars. “Sometimes. Bad enough I can’t even think. It’s like it’s… inside my eye.”

As he watched, her lids started to spasm, and she gave an embarrassed laugh, cupping her hand over her eye to hide it. “They do that, too.”

It should have been him. Not the blindness, but if someone’s white phosphorous burns were going to keep acting up, it should have been *his.* It had been him that deserved to carry that pain, not her.

North grit his teeth, then finally made himself speak.

“I’m sorry.”

She blinked in his direction. “For what?”

The guilt that had been clinging to him whenever he thought about her pressed down on his shoulders.

“I shouldn’t have let go of you.” He made an effort to keep his tone even. “It was because of my negligence that you received your injuries.”

If he'd just tolerated the white phosphorous ember on his back for a little longer, maybe Kangwon or one of the other stretcher women could have stopped her from running into the explosion after her sister.

She gaped at him in dismay, then shook her head vigorously. "No! I charged off on my own. It was my fault. I shouldn't have…"

But of course she'd had to. Her sister had been in there. North had known she would try. But he had let the pain win. And one of his people had suffered for it.

"And you got burned, too, because of me," she said, her own voice echoing his guilt. "You were trying to protect me."

He should have succeeded. She should still be in the army, still be in the Democratic Youth League, carrying the wounded, helping with spring sowing. Instead she was here, vulnerable and feeling useless.

"And I-" He couldn't say 'failed.' If he did, her confidence in what he'd said earlier would wane even further. "-would do it again. I am your country. Any injury I suffer protecting our people is one I would suffer a hundred times over."

But she shouldn't have suffered at all. The war had supposed to be *over* by then. She was supposed to be transporting her injured comrades to a hospital, and her sister had been supposed to be transferred to a Security Company, doing information work in the Liberated south.

"So cool," Choe Jong-mi whispered, then shook her head. "Can we say we're even then? If our Countryhuman is blaming himself over me being reckless, Jong-ok will- will come back to haunt me."

"Alright," North said after a long moment, though it wasn't.

But he didn't want her feeling remorse over something he was meant to do. She would always be on his shoulders. But she already had enough to carry forward.

"I left her," she said quietly, more to herself than him. "She died

because of me, and I left her behind. What sort of sister does that make me?"

"You had to," North told her, chest clenching. "You needed to return home to fight for our country, like she would have wanted."

"And now I can't."

"There are other ways to fight." He would make sure she found one.

Choe Jong-mi let out a shaky exhale, then nodded. “I’m sorry for writing such a long letter, by the way. I wanted to keep it brief, but…” Her lips dimpled as they failed to smile. “I could hear Jong-ok telling me not to waste paper.”

“You can always write to me or our Premier,” North assured her.

He would make sure he answered sooner next time.

He went to leave, when Choe Jong-mi said, “Wait.”

He turned back to her. Her hands were clasped tightly together at her waist, and her white eyes were on the rush-covered floor. She looked almost… shy.

“I…” She sucked in a breath. “I know this is really forward, and feel free to say ‘no,’ but… Can I touch you?”

North stared at her silently, taken aback.

“Not in a- in a weird way,” she hastily said. “I just…” She bit her lip, then quietly admitted, “I’m starting to forget what things look like. It’s not bad yet, but awhile ago I realized I couldn’t remember the exact way Seorak Mountain looks in the distance. I can see the mountain, but I can’t remember how all the peaks look exactly. And I- I realized even when I get to go home, I’m never going to be able to see them again.” She swallowed. “Or… anything. I’m not going to be able to watch my parents grow old, or see Mount Kumgang like Jong-ok and me talked about, or the tree she used to like to read in or-“

Her voice broke. "I know it's dumb, but… But it was like when I realized I'd never see her face again all over."

Whenever North had thought about the possibility of going blind, when Japan would fracture his socket, an enemy soldier would gouge at his face, when he'd followed Choe Jong-mi into that white phosphorous, or when his brother had taken his eye, his concerns had always been physical. He would be vulnerable, unable to fight, unable to protect his provinces or his people. Even when it came to on-the-spot guidance or reports, he would have to depend on someone to describe things to him, read for him, and trust that what they were saying was true. He'd be helpless, *useless,* and no matter how hard he tried to push through it, he would never be what he once was.

He had never even thought about the other things he would lose.

He tried to imagine life without ever being able to watch the stars swimming in Chon Lake, or the emerald peaks of Mount Kumgang. To never lay his eye on the sweeping golden plains of Hwanghae province, or the winter sun gleaming off snow, or the silver rivers winding across their land. To never see the slopes covered in orchards or their cities whole again. Never seeing his people's smiles when they waved to him as he drove by, or brought in the harvest, or the looks on their faces as they crowded around him to celebrate Liberation or Foundation Day or the day they finally won this war. To never see Hae's grin or South Chungcheong's snooty look or North Hamgyong's glower or the artwork SH made for him. To never be able to see South again. To never be able to see *Korea* again.

"I'm sorry," Choe Jong-mi backtracked when he'd taken too long to respond. "I know that's too bold-"

"Okay."

Her marred lids fluttered rapidly. "You mean-?"

"You can touch me." North pried his boots off the floor, stepping forward until he was close enough to count the eyelashes she had left.

“Are you sure?” she asked anxiously. “I don’t want you to let me just because you feel like you have to.”

He did have to. He had been responsible for her condition. The least he could do was help her keep her memory of their country.

“I don’t mean-“

She cut herself off as North took her hand, placing her palm against his cheek, grateful that the burns still hadn’t reached it. He tried to control the way his muscles twitched at her touch. Even for all the touching he did put up with, he wasn't used to it happening to his face.

Choe Jong-mi’s eyes widened, but when he lifted his own hand, she didn’t remove hers. Tentatively, she brought her other one up so she was cupping his face. North tried not to squirm. He knew she couldn’t see him, but his eye kept darting away from hers.

Unlike so many of the hands around him, his own included, hers were soft. Not because she had the luxury of avoiding labour, but because there wasn’t much she could do when they were living rough like this now that she was blind.

North would try and find someone suitable to watch out for her, and help her learn skills she could use without eyes. She didn’t need coddling- she needed to learn how to move forward.

Choe Jong-mi’s hands were shaking as she held his face, and despite their softness, for a moment, North could feel the rough palms of an old woman with rheumy eyes and wispy white hair, her hands gnarled and worn, but gentle, the first time he’d ever felt such a thing from someone that wasn’t his brother. *‘Pak Ok-yeon.’* At the memory, a bit of his own quivering eased.

The woman hesitantly stroked a thumb over his cheekbone, tracing the angular line. North tried not to grit his jaw, knowing she would feel it, just like she could feel how sharp his bones were under his skin, and the swooping hollow of his cheeks as her digits drifted over them. With her skin on his, there wouldn’t be any pretending it was just how his bone structure was.

He wanted to pull away, but then she would know why. So he stay rooted to the floor of the dug-out, letting her explore him, getting bolder as she went.

Her little fingers swept down over his jawline, resting just under it, feeling his rapid pulse. North made an effort not to tense. She was one of his people and he trusted her. If she wanted to feel his throat, he would let her, even with the bandages that swathed it.

But after a moment, her touch left, and she used her forceps fingers to outline his jaw, meeting at his chin before she cupped his face again, lower this time, with just the tips of her fingers clinging to him. Slowly, she slid her thumb up until it touched the curve of his bottom lip, where she carefully traced the outline of them, his skin tingling in her wake.

This was too much touching, both for him personally and for a woman touching a man she wasn't married to. But the slight red tinge had left Choe Jong-mi's cheeks, and her expression didn't make him uncomfortable the way the ones of the women SH and Kangwon would help guide him away from did, or the eyes of an audience sometimes still could.

Her sightless, scarred eyes were filled with awe, but it wasn't the awe of a crowd staring up at a being they saw as beyond their reach, but the awe of his people as he pulled them up next to him, letting them embrace him, showing them that they weren't below *anyone,* let alone him. It was the awe of realizing her country really was in her hands, and it made her tremble as much as him. They weren't a man and woman now, but a Korean and her country.

When she was done gently prodding at the corners of his mouth with her thumbs, she moved them slightly up.

"Is this where the white strip on our flag is?" Her voice was hushed, like she was whispering in a temple.

The comparison didn't bother Korea when he was whispering with her. He couldn't even trust himself to speak, just responding, "Mm," to her as she sought out the bands on their flag- the crimson blood shed by the revolutionary patriots and martyrs that had

always defended their land, the snowy purity of their people and culture, and the navy of their spirit as they fought for peace, blue like the seas that cradled Korea. Choe Jong-ok's favourite colour.

She read his face like a map of their homeland, trailing her fingers over its contours, familiarizing herself with its valleys and ridges, following invisible rivers and mountain peaks that she would never see again.

When she was done, Choe Jong-mi ran her thumb under the skin under his eye, possibly the only delicate skin on his entire body, unable to see the shadow under it. Then she passed it over his upper lid, running along his short, sparse eyelashes, feeling the soft orb underneath. She did it gently, soothing the tension in his chest. Korea's eye had half-lidded to allow her to do it, and it didn't open all the way after as she cradled his face again.

Her gaze shifted towards the left half, around where his eyepatch was. The thumb on her left hand rose, touching the bottom of the fabric, following the outline over his brow and back down over his socket. Korea's breath caught in his throat, and he went still, trying not to scare her off. He was her country. She had a right to investigate as she pleased.

"Are you really missing an eye?" she murmured.

"…Yes," Korea managed to answer, hoping she wouldn't ask how.

She didn't. And she might have felt him tense despite his best efforts, because she only stroked the edge of the star eyepatch again, then returned to holding his face between her warm palms. They were both trembling, eyes wide now, and Korea could feel through her fingertips that her pulse was racing just as fast as his.

Choe Jong-mi gazed into his face, and he met her eyes, swallowing. Even though she couldn't see him, she smiled, her lips curving up in a wavering line.

"Jong-ok would be so jealous," she whispered, and tears started to pour down her scarred cheeks.

Her hands slid away, and North had to stop himself from pulling them back.

"Thank you," she murmured, wiping at her face. "Now even if I forget… Thank you."

North watched her step back, her questing hands curling in around herself, cradling her own ribs now.

Ghosts weren't real, but Choe Jong-ok *was* haunting her. Neither her nor her parents could move on with her hovering over them. They hadn't been able to have a funeral or three-day mourning period, or a 49th Day ceremony to guide her spirit towards a new life. Even though it was illegal to waste food on offerings right now, they didn't even have a gravesite to visit. They couldn't feel like they had said goodbye.

There were no such things as ghosts or reincarnation. There was only one life, and Choe Jong-ok was gone from theirs. Bringing her body back wouldn't bring *her* back. And corpses didn't care where they were buried.

But their living families did. Even if the rituals were just superstitions, they had an effect on the people that conducted them. They let them move on.

North Pyongan had once asked- after realizing that North was never going to turn towards Christianity- why he didn't at least follow their own native traditions. He knew why he didn't like customs like leaving food offerings for ancestors while the people around them starved, but he'd wondered why he didn't follow the other observances.

'I know you said you have our people, but… Much of your grief seems to come from them, too. Even if you don't want to believe in God, the rituals might give you some solace.'

But North didn't need solace, not the way his province meant it. He had his people for that, too. He believed in them, that they would never stop fighting, and that one day they would all win freedom with their own hands. His grief and rage over what was

being done to them only made him fight harder. And as their Countryhuman, he *couldn't* move on. He didn't deserve to have the weight on his shoulders lessened when so many of the people he was carrying forward where there because of him, because he hadn't came soon enough, because he had given up.

He didn't approve of the parts of any religion or spiritual practice that told his people to tolerate suffering in this life to be rewarded in the next, or to ignore their oppressors because they would be punished by some divine force in an afterlife that was never coming. But he did recognize that not all of his people could bear the full weight of their losses. Some of them needed to lighten them if they hoped to keep fighting, to keep pressing forward. And if rituals were what was needed to do that right now, then he would do his best to help them conduct them.

Rituals didn't matter to the dead. They did to the living.

"Comrade Choe Jong-mi."

The woman raised her head, her bloodshot eyes even redder. He gazed steadily into them, making sure she felt the weight of his vow.

"I will bring your sister home. I promise."

She nodded wordlessly, and he turned to go, escaping out into the later afternoon sun. He didn't bother looking for her parents, not when he felt so light and shaky.

He knew he had been imagining her accusations, just like with his soldiers and everyone else last year. She didn't blame him for how long her sister had been left behind, not when she looked at him like that, something beyond the clouds in her eyes shining brighter than even the sun. She believed he would keep his word, that she could bury her sister where she was meant to be buried. She had faith in her country, and even if he took another year, she would probably still have faith.

But if he could accept making her wait that long, then he wouldn't deserve it.

It would only be a few more months, and then he would have access to the south. He could move freely through his country the way they all always should have been able to. In just a few months the war would be over, like he'd said. They would have won. Just a few more months, that was all.

But he had already left them waiting long enough. Corpses didn't care how long it took, they didn't care if they ever saw their hometowns again. Choe Jong-ok was long gone.

But her family wasn't. And they needed her to come home.

Happy Spring Festival/Seollal/assorted other Lunar New Years! ^^ Asking for good fortune is too audacious for me, so may we all survive the year again.

Important to know that North would also let a man do this to him. So long as he's Korean.

If you're wondering why Choe Jong-mi wasn't as messed up physically by the Raktong, it's because white phosphorous is liquid soluble, and the smoke is included. So it got into her eyes, she couldn't be treated properly because they were out of supplies and launched immediately into the withdraw (even if she was treated, she likely still would have gone blind) and the moisture in her eyes combined with the phosphoric acids to gradually corrode more and more of them.

When North says he was irked at Kim Il-sung, he's being an unreliable narrator. What he was really doing is sitting at his desk and pouting at him like this:
(x ⌒ -̃) = 3 But he would never use the word 'pouting' for himself. Kim Il-sung also would never. Out loud.

By the way, this will never be brought up, but after the war the Foreign Minister, Pak Hon-yong, would eventually get accused of being an American spy, and removed. American media obviously says this was fabricated because while they can never be entirely sure if the DPRK has things like free healthcare (it's in their constitution and the UN has observed them before) or if a high-profile politician has been brutally

executed (he showed up a week later) in the modern day, they are 100% certain the evidence from decades ago was fabricated. I'm not saying it was or wasn't. But in the context of the story world, North is convinced he is because of how easily he agreed that Kangwon should go to the Oslo meeting, and because it's never entirely clear how America knew they'd be there in order to have the Norwegian State Police arrest them immediately. Spy at Moscva airport? One of the Swedes at the Swedish one? Or maybe a spy in Korea.

Parallel Steps

A man and woman holding hand tillers in front of a flooded field, women packing jumeokbap with smiles on their faces, peasants and soldiers hard at work, a man leaning on a hoe with a group of farmers, dressed in white just like them, his Party membership card presented proudly to the sun.

'Fight to finish rice sowing in time! All efforts for the front! Let not an inch of land go idle!' These were the types of slogans on the lithograph posters SH's paintings had been turned into that she posted around Pyongyang.

She loved lithographs. During the Occupation, they'd had to make every poster by hand, and while she hadn't discovered her talent at art yet, she knew how hard it was for the women and men that made them. Even if they could get a contact at a printing press to make copies, they were already risking themselves by siphoning paper and black ink, so they couldn't afford to steal any colours. Posters were a better medium than pamphlets for communicating a message when so many of their people had been illiterate, but black-and-white ones just weren't as impressive.

SH liked that now not only were the words just as understandable to their people as the images, but that the images could speak the way they were *meant* to, in splashes of colour that interrupted the dreary rubble their lives had become. After a washerwoman had admired one, she had even taken to painting tiny pieces with slogans on scraps of lithograph paper that would go to waste otherwise, distributing them to her and the other civilians in the dug-outs. It killed two birds with one stone by livening up their holes in the ground, and making sure they'd see the motivationals every day.

But the ones today just weren't speaking to her.

As SH carefully pinned a poster that read *'The struggle for food is a struggle for the country and for victory at the front!'* to a newsboard

where people tended to congregate, she wished it read *'DEATH TO THE YANKEES'* instead. But her recent batch of designs had been rejected. 'Too disturbing,' the information worker had said, just because she'd paid too much attention to the coils of intestines spilling from the Yankee's soft belly as he was gutted.

Her slogans weren't exactly subtle, but she didn't *want* to be subtle. She wanted them to shout at anyone that read them *'THESE MEN DESERVE TO DIE! **AMERICA** DESERVES TO DIE! HE'S A LIAR AND A MONSTER AND WE CAN'T TRUST A CEASEFIRE!'*

But she couldn't say that. At least not the last part. She… wanted a ceasefire, she did. She just didn't trust that *America* did. But their people were already nervous since they weren't allowed to know what was happening in the secret sessions. They needed hope right now.

So even though she wanted to paint too-pale and too-dark men with their skin bursting and tearing the way hers was today under her bandages, she would instead paint emerald fields and happy farmers. She would save the rest for the wall.

SH let out a breath, feeling her energy go with it.

She'd felt off since walking Zhao Jingjing to the river two days ago. It wasn't just the bombardment her province was still taking. She felt nauseous and tired. Worried she might have caught something from the lab assistant, she'd gone to Kangwon again, but he assured her her blood was still clean, and that a day was too fast for most diseases she could have caught to start showing symptoms.

The sympathetic fever must just be taking its toll, and the burns were only making it worse. That was all.

She inhaled until she felt some oxygen return to her lungs, then set out, trying to keep some pep in her step in case anyone saw her. Her other posters had all been passed out to the underground factories to hang up, or posted in public areas. Now she only had two left. Her heart sank as she realized which ones they had to be. She checked again anyway, just to be sure.

A man heaving back to pound the head of a railroad tie into the ground, a cheerful but determined look on his face on one, and on the other, two men in the foreground with those same hammers over their shoulders, rags tied around their glistening foreheads, smiling broadly as they watched a train roll down the tracks behind them.

'Rebuild what the enemy has destroyed!' and *'Rail lines are the veins of our country!'* they read respectively.

SH groaned, letting them fall to her sides. *'Great.'*

Was North Hamgyong working on Pyongyang lines today, or had he gone to his province? He never announced when he did, and it wasn't like she asked. The targeting on their rails had been intense the last few days. They'd been cut in over fifty places in a day alone, including the crucial stretch between Pyongyang and Kunu-ri, plus another train had got destroyed, so he might-

Oh. Right. Korea wanted him to stay near the city, too, for some reason. And since most farmers would be waiting for night to work on sowing, and he'd never choose farming over hitting things with hammers anyway, he'd definitely be working on the tracks.

'Talk to him maybe?' Kangwon said, like it was that easy. It *wasn't,* and not because of her 'personal problems.' He was just so caught up on thinking there was something wrong with her that he had to bring her past into everything.

She *had* tried talking to him, and he'd rejected her every time. When she asked him how things were in his province, he grunted, when she tried to talk about their plans when they'd used to take the same vehicle to their provinces, he grunted, when she tried to stand watch with him those first few times during the Occupation, he'd say she could do it if she wanted to so badly, then go to sleep. He'd walked away from their first New Year's dinner as a family, for goodness' sake! Every time she tried to bring him food, see if he was okay, ask if his back was acting up, or if he was feeling alright, she was just met with insults or a brick wall. The last time she'd ever asked how his day was was in 1947, and she hadn't even gotten a 'Shit.' He'd just shot her a glare like she'd insulted their

shared ancestors three lines back.

He *wanted* her to keep trying to reach out so he could keep shoving her away, because he liked hurting her. And she was expected to keep trying with a smile on her face just because she was a woman, and because they were siblings.

Well, if he wanted to keep making fun of her whenever she did 'women's tasks,' then she wasn't going to. And it wasn't like he cared about siblings anyways. Just look how he felt about Korea's. SH had been the one captured by him, SH had been the one taken hostage by America while he let it happen, and *SH* had been the one to have her mind invaded and body stolen by him, yet *she* didn't want him dead, she didn't want to hurt Korea by taking his brother away. But North Hamgyong *did.* He acted like it was a personal slight against him, like he was the one who'd gone through it, like *he* was the one who suffered, just like back-

SH hurriedly painted a burning cage on a hill, flames leaping through the bars, before the thing behind the wall could start to scratch.

A thought leaked through like smoke, one she'd been trying to keep back there.

'Why was it Kangwon's brother that was taken?'

She ducked her head, painting the words away.

She didn't mean it. She loved North Hamgyong, really. But he couldn't be Commanded, he could take torture better, and Gangwon had been a nurse. Almost anyone could work on a railway, but they *needed* medics right now. And Kangwon felt guilty over his brother being taken. SH wouldn't, since it wouldn't be her fault. Korea couldn't berate her for it, and North Hamgyong couldn't be a jerk to Kangwon *or* her.

She would feel bad if he got taken, of course. She'd feel awful, unlike him.

'I know North Hamgyong missed you.'

Her fists balled into knots.

'He didn't, actually,' she had answered, that ugly circular scar twinging. But that was a lie.

She knew her feelings about him shooting her were tied up in a maedeup knot. She had wanted him to. She really had. She had wanted him to stop the pain the Commands were making her inflict on the comrades trying to restrain her, to strangle the words coming from her mouth that she never would have willingly spoken in a million years.

And he had promised he would. So many years ago, he had promised. She hadn't wanted him to fulfill it the way they'd meant back then, but she *had* wanted him to do it.

She just wished *he* hadn't.

'I wish I hadn't-'

The paint brush swished and cut like a sword as she set off with her shoulders back. She had work to do.

Part of her wanted to just head back to the theatre to paint away some of her languor and try to feel right again, but she knew she couldn't. Korea had entrusted art and information work to her, and hanging posters was part of both. She wasn't going to let North Hamgyong get in the way of that.

'I'm not going to let the people who took those things away from me take that, too.'

Her stomach swirling, SH set off for the Pothong River.

At least it was overcast today. That tended to keep the enemy bombers away, from the capital at least. Either the weather was better on the coasts, or the hideous Yankee ships were being extra active to make up for it, blasting away knowing they would hit their targets, with no risk of crashing or being shot down. They'd been hitting the east coast hard, especially the frontline in Kangwon's province and the rail lines farther north. And her. She could feel her heartbeat throbbing in the new patches of raw skin,

making the dark thing stir.

It had been quiet since two days ago, stuck silently pacing behind the wall, turning in circles as she tried to use the operational pause to paint distance between them.

But she knew no matter how many layers she put, it wouldn't be enough. Not when one blow was enough to crack the concrete and sends paint chips flying, ruining all her hard work.

She *really* didn't want to see North Hamgyong today.

She got lucky at the Pothong River bridge. It was in good condition, several workers having a late lunch around an open-air kitchen while a political worker walked the tracks with a few others, animatedly discussing the Party's platform while he instilled revolutionary ideology in them. She spoke with them for awhile, reminded everyone to work hard, and pinned her poster up on a board along the tracks.

And most importantly, she didn't see a single hint of green skin or gloomy glower around.

The men tried to convince her to eat with them, offering up spring namul they'd harvested from the plot of land the railway employees had been given, but she politely turned them down.

She didn't exactly have a problem with how men were put in good spirits by having a pretty face around, or how it made them work harder. She knew it wasn't malicious, and it honestly probably wasn't even conscious half of the time. And she was a province. It was part of her job to motivate her people, to give them hope and urge them to work harder.

But she didn't feel very… provincial today. Her skin felt tight, and so did her insides. She just wanted to hang her last poster, then go back to the theatre, to work on her sewing and paint.

Unfortunately, she didn't get lucky at the Taedong crossing.

As soon as she saw the pine-green form standing in the river, broad back flexing as he hammered something in the water into

place, the tightness in her chest and stomach crept into her muscles, the way it always did now when she saw his face first thing in the morning, and when they met at the GAZ at night.

She took a deep breath. She could do this. She wouldn't ignore him in front of others, because that was immature, and she wasn't him. But she would keep any conversation formal and short.

"Put your backs into it!" North Hamgyong bellowed, his voice grating on her 'ears' as it echoed over the river. "We get this stretch checked over by nightfall. We won't have rotten wood getting our locomotives before the Yanks do!"

The men answered with an *"Ura!"*

He could at least *try* to sound encouraging, instead of like the next train was going to make it ten metres off the submerged track before it was hit by an enemy air strike.

One of the men working with him spotted her first. He stood up, wiping sweat from his brow. His expression was tired, but when his eyes landed on her, he lit up.

"Comrade SH!" he called, and the other men in the river quickly stood, waving as they spotted her.

"Hello, comrades!" she called pleasantly, not making eye contact with her brother.

Still, she could see how his face went from grim to grimmer as he turned.

She could see that look in his white eyes, the same one he always had when he looked at her now, saying what he had wanted to before, what he still wanted to now.

'I wish I hadn't-'

The dark thing tapped its talons, and she painted bubbling water over it, like something was being held under it. She wasn't going to give North Hamgyong the satisfaction of making it use its voice again. She could do this without hearing it growl.

"I just came by to hang a poster," she called, holding it up. It was the one of the man hammering the tie. "Would one of you comrades like to show me a good place to put it?"

She turned her gaze to one of the closest men, smiling. "How about you?"

His eyes widened, and he excitedly started out of the water, before someone grabbed his shoulder, yanking him back.

"I'll do it," North Hamgyong growled irritably. Which was pretty much the only way he knew how to sound. "Stop gawking and get back to work!" he shouted.

SH kept her smile fixed on her face as he slogged through the water, then up the bank. He snatched his shirt up from where it was tossed with the others.

"I can find a place on my own," she said in the same tone she would have used for a People's Committee secretary she'd never met before.

He pulled his sleeveless undershirt on over his head, covering up the bloody bandages and patches of uncovered burns. "So you *were* just being petty," he grunted.

"I was looking for the chance to see how one of our comrades is feeling, since I know *you* won't have," she answered in the same polite tone. "Not everything is about you."

Even though he always acted like it was.

"Hang it at the rail station," the male grunted, crossing his arms. "If you put it out here, it'll just get wrecked when it rains."

"This one is for the workers. It will do better here."

"And it will get *ruined* here," he growled, like she was being dense, when really she had been doing this for years now.

"Which is why I need a good spot for it," she said 'patiently.' "To make sure it's as protected as possible. It is also laminated."

“Why the fuck are you talking like that?”

“If you can’t help, then I’ll ask someone else.” She turned back to the river, opening her mouth, and he snatched the poster from her.

“Even children know how to ask for things,” SH said, fighting to keep her tone neutral.

North Hamgyong ignored her, looking down at the poster with a curled lip. “You think we look like this when we work?” he demanded, thrusting the smiling man at her.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t posted a dozen of these around the rail lines already or anything.

Painting, painting. *‘He’s just trying to pick a fight.’*

“It’s how you *should* feel,” SH pointed out. “Railway workers are some of the most important. ‘Railways are like the circulation of blood in the body.’”

She should have brought the other poster. But he’d just find something to nitpick there, too. ‘You think we smile like this when we fix a track so a train can go through? We know it’s going to get bombed before it reaches the front, we *know* we can’t-‘

Deep breath. She didn’t need to invent things to get mad at when he was already trying hard enough.

“And our comrades smiled when *I* showed up.” She looked over his shoulder, waving, and the men still watching her as they worked waved back, grinning.

Maybe she was being a little petty. But he was always going on about her treating Korea one way and him another. So why was he free to be as unpleasant to her as he wanted, but she couldn't return it with even a little pettiness?

“Maybe if you smiled a little more while you worked, they would, too,” she said, watching his eyes darken.

“Fuck you,” he growled.

“Charming.” She plucked her poster out of his ragged hands. “I’ll go find someplace to put this now.”

He grabbed for it again, but she stepped out of reach, walking away.

He followed, barging past her. “Put it up at the dug-outs. It’s what we have a damn board for.”

And if it rained, someone could bring it in.

SH kept pace with him, but didn’t speak.

“I don’t see what the point is,” he grumbled. “If the damp doesn’t get it, the bombs will.”

“And then I’ll make another,” SH answered.

“And it will get fucked, too.”

“And then the war will be over, and our rail lines won’t be being destroyed every day.”

He curled his lip. “You still think that’s ever going to fucking happen?”

SH’s tongue itched to answer, but she held it. She was too burning, uncomfortable, and tired for this. She’d been tired of it for awhile now.

“You heard what Korea said this morning,” he said, trying again. “The Yank asked for an extension. You know why?”

SH did. But she kept quiet, reaching the post hammered into the ground outside the mounds of the dug-outs. They were empty right now, which meant North Hamgyong could keep trying to get her to bite back as she prepared to nail the poster in place.

“Because he’s doing the same exact thing he’ll have been doing for a year soon,” he continued. “Fucking stalling while he keeps bombing the shit out of us. He's pounding us both right now. I *know* you fucking feel that.”

She almost couldn't. The patches of skin that had still been surface burns had spread deeper now, eating into her nerves. Only the shallow ones on her face and hands still hurt.

But they did *hurt*.

"He's going to *keep* doing that," North Hamgyong growled. "He's going to keep doing it until there's nothing fucking left of us."

Using a rock with good grip and some thin nails from her pocket, SH set to work hammering them into the slightly singed board, using the holes where others nails had been. She made sure to position the poster directly under the small triangular roof, so it would be safe. It faced a few of the dug-outs and the city ruins, which meant any fog or wind off the river wouldn't degrade the lamination as quickly. She painted a nice fog bank rolling in, swallowing them all, but leaving her poster untouched.

"While we all keep starving and dying of his fucking diseases," the person behind her said, still trying to get a response. "How much more of this do you think we can take?"

'A thousand years,' SH didn't say. If he didn't believe it from Korea, he wouldn't believe it from her. And there was no one else here to hear. If he wanted to drown himself in pessimism, that was his choice, so long as he drowned alone. He just wanted to drag her down like always. And she was better than that.

"How many more years do you think our cousins down south can take?" he demanded. "What do you think the miguk-nom is doing to them right now? You think South Chungcheong's just sitting there accepting being ordered around, even with the Commands? You think Gangwon's going to get off just fucking fine for choosing us? Do you think your favourite fucking violet bastard wouldn't try some shit and get his head kicked in?"

Part of SH wanted to snap 'Don't act like you care when you don't even care Gangwon got taken.'

Instead, she finished tapping the last nail in, getting the head as flush to the worn wood as she could get it, then turned to face him.

“I think you should apologize to Kangwon,” she said calmly, her fingers holding the hem of her tunic. “You should be the one to go get our blood results tonight, and when you do, you should say you’re really sorry for saying Gangwon being taken was his fault, and that it isn’t. And then you should say you’re sorry it happened at all.”

“Why should I?” he demanded without even hesitating for a second. “It *is* his fault. You heard him say it.”

The dark thing sat up, but still didn’t growl. SH didn’t even get angry. Her fingers clenched in her hem, then released, and she nodded.

“Alright,” she said, and turned to walk away.

She’d probably paint for a bit first, try to touch up her more ‘disturbing’ pieces to be fit for civilian eyes, so the resources she’d used on them wouldn’t be wasted. Then if it was late enough, she would practice her steps for the end of month performance. Her feet hadn’t quite relearned how to dance with three toes missing.

“The fuck do you mean ‘alright?’” The man stormed after her. “What’s fucking wrong with you today?”

SH didn’t respond, already practicing her brushstrokes on the walk, trying to figure out how to turn intestines into something more artistic. Streams of pink flowers maybe? *‘Our homeland can’t bloom without driving out the invaders?’* Maybe that was too abstract.

“Is your head screwed on?”

She was trying not to entertain thoughts of *un*screwing his.

No. She didn’t want to hurt him. She didn’t want to maim him. *He* wanted to hurt her, *he* wanted to maim *her,* to gouge at her until she was as miserable as him. He always had.

Fish eyes popping in her mouth, sweet and gelatinous, tipping her head back to catch the last one he tossed, all of them for her.

‘Not always.’

She shook her head. Who cared about that? It was so far away from how he was now that it might as well have been someone else. And didn't the other stuff just make it worse? He wasn't formed this way- he'd *became* it. And it was because he had *wanted* to. Everything she had gone through, and she had still chosen to come out smiling, to come out kind. And so had Zhao Jingjing. So had the Jeollas. So had Jin-suk and Oh Mi-ae and so many other women.

What right did he have to be like this when it was *her* that had every reason to?

She painted the memory away, giving it to the dark thing to feed on, along with all the others.

He followed her even once she left the rail line, heading into the city center at a brisk but reasonable pace, still trying to hurt her even when she was mustering all her willpower to get away peacefully. Because of course he did. Men didn't know how to take 'no' for an answer or leave a woman alone.

"Why *should* I apologize?" he demanded. "I'm not the reason Gangwon's probably getting tortured right now."

He just wanted an excuse to say it, the thing that had been hanging between them ever since that day he'd came to find her cleaning the bunker. He wanted to say it, he *wanted* to ruin them. She didn't have to give *any* man what he wanted anymore.

Finally, SH stopped in an alley, turning to him. She could feel the anger in her chest, but she kept her words even.

"You should apologize because you care," she said, smiling. "Or at least Kangwon seems to think you do, for some reason. But it's okay. You don't have to apologize. *I* know you don't."

He could read her face as well as she could read his. She knew he had seen the ultimatum in her eyes when she'd told him to. And she had seen him refuse to even think once about answering.

His features twisted at her words. "I'm not apologizing because it's not my fault," he snapped. "Kangwon said I was fucking right. And I

bet you haven't told *Korea* to apologize."

"This isn't about Korea," SH said, blood pounding in her temples. "This is about *you,* and how *you* don't care about us."

He wouldn't even say it now. Instead his brow furrowed like a dog's as he bared his teeth at her.

"Because *you* care so fucking much about *me."*

If she didn't, why would she have waited *forty-two years* before giving up on him?

SH wanted to stifle the cry, to not give him the satisfaction of knowing she did when he didn't, but it still burst out.

"Of course I care about you! That's why I ask how you're feeling, it's why I ask how your day was or if you ate or what work you got done! You're my *brother,* North Hamgyong. I- love you!"

Maybe some small part of her had still thought that speaking the words they never had even back when they'd eaten fish together in moldy sheds would break him, that Hwang and Kangwon were right, and his callousness really was a mask, and it would shatter and he'd apologize to her and tell the *truth.*

But of course he didn't. Somehow the words just seemed to twist him further, his lips peeling back as his eyes narrowed.

"You still can't tell the fucking-"

It hit them both at the same time. Whatever hurtful thing North Hamgyong was going to say cut off as his teeth snapped down, his eyes slamming shut. SH gasped, fire rippling along her skin as her body burned. It wasn't just a brief strike, the kind she ignored every day. She could feel blisters rising in already charred flesh, popping and bursting as they rose. The burn over her chest spread, the edges pressing against the bandage wrapped tightly around them. It felt like the wound was fighting to squeeze under, pain building and building until it burst, washing her body in a flood of agony as it crawled across her body.

SH staggered, her back hitting the wall behind her. She could feel her skin tearing as she slid down the weathered clapboard, nothing compared to the feeling engulfing her front. She buried her face in her knees, gritting her teeth as she tried not to grab at the wound spreading across her skin, widening until it met one wrapping around her arm, meeting at a spot several inches over her heart.

The pain didn't end, it kept going, only numbing once it ate deep enough, and she got used to it.

Once she'd mastered it, she sat, panting, her fingers cupping her left shoulder, wanting to squeeze to try and stifle the feeling, but knowing it would just make it worse.

North Hamgyong had his head down like a bull, breathing heavily. With his sleeveless shirt, she could see that the last bit of green had disappeared from his ribs, charred black and crimson reaching out from under the blood-soaked bandages.

"The… The rail line between our provinces," SH managed to gasp, waves of pain still flowing through her as their border was bombarded.

"No… *shit,"* her brother gritted back, hands balled tight at his sides.

SH pressed her face to her knees, the burns on her cheeks making the dressings over them damp, trying to steady herself.

It had to be a naval bombardment. Even wings of bombers took time to do their next pass. But this was constant, barely letting up.

Her brother didn't either. The second it got more bearable, he demanded, "And you *still* think we can win this? They can do that to us whenever they want. They *will* be able to do that to us whenever they want, even if by some miracle the Yank signs a damned ceasefire. That's why he doesn't want us to build airfields, it's why he'll keep his damn blockade up. Even if an armistice is signed, even if the war ends, he can do *that* whenever he gets fucking bored."

He glowered down at her. ”We're screwed. Just fucking *admit* it.”

The dark thing finally broke its silence, a growl rumbling in its chest as rage rose in SH.

Of course. Instead of asking if she was okay or worrying about their people, he was striking when she was weak.

But it wasn’t like she’d expected him to. The first words he’d ever spoken to her when he’d woke up to find her caged had been ‘Why the fuck would you do this?’ And the second had been ‘Did those bastards already rape you?’ going straight to patriarchal possessiveness, because her purity was more important than *her*.

She had never had a chance to answer the first question. But it had stayed with her, the way he had said it, hurling it like an accusation, like it was *her* fault, until one day she finally made herself accept whose fault it *really* was.

So she hadn’t expected him to ask if she was okay now. You only asked if someone was okay if you cared.

And he didn’t. Not anymore.

—

North Hamgyong’s entire body burned, the ship cannons continuing to hit like a hammer on a fucking rail tie, every round destroying a rail line, a building, a train, his land, his people, *him*. The cool breeze didn’t stop sweat from sheeting down his forehead, stinging the wounds even more. His head was pounding, already screwed up by the fever, and now feeling like a steam engine firebox burning at full-tilt while some idiot shovelled more damn coal into it.

He was sweaty and pissed and burning, and now on top of that, his aching back let out a twinge. Because wasn’t that always the way it was? It could never just be one shit thing, it had to be twenty. They could never just sign over all their shit to Japan, *they* had to be signed over. They could never just be Divided, they had to be in a civil war, and then they had to be in a *real* fucking war

against half the damn world. And they could never just be poor and starving. His sister had to sell them into slavery.

South Hamgyong sat at his feet, twitching as their connecting line was cut in another fifty fucking places more.

"We're screwed," he growled, daring her to challenge it the way she always fucking did. "Just fucking *admit* it."

He wanted her to admit more than that, admit how she actually felt about him, even though he knew she never would, and if she did, that would be fucking it.

He expected her to glower at him, get pissed and defiant, work herself back up into high spirits to spite him, like she usually fucking did.

Instead she looked up at him with the same aching exhaustion that'd been in her eyes since the second she showed up today.

"What's wrong with you?"

Her voice wasn't cold or filled with the rage he'd finally got her to admit to. For some fucking reason, she sounded sad.

"What's wrong with you?" he retorted. "You have to know this isn't going anywhere."

SH shook her head, ignoring his bait again. "You didn't use to be like this. You were always a jerk, but you were never…"

"Never what?" he snapped, skin prickling.

"Cruel. You were never cruel." She tipped her head at him, hand still tented over where his bullet had hit. "What happened to you?"

'Cruel.' Was he cruel for having a reasonable damn expectation for how this war was going to end? Was he cruel for trying to make her get the fucking truth through her thick skull? Was he cruel for saying it was Kangwon's own damn fault he hadn't been able to protect his brother when *Korea had said it too?*

He would show her cruel.

"You should know," he growled. "It's your fault."

Hurt struck her face, and he made himself keep glaring as it morphed into something uglier, the thing she really felt.

"It is *not* my fault," she growled back, rising. "Do *not* blame me for how you turned out. *I'm* the one it happened to, I'm the one who was-!"

She cut herself off, taking a deep breath as her closed eyes flickered behind her burnt lids. When she exhaled, she opened them to pin him with a glare.

"I spent long enough blaming myself for everything that happened to us," she said firmly. "I won't be blamed for what *you* let yourself become. *I'm* the one who went through the worst of it, and *I* didn't let it change *me."*

She had. The South Hamgyong she was now would never have went to Japan, never have signed that stupid fucking contract. Not for him, not for *anyone.* She would have found another way, through blood and fire. She wouldn't have rotted in that cage for six damn years.

His sister *had* let it change her. She had just changed into something stronger, better.

"I wouldn't have 'become' this if it weren't for *you!"* he hissed, and her eyes flashed.

"Who's the one who got in that stupid fight?" SH angrily demanded. "Who's the one who got sick? Who left me alone and forced me to do whatever I had to in order to fix him?!"

"Who fucking signed me up for slave labour?" he shot back, his mouth barreling away from him like a train down tracks. "Who refused to leave no matter how many times I asked her to? Who fucking *sold herself* in the first place?!"

She bared her teeth. "I would *never* have signed that contract

without a reason, and *you* are that reason!"

As if he didn't fucking know it.

"You should have let me die," North Hamgyong said coldly.

"Then it's a good thing I'm not you."

Hurt flashed through him as she turned on a heel, stalking away before turning back.

"And I want you to know the reason I didn't hit you for saying that is because Korea wouldn't want me to. And that is the *only* reason." She glared over her shoulder, ready to deliver another targeted missile.

"I know you think that if you make me as miserable as you, it will be like I never left that cage. But I *did.* Korea gave me the chance. He did what you couldn't. And you need to accept that, North Hamgyong."

'Don't say it don't say it don't fucking-'

But she was daring him to, *demanding* it, and there was no Korea or North Pyongan or Chinese province here to stop his locomotive mouth this time.

"I wish I hadn't missed."

Pain contorted her features at his words, far worse than the bombardment still shaking through both of them, and she quickly left. Her hands stayed clenched at her sides, but he knew she was crying.

North Hamgyong bared his teeth, then punched the alley wall. He kept punching until one of them broke.

—

1912

'SLAP.'

North Hamgyong flinched as something wet slapped against his shoulder, but he didn't turn around to defend himself, knowing damn well what had just hit him.

"Dinner is served," his sister laughed as she came around his side, holding the large grey mackerel in one hand. She had another in her other fist, grasping its slippery tail tight.

North Hamgyong would have been pissed his shirt smelled like fish now, if everything in Hungnam didn't already smell like fish.

So instead he just grunted, "You got some big ones," impressed.

South Hamgyong sat across the small fire he'd started on the dirt floor of the shed, balancing one of the fish on her knee as she handed the other to him.

"Did you see the look on that fisher's face when you took his hat?" his sister giggled, pulling out her little knife.

He snorted. "I thought he wasn't going to chase me, just gawk at me like a fucking idiot."

"Language," his sister scolded.

"I'm not saying 'darn,'" he grumbled.

"Then just say 'like an idiot.'" The girl slid her knife into the belly of the mackerel with some difficulty. "Did you have any trouble making it away?"

"No," he replied, eventually getting his own blade past the slippery fish skin. They seriously needed to find some way to sharpen their knives. "You?"

She shook her head, pulling guts onto the floor of the abandoned shed and piling them neatly.

He relaxed. His least favorite part of robbing idiot fisherman was the time spent waiting for his sister to return. He'd been sitting with his hands tucked into fists until that mackerel hit him.

Their mark this time had been one of the fishermen that sold their catch to the Jap companies to ship to Japan. North Hamgyong didn't care who they stole from, so long as it wasn't some bastard just trying to feed his family, but his sister insisted they only take from those overfishing to sell their catch and the richer Japs, leaving the poor ones alone.

So what if they were poor? They were still stealing Korean fish. But he didn't care enough to argue with his sister and upset her.

They finished prepping their mackerel, impaling the gutted corpses on sturdy sticks. South Hamgyong finished working hers through the cut she made around the fish's gills, then held it over the fire. It was dark now, so the smoke that leaked out of the slightly open shed door would go unnoticed from outside.

"I got that job," he informed her, remembering that he hadn't yet.

She brightened. "Really? Did the practice interview help?"

"Yeah," he grunted, holding the fish deeper in the flames. "I start tomorrow."

If it weren't for his sister's mock interview, he would have answered 'What makes hiring you worth the risk?' with something like 'I don't even want you to fucking hire me.' But instead he'd been prepared with, 'Provincehumans have better endurance and stamina than regular humans. I can do the twice the work for half the pay.'

Which was bullcrap. Besides being unkillable by regular means, he wasn't any physically different than your typical starving fifteen-year old street urchin. But the second part was true.

Half a yen per hour. They'd be lucky if they could afford thread on that. And they'd be f- screwed if they got sick or injured or caught for stealing food.

"Don't glower," South Hamgyong chided. "It's something."

He huffed.

“I was thinking about setting up near the docks,” she told him, plucking the warm eyeball from her fish to pop in her mouth. “I can mend shirts for the fishermen. I still have some thread left from the merchant,” she added before he could complain.

He *‘tch’*ed. “I don’t want you spending all day by the docks.”

There were too many Japs, going out to sea and coming in. Hungnam wasn’t as busy as Wonsan or someplace farther south, like Busan. But it still received too many visitors from their bastard of a neighbour.

“Well, I have to do something,” his sister sighed, turning her fish. “Unless I go back to shining shoes-“

“No,” he quickly cut her off.

He hasn’t liked the idea of her doing that in the first place. Sure it didn’t require skill, and all she needed was a cloth to do it. But the kinds of bastards that got their shoes shined were rich men, the type that thought they could buy anything they want, and if that didn’t work, they could just take it.

He hadn't been able to contain himself when he’d come to pick her up that one day and seen her kneeling on the dusty street, polishing that Jap’s shoes. The bastard had such a disgusting look in his eyes that North Hamgyong had smashed his head off the wall.

Which was why they didn’t live in Chongjin anymore.

As South Hamgyong’s brother, it was his responsibility to protect her from ass- jerks like that.

“Set up by the warehouse,” he told her. That way he could keep an eye on her while hauling goods, carrying boxes and other useless crap.

Loading ships might have paid more, but he wasn’t going to have a hand in the endless stream of resources leaving their country for Japan. Nothing ever came in. He'd end up killing someone if he had to do that.

“Yes, sir,” South Hamgyong said sarcastically, removing her fish from the fire.

His was done, too. They switched, him taking the one she’d made for him, and her taking the one he’d cooked for her.

“Keonbae,” South Hamgyong toasted, smiling as she reached over to tap her grilled fish against his.

He snorted. “Keonbae,” he returned, already ripping into the mackerel, making sure to save the eyes for her.

It was soft and flaky. They didn’t have any seasonings, but they never did, so they couldn’t tell anything was missing. The Southern Hamgyong juggled her fish from hand to hand, while the Northern dealt with the burning. His hands were already deadened from manual labour.

As they ate, South Hamgyong started to chatter on about how one day they would have better food, and a house, and real jobs. She’d be a famous seamstress, and he'd be a renowned mechanic.

Usually he hated when she did that, made up crap that would never happen. They’d never make enough with him on half a yen an hour, and her on the crap sum she made by poorly mending shirts. The only ones who made enough in Korea were the bastards who didn’t deserve to.

And being famous or renowned would get them killed by Japan. Or worse.

But right now, with the fresh fish, warm fire, and his sister’s excited voice, he could tolerate her fantasies. He could even pretend to believe them.

She smiled at him, pulling a thin bone from her teeth.

That was why he kept going. Why he took the underpaying jobs and dealt with the abuse from slave-driving managers. For her smile.

It was hard for him to smile, when so much was crap. But he

tightened the corner of his lips in return, and she went back to talking about the dresses in the dirty catalogue she held onto like it was made of f- darn gold.

It was his job to *keep* her smiling, to protect her from the perverted men, bloodthirsty Japs, and greedy factory owners. It had been since he'd been poked awake in that back alley, her crouching over him, that dirty white sheet wrapped around her like a fancy dress.

'You should be more careful when you walk home, oppa,' she'd said, smiling as he shot up and away from her. '*I was following you for three streets.'*

He'd known there were other Provincehumans, but he'd never thought to look for them. And he hadn't expected the other Hamgyong to be a girl.

She was. She was his sister. And he had to protect her.

They finished their mackerel, then banked the fire until it was only smoldering coals. South Hamgyong curled up on her dirty sheet, demoted to a bed now that North Hamgyong had mugged a man for his clothes to give to her. He sprawled out on his burlap sack, rough and coarse.

"Goodnight, oppa," his sister said, smiling tiredly. "See you in the morning."

"'Night," he grunted back.

He waited until she had drifted off to sleep, breathing deep and even, to close his own eyes.

Screw Japan and screw underpaying jobs.

But things weren't crap all the time.

—

1952

SH didn’t cry. She didn’t sob or wail after the person who was supposed to be her brother confirmed what she’d know all along, even before he almost slipped up that first time. She had known, after all, even if she’d tried to convince herself she didn’t.

She just wiped her tears and went back to painting, sitting herself in a private room in the Moranbong Theatre and throwing herself into a canvas, not stopping even when Liaotung came to tell her they were all heading back to base. She stayed long into the night, only stopping to relight her lamp after the electricity was cut.

It still wasn't enough on its own to soothe the dark thing now that it had opened its slitted eyes again. Every stroke of colour had to be mirrored on the wall, the scar over her heart burning under the carpet of burns like a brand.

South Hamgyong did know why her brother was like this, actually. Because he had failed. Kangwon was right about him, at least. She could never work things out with him when he was so tangled in his own personal problems. And he had *chosen* those problems, he had *chosen* to be like this. He had chosen to wallow, and he wanted her to join him again. She knew *she* was right about that.

Well she hadn’t. And she wouldn’t, because *she* had chosen to spread her wings and fly free. It wasn’t her problem if he refused to do the same, and she didn’t have any responsibility to pull him out of the muck when he wasn’t trying to help himself, only pull her under.

He had taken her past away. She wasn’t letting him take her future with it.

The answer to who is in the right and who is in the wrong with these two is ‘yes.’

I just know if this book was as big as a real one, there would be people picking sides against one of them (mostly SH because she’s a woman and so not allowed to be anything but sweet and perfect). So I’m very glad that all my readers aren’t like

that (to my knowledge). My SH lovers like North Hamgyong, and my number North Hamgyong lover (you know who you are) also loves his sister. And *I* am chewing on both of them. Mmmm, bitter.

Also jumeokbap are called jwegibap in the DPRK, but that's a Munhwaeo thing, which wasn't enacted until the 60s, so I'm fairly certain using jumeokbap here is correct. Just so we know.

Born To Leave

The General knew what North was planning almost the second he slunk into the office immediately after returning to Pyongyang. After his Countryhuman told him the details, he stared at him, long and somber.

"Is there anything I can do to stop you?" he asked eventually, sounding like he knew the answer.

"Order me not to go," North responded flatly.

"Besides the one thing I won't do."

North didn't answer.

The man shook his head. "I can't approve of this."

"Our people would."

The General looked up at him. "I think my country knows that isn't true this time. They would have cheered on your efforts to rescue our provinces from the enemy's grip. But this isn't that. None of them want to see our Countryhuman risk himself for gestures, even ones for them."

North's fists squeezed, but he held his tongue.

He was right. This was a gesture. But he had to do something.

"Order me not to go," he repeated.

Kim Il-sung sighed, rubbing his hand across his face. "Sometimes I think you enjoy putting me in difficult positions, comrade."

North's eye flicked away.

"Some of our comrades are worried about you," his General said eventually, folding his hands on the table again. "They worry you're

growing more reckless."

'South Hamgyong.' It had to be. She was the one that had nagged him most for Chorweon and Seoul.

"I wasn't reckless to begin with," North clipped.

Kim Il-sung looked up at him with his dark eyes. "You do know that we will win this war, comrade."

"Yes," his country responded. "But I need to do this *now*. I need to do-"

His grip on his military brace tightened, feeling phantom hands brush over his face.

"I need to make sure her faith in her country doesn't go unrewarded."

The General closed his eyes. "And how am I supposed to convince our country not to go when he says something like that?"

"Order me not to."

North didn't know if he wanted him to or not, even when he knew it would be the only thing that could stop him from taking this incredibly stupid action.

But if he hadn't wanted to go, he wouldn't have been Korea. And if Kim Il-sung had ordered him to stay, he wouldn't be the General.

"No," he said, shaking his head at himself as he did. "Comrade Kim Tu-bong and I have agreed that we will never order our country to do anything. Our country commands us."

He gave that country a helpless look, knowing what that meant.

"Then I'm going," North said, relieved after all.

"You are," the Premier sighed. "Against both of our better judgements."

North didn't take the decision back. "Don't tell the provinces you know where I went."

After the man had given Kangwon and Gangwon permission to leave, SH, Chagang, Hwang, and North Pyongan had told him he should convince him to take on the authority to command the Provincehumans at least. He had managed to make North Pyongan back down, but the others had been less convinced. They were dissatisfied with their Premier's decision, and while they hadn't shown any resentment, North wanted to keep it that way.

The General shook his head firmly. "I won't let our provinces be consumed with worry for you."

"They will be anyway."

"Better the worry of whether or not a mission will succeed than the worry of uncertainty." The man tipped his head. "I might remind my country of recent events. Or when the South was taken from our borders."

The furious panic that had crackled through every inch of North's body until he knew his brother was alive and back in Korea, and so was his province, was a feeling he could easily summon again. He still felt it for his southern ones after all.

"Our comrades worry just as much about your safety as you do theirs," the Premier said gently.

That was impossible, but North still said, "Fine. Then don't tell them until tomorrow. And make sure they don't follow me."

They should all be smart enough not to. But then again, he'd thought Kangwon and Gangwon were smart enough not fly halfway across the globe to an enemy nation.

"Alright," his General conceded, then stood before he could walk away. "Comrade. Our provinces and our people all care deeply for our country, just as much as I do. And for our Countryhuman. We don't want to see him suffer for wanting to serve his people."

"I won't get caught." He knew their land better than anyone.

“I have faith in my country’s skills.” The General’s gaze was sober. “I also have faith in his compassion and love for our nation. In these circumstances, those worry me more.”

North’s shoulders hunched slightly, avoiding his face. “I am only going for her. I won’t do anything to jeopardize the armistice or our country.”

The edges of his comrade's eyes dipped. “Don’t do anything to jeopardize yourself.”

North met his gaze again. “I won’t do anything to jeopardize Korea.”

The man exhaled, but knew that was a much as he could get. “Let this be the last time, comrade. Not the last time without notifying me beforehand, like before. Not the last time you do this for only a gesture. The last time.”

He came around the desk, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“This isn’t an order,” he said seriously. “This is a plea. We don’t want to lose our country, and we don’t want to lose *you.”*

North’s eye skittered away from the sincerity he saw in the depths of his black eyes.

It wasn’t like he did these things to worry him, or his provinces. But when they were trapped in America’s prison, or when they were hunting and being hunted across Paektusan by someone that could actually kill them, or O-geun was lying in front of him, small and bloody, or when the Chinese were holding the line and it was their last chance to-

He had to do *something.* He owed it to them.

“…This will be the last time,” he muttered. “The war will be over soon anyway.”

And he would be one with South. And his brother had never been very good at leaving.

Kim Il-sung gave him a long look, then dipped his head. “May you come back safe.”

North left.

Since he was keeping all his provinces near the city still, he found South Pyongan easily, working in the dark in a barley field across the river. The fields around Pyongyang should be coming along slower, considering the best time of day- night- to sow was when the B-29s came, and being so close to the city risked them getting hit accidentally or ‘accidentally.’ But with all his provinces devoting their efforts to rousing peasants to work around the clock, and mobilizing soldiers personally, most of them were either tilled and planted by now, or even starting to show sprouts of green.

The sight just made him grow tense. He needed his provinces in their capitals, making sure the planting was done there, in the fields hidden in valleys or by towns bombed less often. The Pyongyang fields were struck too much. Even now he could see craters in the soft brown earth closer to the river.

South Pyongan was working on one of these with people, so he calmed himself as he approached.

“C’mon, comrades!” she called energetically as they filled in holes under the moonlight. “Put your backs into it! Whoever finishes first gets the exclusive honour of sitting on my back while I do push-ups!”

“Is that an honour?” one of the older women asked, bemused, then did a double-take as she realized one of the Democratic Youth League boys had started to swing his hoe with renewed vigour, rapidly filling in one of the bomb craters with a determined look.

“Highest honour the State can give,” South Pyongan assured her, glanced over her shoulder, then spun around. “Oh, hey Korea! Normal things happening here. How’s it going?”

He ignored her, raising his voice to the women and Youth League members that had paused to look at him. “Comrades! Your country is grateful for all your efforts. ‘The struggle for food is a struggle for

victory at the front,' and I know if everyone in Korea is working as hard as you, then our victory is inevitable."

They cheered, throwing themselves back into their work, getting their eyes off him.

"Come," he ordered South Pyongan.

She hesitated, looking at her hoe. It made a little ember glow in his chest.

"You can finish later," he assured her, walking away.

She followed, until they were standing next to one of the Taedong's branches, next to the burnt remains of a farming hut.

"Before you get at me, I know we're not supposed to show off the bandages, but I was seriously chafing." South Pyongan gestured at her upper half. She was wearing a sleeveless undershirt without her tunic, but with the off-white fabric swathing her arms, it still looked like she had a real shirt on.

"That's not what I'm here for." North's eye lingered on the flag wrapped around her left bicep, then went to her face. "I know you have a smuggler."

His province lost her easy attitude, her diamond eyes shooting open. "What? Me? Smuggler? No. I don't even know what that is. I mean, obviously I know what a smuggler is, but I don't-"

"Then tell me where you got that tea South Hwanghae told me about."

He hadn't been able to escape her rib-crushing hug as she saw him for the first time in over two months and babbled about how sorry she was for 'making' Kangwon lie about her, and every single tiny thing that had happened while he was out.

He also maybe hadn't tried very hard.

South Pyongan *'tch'*ed. "Oo, that little *snitch."* She saw his look and said, "Okay, fine. I might, maybe know a guy. But Korea I

swear he's not stealing shit or extorting people or moving contraband, he buys his stuff from people and salvages and *maybe* he knows other guys from the south that steal Yankee crap and sneak it here, but I swear I said I said if he bought anything from our guys I'd twist him into kkwabaegi, and I'm not doing anything *super* illegal, I'm just signing his entry permits for cities and-"

"Enough," North shut her up.

The less he knew the better. And he already knew she was using the cut she made from it to buy goods from their peasants to distribute to war victims. Chagang had noticed something in her behaviour and investigated while he was unconscious.

Both of those things made him smug. But he kept his expression flat.

"Get in contact with him for me. Tomorrow."

South Pyongan looked intrigued at that. "Wait. So I'm not in trouble?"

"No."

She brightened. "In that case, I can definitely hook you up with Completely Reasonable Prices Kim."

North squinted critically, before his province's expression suddenly shifted, her lips pursing.

"Wait. Why?"

"I need him."

She narrowed her eyes. "For what?"

Irritated, he demanded, "Do you want to know, or do you want to get away with falsifying travel documents?"

"Okay, first-" She held up a finger. "I'm not falsifying them. I'm literally just giving him a signed paper that tells the guards he has permission to enter, which you've told us we can do. I'm not even

getting People's Committees to sign his overnight papers if he wants to stay somewhere, that's all up to him. If my paper makes it easier, that's *so* not my fault. And second-"

She held up another finger, then pointed them at him. "SH is totally right whenever she says you not telling us what you're planning is shifty. It always ends in you doing something stupid."

"Do not talk to your country that way," he said coldly, and she smacked her fist into her palm.

"You *are."* She shook her head, a mix of disbelieving and impressed. "Seriously? Right after you freaked out on Kangwon for doing the exact same thing?"

North hid his grimace. "I'm not doing 'something stupid.' I am performing my duty as Korea's Countryhuman."

The twist to South Pyongan's lips faded. "Korea, are you-?"

"No," he clipped.

He wouldn't. He was just going for Choe Jong-ok. That was all.

His province stared at him, then shook her head again. "And you say *I* need to be responsible."

"This *is* me being responsible." It was. It was his responsibility to keep his promises to his people.

"Okay," she said skeptically. "I'm just saying, you're lucky I'm not the 'learn by example' type."

He really was.

"Will you contact the man or not?" he asked.

South Pyongan heaved a dramatic sigh. "Fine. But if you die and North Pyongan's right about the afterlife, you better float down to protect me from SH." She thought for a moment. "Or crawl up."

North grimaced. "He isn't right." More seriously, he asked, "Can

we trust this merchant?"

South Pyongan's mouth worked as she thought. "Yeah," she said eventually. "He's a little money-hungry for sure, but he's a patriot. He never sold anyone out when the Yanks were crawling all over the place, and I didn't have to bargain too much to get him to slash his prices."

North nodded, handing her a scrap of paper from his pocket. "Then tell him to remain in the Kangwon area for the next few days. And on the 17th, give him this."

Even if he was trustworthy, it was better if no one knew where he was for as long as possible. And six days should be enough.

"And since I know you're going to read it-" He shot his province a glare as she innocently blinked. "Don't go to the location, and don't tell the others about it. It's too close to the front."

"But not too close for you?" South Pyongan boldly opened the paper up in front of him, squinting as she held it up to the moon. Her eyes widened.

"Uh, Korea? This isn't 'close' to the front. Last time I checked, it's past it."

North ignored her. "If it's too dangerous, or he doesn't think he can do it, he can wait at the secondary location."

North might have to carry his cargo even farther, but he wouldn't have the man getting hurt.

South Pyongan lowered the paper, staring at him. "Y'know you're the worst, right? Like seriously- the worst."

"Is that a yes?" he asked coldly.

"Ugh, fine." She shoved the paper into a pouch on her pants belt. "But you know I've gotta tell my brother about this."

"Which is why you will be working the fields until at least midnight." North turned on a heel, then was dragged back by his

sleeve.

He glared at South Pyongan. Her jaw opened, shut, and she rubbed the back of her head.

“Come back safe, yeah?”

“I always do.”

Forty minutes later, North returned to the bunker with the others for the first time since he’d recovered from his illness, having to reassure North Pyongan that his sister was fine, she was just choosing to work late. Which clearly didn’t reassure him. Taking on extra work wasn’t exactly typical of South Pyongan.

No. North couldn't say that anymore. Her working with the merchant *was* taking on extra work. And she had been working hard while he was out, scavenging building supplies and helping build dug-outs.

But missing dinner was definitely unlike her and always would be. He could see the worry that lingered in North Pyongan’s eyes, no matter how much he said she was fine.

North knew he was thinking of the Kangwons. Even though they hadn’t been able to see him much with him in the hospital, Gangwon's absence and Kangwon's loss now hung over them as the others ate their rations. The non-war-related topics were less, and the jokes were quieter, especially without South Pyongan there.

North Hamgyong was also absent, having headed immediately into the bunker, telling Hae to take his rations, though North couldn’t allow that. SH’s more-forced-than-usual cheer and the way her eyes determinedly didn’t follow him told him all he needed to know.

“Korea?” she said hopefully, her hand on the spoon (only serving, North Pyongan had cooked).

He shook his head, and her lips pressed flat.

“You should eat.”

Between the dark look in her eyes and the desperate edge in her voice, he decided that she needed him to listen tonight. And his rations would be going to other soldiers for the next few days anyway.

Wordlessly he got up, wrestling the spoon from her, taking a small portion of rice. SH looked disappointed at the size, but some of the tension went out of her shoulders.

"Oh, jiejie can move mountains," Liaotung noted. "I don't think I've seen gege eat before."

"Don't call me that," North muttered, Hae attaching to his side the second he sat. "And you have."

The turquoise woman crossed her arms, putting on a wise face. "I've seen Comrade Korea eat, not gege."

"Eat your food and don't be rude," Liaoxi scolded.

Both of the provinces looked just as flushed as his, the sympathetic fevers tinging their cheeks orange and purple, respectively, even with the cold reduced to a spring chill. North had been caught up in an awkward briefing by Kangwon on how severely the Americans had targeted their lands at the end of March.

Since he was here, North asked, "How is the germ warfare in your provinces?"

"Still not gone," Liaoxi said sadly. "But we're keeping on."

Liaotung nodded, swallowing a mouthful of rice. "They're really branching out on Jilin and Heilongjiang now. They had to slaughter an entire village's worth of animals up there."

North listened to the women brag about their cousin's people in Heilongjiang, who had woken up to a sudden infestation of voles after a plane had gone by, and put every single cat, dog, and rodent to death without needing to be told, then fire-cleansed every home. Their story matched Kangwon's entirely.

He'd been worried about America spreading the disease to China as well, where he couldn't oversee the efforts to stop it from spreading. It was slightly reassuring to know the Chinese were almost as diligent as his people when it came to hygiene.

As his provinces joined in with their own humble-bragging, someone whispered in his 'ear,' "I thought you weren't sleeping here?"

North swatted at the fly, and China leaned back.

"I'm not," he said. "I just came to make sure South Hamgyong did an acceptable job cleaning. *Alone,"* he added, glaring at her.

"Everyone else was busy," she said, then pivoted. "You'll come to the May Day performance, right?"

"We'll see." He'd be back by then at least. Barring something going incredibly wrong.

"Trying to avoid talking to me all of a sudden?" China said on the other side of his head.

Another thing he hated about China- how observant he was.

"Oi." Hae pouted up at the Chinese country. "Ah'm the only one that gets to whisper to Korea."

North removed the hand she cupped over his ear slit. "That isn't even true."

His meager portion of rice finished, he stood up, Hae reluctantly sliding off his arm.

"Koreaaaaaa," she whined. "Don't go."

His teeth grit. "I need to bring North Hamgyong his rations."

"No need," SH said cheerfully from her log. "If he wants to starve, he can."

North shot her a Look. *'What is it this time?'*

Her tight smile said, *'Nothing,'* and her burning eyes said it was her brother, and worse than usual.

North narrowed his eye at her. *'Behave.'*

Her gaze narrowed, a piercing flame as her hands tightened on her bowl. *'Not if he doesn't.'*

Ssi-bal, they better both be alive when he got back.

—

North Hamgyong was an idiot. He knew that. He fucking *knew* it. He'd spent so many years in that cage keeping his damn mouth shut under the weight of everything bearing down on them, and now ever since it had lifted, the words just came spewing out with nothing to hold them back. He wasn't his sister, he wouldn't just pretend everything was okay now when it *wasn't.*

And how was he supposed to keep quiet when she *looked* at him like that, the way she'd been looking at him since she'd came back from that POW shithole, the same way she'd been looking at him for thirty-eight damn years?

Whatever. Now she never would again. He'd just cut the last fucking tie between them, and he'd known that when he was saying it.

And now he wasn't her brother anymore. Maybe he hadn't been since the moment he'd shot her in the shoulder instead of the heart, breaking their promise. The miguk-nom hadn't raped her, but if he had, it would have been North Hamgyong's fault for being weak, and South Hamgyong couldn't forgive him for that. That harpy couldn't forgive him for *anything,* and even though he didn't deserve it, if she thought Korea could forgive his brother for cutting out his eye, then she should be able to forgive *him* for being an idiot.

Maybe he hadn't been her brother for awhile now.

North Hamgyong slammed his broken fist into the wall again, pain splintering through the bones. It would fucking hurt to work tomorrow, but he'd do it anyways. He'd go to the military hospital

when he got it bandaged so Kangwon couldn't nag him.

The door to the men's quarters opened, and he jerked his head up, snarling, "That had better not be-"

Ssi-bal.

Korea stepped in, flashlight in one hand, bowl in the other. North Hamgyong swiftly looked away, uncurling his legs so he was sitting properly on his bed.

"Your rations." His Countryhuman placed them on the edge of the cot, the single one at the back.

North Hamgyong looked away from them. "I don't want that shit."

"You work manual labour," Korea said, unimpressed. "You need the energy."

The province scoffed. "You're such a fucking hypocrite."

Just like his damn sister. It was probably why she liked him so much.

But no. He knew why she liked him. She'd told him to his shitty face.

'She likes him because he did what I fucking couldn't.'

Korea scowled. "If I ate tonight, you will."

"Unlike you, I don't have to do everything South Hamgyong tells me," he muttered.

Korea glared at him, finally lowering his damn flashlight so he wasn't blinding him, pointing it at the floor.

North Hamgyong's stomach cramped at the warm smell of rice, but he crossed his arms, hiding his injured hand. "Is she out there lying about me?"

"No."

His teeth gritted. Not even slandering him. He bet she'd never say his damn name ever again.

Good. He didn't want to hear it from her.

"Then what do you want?"

Korea stared at him, his thin face half-hidden in the shadows, somehow still without the stupid fucking burns the rest of them had.

"She followed me because I gave her hope," he said eventually.

North Hamgyong's biceps bulged as his arms tightened, hand twinging. He hadn't wanted to talk about this shit again.

"She followed you because you aren't me."

Three-fucking-hundred and forty-six damn times she'd turned him down. And it had only taken Korea *once.*

"I tried to make her leave," he growled. "I *tried.* I would have protected her, I would have-"

"How?" Korea asked. *"You* didn't even believe you could protect her."

He bared his teeth up at him. "I *did."*

He'd been her brother. It had been his fucking job. Just because he'd fucked up *once-*

"You didn't." Korea's voice was cold as damn steel. "How was she supposed to believe in you when you didn't believe in yourself? How was she supposed to have hope that you could save her when *you* didn't?" He drew himself up, looking down on him with his slitted eye. "I gave her the hope she needed, I gave her the chance to save *herself,* and the belief that she could. *That* is why she followed me."

'Korea gave me the chance.' Like they were fucking psychically connected.

For a damn commie materialist, he put a lot of stock in shit that didn't exist. 'Hope.' What was fucking hope? South Hamgyong had been trapped in a fucking cage, dressed up in Jap costumes and raped by foreign bastards and rich pigs almost fucking daily, and the reason she hadn't let him save her from it was because he didn't have something that didn't even fucking *exist?*

He wanted to hit Korea. He wanted to smash his fists into his steel until they both broke and he had to put him down. If he'd been so fucking useless that the only reason South Hamgyong had followed someone else instead of her own brother was because of a damn *concept,* then maybe she was right, and they really would be better off without him.

But he couldn't hit him. So instead he raised his head and asked, just as cold as him, "Then why didn't *your* brother follow *you?"*

He'd expected him to get mad, to snarl at him and leave him the fuck alone.

Instead, like South Hamgyong, he went quiet, raising his head, staring into the dark above his province for a long time.

"I don't know," he said eventually, his voice too fucking low.

North Hamgyong turned his head, teeth creaking. Ssi-bal. His fucking mouth again.

Then his country came back to earth, and pinned him to the bed with a glare. "But I do know that if he *had* followed me, we wouldn't be at each other's throats the entire damn time. What do you think Kangwon would do to have his brother back?" His jaw feathered. "What do you think *I* would do?"

North Hamgyong scowled. He *shouldn't* want his brother back. He was a shitty puppet traitor that had cut out his eye and could destroy their entire nation.

"You still have *your* sibling," Korea delivered with that damn finality of his. "Don't lose her when she's right next to you."

He spun around, leaving the room, taking the light with him,

leaving North Hamgyong to beat his throbbing head into his sore knees.

Why *should* he not want to lose South Hamgyong? Why should he when she could believe he didn't give a damn about her or the others, and couldn't admit she *didn't* give a damn about him? Why should he not want to lose that accusing glare, blaming him for everything that had ever happened to her when *she* had been the one to make herself a fucking whore? When she would never forgive him for making her do it? When she'd never forgive him for *anything?* Why should he not want to lose her when he'd already lost her *thirty-eight damn years* ago? Why should he care when she'd said that to him, her voice tripping, not because it wasn't something sisters said to their brothers but because she didn't *mean* it? Why should he *want* her to mean it?

…He was no fucking better than Korea.

—

After all his provinces were asleep, except for Chagang on watch, North quietly unpacked his bag, putting only what he needed in it- ammunition, tooth paste, a good pine twig for brushing, extra socks, ammunition, and the uniform he'd change into once he got past the frontline. Something else slipped in, too, his hand not wanting to let go of it.

North Hamgyong's question tried to creep in, but he blocked it out. He had a mission to accomplish.

China always went to sleep first, so he only had to move quietly to get away from him, slinking out the door.

He glanced down the hall before he left.

*'Ah **hate** when Korea leaves.'*

This would be the last time. It would be. The war would be over soon. When they had peace, he wouldn't have to run off to save their people *or* them, and leave them worrying.

North left the bunker, replacing the lingering scent of disinfectants

with the cool night breeze again. Chagang looked at him, tipping his head, but he'd already said he wasn't staying the night, so he didn't ask questions.

Squinting, he said, "Travel safe."

His voice was slightly strained. When he got back, he should see if SH could find more ginger and meowi, or if South Pyongan could get some from her merchant.

North nodded. "I'm visiting a village in South Hamgyong tomorrow, so I won't be at the meet-up point. Tell the others you can all deploy to your provinces again, but to be cautious."

The communique had been handed to him after he'd spoken with South Pyongan- Norway was sending soldiers to Korea. It was only a battalion, not enough to matter or change things. But it was a sign- Korea was an enemy.

That made it mutual. Even before he'd stolen his provinces, the Norwegians healing the men that raped and murdered his people was hardly any different than doing it themselves.

It was also the foreign country's revenge for getting Kangwon back, which meant North likely didn't have to be wary of anything more drastic, though he would stay on alert.

Chagang's gaze bored into him for a little too long, then he saluted at his order. "Yes, Korea."

North set off into the forest, emerging from the trees, moving swiftly as he followed the road their tires and boots had carved across the field after months of living here. The path always made his teeth ache.

He had made it to the other side of Pyongyang, heading for a supply depot to get a vehicle, before he stopped on the eastern highway, near where he had been when he sent North Pyongan off to Guk Island.

"If you're going to come, then stop skulking in the shadows," he called, not looking over his shoulder.

After a second, someone slunk out of the ditch, smiling under his mask.

"Want to tell me when you noticed?" China asked.

North hadn't. He had just figured he was there. If he hadn't came out, he would have called again before the depot. Then checked the underside of his vehicle *very* carefully.

"Does 'if you're going to come' mean I'm allowed to?" his comrade asked when he didn't answer.

"I'm going to the south," North said bluntly, turning to face him. "Farther than Seoul."

"Hmm, foreign sights unseen," China hummed. "And a chance to stretch my legs."

"It's too dangerous for you."

"Oh? Do you think you're not skilled enough to get there undetected?" China asked innocently. "Because I think I am."

North glowered. "If Gangwon can tell America that you're here, and he accuses you while you're down there, we won't even know. What are you suppose to do if they call another snap trial?"

"My comrades are experts at stalling," the man said flippantly.

The Korean heaved a sigh, turning away. "Fine. But keep up, don't talk, and no complaining."

"Oh? Giving in so easy?" China asked. "Have you gotten so tired of me you're planning on turning me in to the enemy once we're there?"

"If I don't let you come, you'll either go tell my provinces or stalk me across Korea anyway." And then North wouldn't be able to keep him- keep his eye on him.

China was at his side in a flash, padding down the highway. "This should be fun. Though I have to wonder if this is revenge on your

helpful little doctor for his stunt, or if worrying people is just some sort of fetish of yours."

'Fun.' Risking himself getting captured and putting his entire country in danger. North could never understand him.

"I brought rations, by the way." China hefted his bag. "Since I couldn't help but notice that you were packing rather light."

North side-eyed him, and he smiled.

Ssi-bal. He had a feeling this six-day trip had just gotten a *lot* longer.

Today's fun fact is that April 1952 (this chapter) is thirty-eight years to the month since when North Hamgyong woke up from his coma to find out what SH had to do for him.

Also in real life, Norway only ever provided medical support to the United Nations forces. In this, he has been driven to provide one battalion. How brave of him.

Finally, the long-awaited paragraph(s) about why I believe the accusations of America using biological warfare during the war:

America bad.

Okay, serious now. Sources will be at the bottom. First, let's say the stories about Japanese Communists and North Korean POWs being used as test subjects in Japan, Geoje Island POWs being experimented on, and Ishii Shiro visiting Korea are all just rumours (despite there being evidence against that). The fact still stands that America did grant Ishii Shiro and other Unit 731 chiefs amnesty in exchange for their information on germ warfare (and other grisly things). It didn't come out until decades later, but is now a known fact that they flat out lied about that. They also lied about Japan not using germ warfare on China during WWII when scientists drew comparisons

between what had happened then and what was happening in 1952. It's now known that we *did* use biological warfare and that the US covered it up. But anyway, let's also say the very suspicious circumstances of the smallpox/viral haemorrhagic fever outbreaks the year before were also just sheer coincidence (despite there being lots of questionable events there).

Second of all, let's not talk about the American pilots much. I wouldn't trust the word of a North Korean/Chinese POW in American hands, so I'll be fair and not trust the word of an American in North Korean/Chinese hands. The only thing I'll say is that there were no signs of torture; while they said they were threatened at the time, some have come forward in their old age to recant that and say they were actually treated well; they were at threat of being court martialled if they didn't repeal their testimony once home, which would have been disastrous for them and their family in that time; and most of them didn't repeal their testimony to the UN, though it was said their legitimacy would be solidified if they did. And later Al Jazeera (decidedly not pro-DPRK) tracked one down, and he said 'I didn't know. But they send it with you.' Also the people responsible for their debriefing when they returned home went on to be part of MKUltra. I am *not* saying they were brainwashed to repeal. I don't really believe in 'brainwashing' in that sense. It's just one of those 'everything is connected' moments.

So the meat. America started their biowarfare program in 1943. They experimented with germ warfare on their own people in 1950, three months after the war in Korea 'began.' They sprayed San Francisco with two types of bacteria, one causing urinary tract infections, and another that, while not a pathogen, can still cause respiratory illness. At least one person died. They carried out over two hundred of these 'tests' from 1949 to 1969. Also in 1950, pneumonia bacteria was sprayed over Panama City and Florida, and a cancer-causing chemical was sprayed over the Midwest. This isn't conspiracy stuff. It's 'even Wikipedia admits this' stuff. So it's not a matter of 'would they.' Not even counting future claims of other cases

of germ warfare, if they did it to their own people, they would do it to the people they committed the Nogun-ri and Pyongyang massacres on.

So there's all the aberrant insect appearances that have been mentioned in previous chapters, appearing months too early, and some not having been spotted in Korea beforehand. If you want the full rundown, look at the ISC Commission report (it's very long, so if you're a busy person most of the bulk is in the first few hundred pages; but if you're not willing to read it, don't proclaim biowarfare *wasn't* used in Korea). There's also the appearances of plague without cases in between Korea and the closest endemic regions in Manchuria and Fukien, as well as blighted oak leaves appearing above the 38th Parallel, where that kind didn't grow. None of these things changed in the future. As in there were no new studies that said, 'actually these appeared here/then all along.' (though if things (global warming) continue, insects *are* going to keep appearing earlier and earlier). The anthrax studies were actually some of the first really publicly done studies, actually, discovering things that would later come to be scientific fact, so it wasn't like they were using information that was already out there. They *did* conduct these comprehensive studies. Also the US or affiliates have never even tried to launch some mass investigation in the modern day to prove that these diseases and vectors were present all along, which you would think they would do if they were so sure the DPRK and China were lying.

The 'proof' that has all come out against the allegations has been baseless. 'Soviet letters' discovered after the fall of the CCCP said it was all a ploy, but they were hand-copies, and the originals and their reference numbers were never provided. Very convenient that they just so happened to find the personal admittance to that evil scheme that no one else is allowed to see. A book in the name of a Chinese scientist who worked on the case came out after his death saying it was all a false alarm. But it came out after his death, and long after he could have moved to America and gotten rich off of that story. No one ever came forward and said he'd hinted it was all

overblown before. Two men who have investigated the allegations for years said that if the previously mentioned items were true, it would go against a lot of other evidence, some of which came out publicly *after* these claims, like some intercepted cables the US released which contained information it wouldn't have made sense for that Chinese scientist not to know about. They actively showed that the PVA and KPA were being negatively impacted by the germ warfare, so it certainly wasn't a false alarm. And not every report was taken at face value. North Korean investigators reported internally several times that some claims were false when they went to investigate, so that shows that they weren't just trying to pump up outrage (and really, did Koreans need any more reason to be outraged at America? They were living in holes in the ground at this point.)

A couple authors claimed that they had confirmed that an anthrax sample had came from natural Chinese sources, not American, based on a genomic analysis. But they never published this analysis, and an investigator called their source's sources, none of whom actually backed up the claim, and the main one of which said he'd never even heard anything about the analysis. Other Soviet records seem to say the Soviets didn't know if the germ warfare was true, but that the Chinese and North Koreans (the people it was happening to) seemed to believe it was. And Stalin also seemed to believe. Intercepted messages from KPA and PVA soldiers show that they were utterly convinced biowarfare was being used on them. A staunch Hungarian anti-Communist who was in Korea at the time later confirmed he had seen flies in winter, long before they should appear.

No one really claims this, but in case you're thinking 'what if it *was* germ warfare, but they did it to themselves??' That would be incredibly stupid. Most of Korea's hospitals had been bombed, along with water stations, and medicine factories. They had lost hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and illness spreads most easily among army units with how packed together they are. China was also advancing very fast in the sanitation department, but still had a mostly feudal

population. Infecting their own country would just tamper with the part of their supply line that *wasn't* being bombed. Also since they had livestock shortages, all the animal culling they had to do was not good for their food supply. This was also at a time when America was drawing out the ceasefire and trying to gain more land in the deal. If their line had weakened, they could have lost more territory. They did handle the outbreaks well because sanitation was very important to them as recently-feudal countries, but it wasn't a 'haha, if we release this, we can handle it easily!' situation. Putting aside any beliefs about morality, it would have been risking tactical suicide. I think the fact that America doesn't even claim this (explanations for the positive tests of bodies are usually 'uh, well, they must have infected them themselves after death.') is proof that it's not an option.

So I think at the very least, the outbreaks were real. The Soviet administration as a whole likely wasn't sure if it was really biowarfare, but were happy to say it was since it made America look worse than they already did. But many of them, and the North Koreans and Chinese *did* seem to believe it truly was germ warfare. Saying it was all some sort of master plot completely invented by them just worked to help the US paint their picture of the sly, slanty-eyed Asian hordes, brutish, but with enough wickedness to infiltrate good American minds and infect with them strange ideas (and if you think I'm exaggerating, look up American Korean War propaganda or WWII anti-Japanese propaganda. Yes, fuck Imperial Japan. But it wasn't the war crimes they were targeting. Even in the 'You poor folks are being used as puppets by your evil commie masters' leaflets, the Korean and Chinese are made to look animalistic.)

You could say, 'okay, with all the destruction of sanitation measures like you just said, doesn't it mean sickness could spread more easily?' Yes. But the way the sickness cropped up in those specific periods, many of the illnesses out of season or area, along with the vectors, with such sudden intensity, is definitely suspicious. The ISC Commission also interviewed dozens of witnesses in both Korea and China who were

adamant they saw American planes dropping non-explosive bombs that released insects and other things. Korea was actually in worse straits hygienically the year before because of the aftermath of the tactical withdrawal, and they hadn't rebuilt any of their hospitals yet. Yet aside from the strange winter outbreaks, the spring illnesses weren't reported as out of the ordinary. This is despite the fact that the previous winter and spring had much more troop mobility with new PVA and KPA divisions coming in from China and leaving Korea. Also the same rash of illnesses were never reported in the South (there were outbreaks, but not in the same vein as these ones), even though they had far more foreign troops from different places occupying them. And while they were less destroyed than the North since their rear wasn't being bombed, they *were* still destroyed. They didn't have hygienic conditions either.

Some people say the Soviet Union vetoing the Red Cross investigation (later chapter) is proof that they didn't want their lie to be exposed. I have a full rant on this for later, but if you read the UN minutes, they weren't actually vetoing an investigation- they were vetoing a vote *without North Korean and Chinese representatives present.* They clearly stated this multiple times, along with the fact that it violated the UN Charter. The UN accuses them of having no proof for the charges, and the Soviets pretty much say 'Yeah, we don't. Because it's not *our* proof. That's why we need their representatives here.' The North Koreans and Chinese were never allowed to speak, but they did make it known that they didn't want the Red Cross to be the one investigating. This is also seen as proof that they're lying. Yet the Red Cross wasn't 'impartial' as the UN was claiming. They were literally part of the organization *at war with them.* They also had a history of glossing over Nazi concentration camps in WWII. Meanwhile the US admitted in a cable that they didn't want a real investigation because it could cause loss of morale by revealing other things they were doing (chemical warfare. They claimed they weren't doing chemical warfare, but surprise! They were. How *fascinating)* The International Scientific Commission and the International Association of Democratic Lawyers get accused of being Soviet puppets, but the fact stands that the

IADL reported on atrocities in Korea that did later turn out to be true, and none of them ever came forward in the future to say they were bribed or lying. I've said before there is no such thing as being unbiased, and that's true. But I would trust a group of professionals from all over the world who personally investigated with no monetary gain (most of them were from capitalist countries where their work could have got them blacklisted) over the people who were actively bombing Korea. Professor Mori Masataka, who has spent much of his life studying the crimes of Unit 731, including biological warfare, has also visited the DPRK in the modern day to speak to survivors and witnesses, and study the proof they still have, and has also concluded that it was used against them.

Overall I think there's just too many coincidences. It could have been just natural outbreaks with the war bringing new diseases. But when you add the physical proof of the lab reports and autopsy results and collected specimens that shouldn't have been there, and the fact that none of the proof against it is actually verifiable, it really does make it seem like there's something else going on. At the very least, North Koreans and Chinese do wholeheartedly believe it was germ warfare. It has left a deep, deep scar on their psyche. If you've ever heard about how they don't like cold water in China, it's because with the fears of biowarfare, the Communist Party started a mass campaign to boil water before drinking it. That lingers in their culture, just like the war itself, while the US does everything it can to make its people and everyone else forget.

And in the end, that's the final nail of proof for me- the fact that the DPRK and China still remember and memorialize what was done to them, while America tries to erase it, even more than they do with Vietnam and Iraq. With them its distortion, justification, and lies. With Korea it's nothing. Chunks of meeting minutes from those years remain missing, files remain top secret, flight paths are never revealed. It's called the Forgotten War in America for a reason- you only want to forget when you still have something to hide.

In the end, even if it wasn't truly biological warfare, it *was* the US's fault. They started a war on false pretenses and refused to let it end even when the North Koreans and Chinese were more than willing. Every baby that starved because its mother couldn't get enough nutrients to produce milk, every child that died of exposure in the winter, and every person who died from illness, whether intentional or simply because they were living in caves with all their infrastructure laid waste to, is on *them.* The crimes that have been fully proven without a doubt are more than enough to indict.

ISC report- https://archive.org/details/ISC-Report-on-Bacterial-Warfare

The investigator who called the genomic analysis sources: https://valtinsblog.blogspot.com/2017/04/revealed-suppressed-report-on-1952-us.html?m=1#.WiwJuUqnGUm

Write up on the released intercepted messages with more sources at the bottom- https://kayej.substack.com/p/a-real-flood-of-bacteria-and-germs?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=web&triedRedirect=true

Al Jazeera documentary- https://odysee.com/@swprs:3/Dirty-Little-Secrets-Korea-Biowarfare-AJ-2010:c?lid=

They do a little of the typical saber-rattling of 'North Korea is aggressive' (when really they were just responding to Trump), just so you're aware.

Al Jazeera documentary with the write up at the bottom, with the account of the man whose father was killed by typhoid I mentioned in another author's note:

https://www.aljazeera.com/video/people-power/2010/4/4/dirty-little-secrets

Soviet vetoes meeting minutes- https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.587
https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.590 (this one isn't so important, it's just the wrap up of 'aha, since you refuse an impartial

investigation (without having the people who are lodging the accusations present to vote, and carried out by the people bombing those people) clearly you are a filthy liar! I am British, innit.') But there is the interesting second part of the UN dragging their heels on letting less-developed nations and Socialist nations into the UN, while proposing Japan joins just a few months later)

The gaslighting in these is genuinely insane. I know that word gets misused, but that is legitimately what it is. Please read the first one and join me in not understanding how Mr. Malik didn't just start killing people. I'm a fairly calm person, but I would be moved to extreme violence if I was him.

Thomas Powell's book The Secret Ugly: The Hidden History of Germ Warfare in Korea is supposed to be good (his parents were actually involved in breaking the story), but I can't find a link for a free version. ⛩⛩ Here's an interview with him: https://youtu.be/wQjHvQsALv0?si=RyFi-PLyNRo-EwWU

And another with Jeffrey Kaye:

https://youtu.be/vweZtDxeF7M?si=luaiIwybeaOOE5T6

Newspaper summary:

https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/271228

A little thing about Fort Detrick: https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/15/cia-fort-detrick-stephen-kinzer-228109/

This is completely unrelated, but do you ever think about how the Black Lives Matter movement in America was so large that it spread across the world, causing unrest and demands that the US treat its minorities better, then suddenly covid hit, forcing people to stay inside and not gather together? And it was announced conveniently right before it hit that Fort Detrick was 'suspending' its deadly germ operations after breeches of safety protocols? And also there was an influx of lung-related illnesses in the area at the same time? And how

when Biden said covid could be a Chinese bioweapon, China said, 'Okay, come check out our Wuhan lab and we can check out Fort Detrick.' And then he clammed up. And how there are apparently a few interesting e-mails involving American capitalists, covid, and Israel in the Epstein Files… Not necessarily saying this is true. Just one of those things nya…

Betting On Jade

1936

Hwang stared at the newspaper in his hands with abject shock. He'd snatched it when they had been in Gangneung out of pure habit, wanting, as always, to learn about what was transpiring in their country. Political maneuvers, projects, information from Japan, anything really, though today he'd been focused on seeing what had been said on the anniversary of their official annexation. It was usually all propagandistic chaff, but a kernel of truth could sometimes be found within.

But for once, what he saw had taken him completely by surprise.

He pulled his wire-framed glasses off and vigorously polished them, as if by doing so he could transform the image before him. But when he slipped them back on, it was still there.

It couldn't be. But...

The province darted a look over the top of the paper at Korea, who was putting his firearm back together on the other side of the clearing, cleaning it after their foray into civilization for supplies.

"What?" his country said, looking back.

"Nothing." Hwang hastily ducked back behind the news, examining the picture once more.

It certainly *appeared* like it.

"What's up, Hwang?" Sang asked, leaning over. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Ghosts aren't real," Korea said perfunctorily.

"It's nothing." Hwang turned the newspaper away from her. He couldn't jump to any conclusions. He needed to discuss this with

Korea first.

A cousin of his had other ideas.

"What are you hiding?" South Pyongan came from his other side, snatching the paper from his gasp. As soon as she saw what was on it, her jaw fell open. "What the hell is *this?!"*

Hwang winced as Korea demanded, "What?"

When the girl shoved the paper at him, his white flag paled even further. Hwang knew what he was seeing there.

Taking up almost the entire front page of the *Keijo Nippo* was a black-and-white photograph of someone standing next to Japan, clasping hands. Though the photo was grainy, it was clear who it was.

Korea.

'In celebration of twenty-six years of peaceful cooperation between Nihon and Chosen,' the headline proclaimed.

By now the other provinces had gathered to see what the fuss was, crowding around South Pyongan, gasping as they saw what she had.

But Hwang was focused on Korea. When he had seen the picture, his eyes had widened in shock. But not the shock of learning new information, but more... outrage. As if he were solely surprised to see himself standing next to Japan, not at seeing a mirror-image of his body, as one should be.

And... was that relief?

"Korea..." Gyeonggi ventured after a second of stunned silence. "Is that... you?"

"Of course it's not me!" he snapped, his reaction already masked. "The only way I would ever get within a foot of Japan is if I was putting a bullet in his heart."

"We're not doubting that," SH assured him. "But that certainly does... *look* like you."

"It's probably photo manipulation." Korea's knuckles were clenched around the grip of his gun.

Gyeong shook his head, hoisting his precious camera. "There are telltale signs when a photo's been messed with. I'm not saying I'd be right all the time, but this one looks pretty authentic."

"And recent," Kangwon added, chewing on a nail.

Korea's jaw clenched. "Just drop it."

"We can't just drop your literal doppelganger appearing in a photoshoot with Japan," Chungbuk pointed out.

"Y'all're crazy," Hae defiantly proclaimed, shoving her head close to the photo. "That don't look anythin' like Korea! Look at the eyes."

"Doesn't," Hwang corrected as he took a closer look.

Indeed, the Korea in the picture had wide eyes and a rounder face. And while his smile looked genuine, there was a stiffness to the corners of those eyes that made it look like he was on the other end of a gun and not a camera, though maybe only to someone who knew that face well. It wasn't an expression he could picture on the country he had known for seventeen years.

"That's because it's *not* me," Korea insisted.

"You can say that all you like," South Pyongan said skeptically. "But that's clearly you. I mean, it's not like there's another Korea."

Their Countryhuman looked away.

Silence fell as the cousins all exchanged looks of growing astonishment.

"Korea..." Hwang wasn't quite brave enough to voice his conclusion.

SH picked it up for him. "Are you saying... there's another Korea?"

Their country didn't answer, which was an answer in itself.

The provinces were all stunned into silence.

Hwang couldn't believe it! There were previous examples in history, and there was he and his sister, of course, but to think his own country...

"This is fascinating," he said, not seeing the looks some of the others cast him. "I wonder why two of you exist? My hypothesis for Hae and I is that the sheer class disparities in our province resulted in the two of us, but why are there two Koreas? Is one of you naturally less educated or-"

Gyeong elbowed him, and he suddenly noticed that Korea looked decidedly murderous.

Right. Perhaps he could pose those questions later.

"Who cares *why* there's two of them?!" South Pyongan burst out. "Why didn't we *know* there were two of them?" She gave Korea a pointed look, but he wouldn't meet her gaze.

"Is it not obvious?" South Chungcheong had been silent, but now she spoke up. "He did not want us privy to the fact that half of our country is colluding with the enemy."

South Pyongan took another look at the paper, as if just realizing what the full picture implied. Her blue face darkened. "He's a traitor?"

"No!" Korea barked with enough force to make both of the women flinch. "South isn't a traitor."

Kangwon's heavy lids flew open. "'S-South?'"

Korea glanced side to side, as if thinking about fleeing, before steeling his shoulders. "Yes. That's his name. He's my brother and he is *not* a traitor. Japan must have forced him to take that photograph."

"But why didn't you *tell* us about him?" SH asked, her expression quite hurt.

It was an enigma to Hwang as well. To think their Countryhuman had an unknown sibling in enemy hands the same way he had, without anyone ever suspecting, was... nigh inconceivable. *Seventeen years* he had been concealing that fact from them. Hwang had only been missing Hae for eleven, and he hadn't even been aware that he was. But evidently the same wasn't true for Korea.

'Seventeen years...'

Korea seemed to have recovered from how off-kilter seeing his brother had knocked him. "And what was I supposed to say?" he demanded, drawing his head up. "That the other half of me is a coward too afraid to fight Japan, so I left him behind?"

"You could have just told us you have a brother," SH said softly.

Their country looked down. If Hwang didn't know better, he would have said he almost looked... ashamed.

"I was going to tell you when we were Liberated," he muttered.

Several points were connecting in Hwang's head.

"Korea," he started slowly. "Is this 'South' imprisoned in Seoul?"

Korea *'tch'*ed, looking away again. "He should be."

The others seemed to catch on.

"The Seoul raids." Kangwon blinked in realization.

"Seodaemun Prison..." North Pyongan murmured.

"The reason you stayed so long-" SJ started.

NJ picked up, "-wasn' to kill Japanese..."

"It was to look for the other Korea," North Hamgyong finished grimly, startling the girls.

Their country grimaced, once more answering with his silence.

The mood shifted a little, from agitation to contemplation. Hwang, too, was immersed in it.

It all made sense! The multiple raids on Seoul, even when it was risky for them to enter the city! How often they visited, even with the Kempeitai chasing them! That one high-risk low-reward mission that had been so unlike Korea! Hwang felt a deep sense of self-satisfaction as the pieces finally came together, an answer to a mystery that he hadn't thought to solve.

Sang broke the silence. "If you told us the truth, we wouldn't have been so hard on you back then, Korea."

North Pyongan nodded, glancing at his sister. "If we knew you were looking for your sibling, we would have helped."

"I wouldn't have," North Hamgyong broke in, glowering. "It was a stupid move, and it got people killed."

"Hambu!" Hae exclaimed in horror.

"It's true," he growled. "He doesn't even *know* if he's in Seoul."

"And clearly the boy is quite chummy with Japan," South Chungcheong added.

"Well, *some* people actually *care* about *their* siblings!" SH said brightly, her smile stretched taut.

She spared a glare for the Chungcheong girl, then she and North Hamgyong exchanged a look that could have reduced anyone who walked into it to atoms.

"Everyone shut up!" Korea snapped, and they all quieted.

"North Hamgyong is right," he continued after a moment. "It was stupid. I deviated from the plan of attack and it got several of our people killed. As revolutionaries we need to criticize ourselves, and learn from our mistakes. Which is why I haven't made another attempt."

"But we know now," Sang pointed out, looking excited. "We could help."

North Pyongan nodded. "With all of us working together, I'm sure we could-"

"No," Korea denied firmly. "If I couldn't find him before, I won't find him now. They've stepped up security in the capital. In fact, I bet Japan published this in an attempt to lure me out." His teeth ground together for a second. "Regardless, South isn't a skilled fighter. It's more imperative that we stay free so we can Liberate *all* of our people, including him."

SH hesitated. "But..."

"No 'buts,'" Korea said. "We have more important things to do."

The words were harsh, but pragmatic. Hwang was also thinking pragmatically.

"We do have more important things to worry about." The glasses-wearing boy once more ignored the looks that were shot his way by the others. "Korea, this newspaper has an added purpose, aside from a possible trap. With this 'South' appearing next to Japan during a time when our guerrillas are becoming more active-"

Korea immediately understood. "They'll think the will of the country isn't behind them."

Hwang nodded. "It's propaganda. We need to counter it."

His Countryhuman grimly considered this. "We'll have to go public."

So far they had been working in obscurity, imploring their people not to divulge the identities of those who had helped them. It had kept them and Korea's Army away from an overt hunt, and out of Japan's hands. Just one more group of Korean guerrillas.

"That's going to cause a lot of trouble," North Hamgyong pointed out.

"It'll be more trouble if we don't," Kangwon countered. "People can't think Korea stands with Japan."

"He doesn't," Korea growled. "He's being threatened, I know he is."

"Then we need to tell people that," SH said.

Korea closed his eyes, then snapped them open. "We'll head north, make contact with the *March First* again, and the underground papers in our own country. North Hwanghae, I'll need you to send a message to that student of yours with the *Dong-A Ilbo*.

"It's time our people know their country is fighting for them."

Hwang's heart leapt. He'd been dreaming of this day! It was imperative the announcement be perfectly crafted. He would prepare one of his mental drafts, and enlist Hae's help to make his words more palatable for the masses.

Korea got to his feet. "Strike the camp. That paper is already a few days old. We need to counter this as soon as possible."

"Wait, Korea!" Hae, who had been unusually silent until now, jumped up, grabbing his sleeve. "There's two'a you?"

"Have you listened to a word we've been saying?" North Hamgyong demanded.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Ah was askin' rhetorchally."

"Rhetorically," Hwang corrected.

"Ayuh." His sister turned her big eyes on their Countryhuman. "Is the other Korea like you?"

Hwang shook his head, bemused. Of course the concept of two Koreas would be his sister's dream come true.

Korea hesitated, then shook his head. "No."

Hae pouted, and he added, "He actually has a sense of humour."

South Pyongan whistled. "Wow. That's hard to believe. So what happened to *you?"* She dodged the pinecone that came her way.

"Wait, can you tell us about him?" Sang asked. "Pretty please?"

"Beautiful please!" Hae pleaded.

Korea *'tch'*ed, saying after a second, "Fine. I will talk about South *this once,* then you are all going to drop the topic until we're Liberated. Deal?"

"Deal," they all agreed in one voice, some earnestly and some not so much (Hwang was one of the latter).

"And we talk as we walk." The Countryhuman slung his rucksack over his back. "Come on."

As they trekked over the hilly north, Korea reluctantly started to describe his other half.

"He's not... really a coward. South is... kind..."

—

1952

On a good day, travelling alone, North could likely cross the southern half of Korea from north to south within two days, not stopping to eat, and with only a single rest. Once the Division was gone and he could finally move freely over his country without hiding from enemy soldiers or with 'borders' to stop him, he would test that. But right now, with the war, his prediction was around six days there and back, maybe a bit longer if he did return with more than Choe Jong-ok.

America's eight more days for revising started tomorrow, today by the time their vehicle reached Kangwon province. North was confident he could make it to the Raktong and back before the 19th, even with China slowing him down.

He wasn't really, he would grudgingly admit. His comrade kept pace easily (with his stupidly long legs), and didn't complain when

North said they were going to take as few rests as possible. The Korean would just have to be more cautious with him at his side, taking longer, more mountainous routes. If he was ambushed alone, he knew he could escape. But it didn't matter if China managed to get away, because if even a hint of his red skin was exposed, his country wouldn't.

North looked over every few minutes, fighting the urge to adjust his old grey and white scarf that China had traded his ushanka for again with the warming weather, wanting to pull it even farther down over his white eyes and the strip of crimson around them.

North had examined his mental map of the frontline thoroughly before deciding where to cross. The Seoul area was obviously not worth it, and crossing by Chorweon and the so-called 'Iron Triangle' was out of the question. The mountains were heavily surveilled by both their armies. The area above the Hwacheon Reservoir was also out, as the thickest concentration of enemy troops was there, with four divisions of Rhee's army under the US X Corps' control, and the American 40th Division. The Yanggu-Haean-myeon stretch was less heavily patrolled by America's 25th and Rhee's 8th, but if they were spotted, their only escape routes would be west, straight into the cluster of enemy troops, or east, where the Haean Basin would cut off their escape. North knew they couldn't count on any of his people helping them there- anyone even slightly left-leaning or 'suspicious' would have been relocated long ago, likely to the same camps as his soldiers.

And even if someone there might help them, he wouldn't put them at risk. He didn't even want *China* here.

So the only option left was the line between Haean-myeon and the coast. It was only held by two divisions of Rhee's I Corps, though it presented the same problem of leaving them trapped between the basin and the sea. Except worse because the area was narrower, and they couldn't even try to escape over the water.

But North deemed it worth it. The majority of combat was taking place between Chorweon (his chest squeezed as he looked at its position below the Dividing line) and Haean-myeon. With the constant naval bombardment, North's soldiers could barely launch

any probing actions. All they could do was hold on and repulse the reactionaries. There was also slightly less aerial reconnaissance, since the enemy knew no major push could come from there.

*'Not that a push can come from **anywhere.**'*

And Rhee's soldiers were still useless. On top of that, his newer conscripts were more likely to be sent to the area, ones that were less steeped in reactionary rhetoric. If they did need an ally, they were more likely to find a defector there.

So North and China took a vehicle bound for his Third Corps to Malhwi-ri for the second time in twenty-four hours, then hiked after it, into the southern peaks of Mount Kumgang. Annoyingly (even though North had planned it this way), they couldn't cross the front that night. The drive east had left the time around zero five hundred hours, with only an hour until dawn. They spent half the day hiking across the lower slopes, until they were just north of the KPA Third Corps, and the gap they held between the Soyang and Nam Rivers. Then they headed farther east across the northward course of the Nam, entering his First Corps' territory, a mountain mass facing the 'NDA's' I Corps.

As they marched, they passed through the empty villages his people had fled from, and the ones they hadn't been able to.

North stopped on a ridge, looking down at the burnt, barren patch of earth where Oemyon-ri had used to stand. It had been small, mostly wood and thatch and flesh. The napalm had spared none of it. The only thing that remained to mark that his people had once lived there were chunks of broken, sooty tile his soldiers had stacked into burial cairns, marking the tomb of those whose homes they had once been part of.

A pole had been thrust into the earth in the center of the scorched patch, the words on it slashed deep with hate and rage, proclaiming, *'AMERICAN BASTARDS'* at the sky in a cry of helpless defiance.

The United Nations had stopped responding to their complaints about civilians being targeted. The Americans reported it almost

openly now. His villages could be used to house soldiers, just like his fields could be used to feed them, his oxen could be used to bring them supplies, and his children could grow up to become them. In the eyes of America and the world, they were *all* military targets.

Korea was nothing but a military target.

He tore his eye away, finding them a place to wait out the hours until the sun fell, sheltered from the rain that started to fall.

As they waited, North could hear the detonations of bombs and blast of artillery from their shelter in a narrow valley. It made his skin prickle.

He knew he should just give this up, go join the First Corps instead, to fight by their side and bring them hope in victory, even if it didn't change anything about their situation.

But he had promised. So he remained rooted to the mountainside, ignoring China's attempts at conversation, until the sun set again. Then they crept forth, into his soldiers' line.

They had no trouble, as he'd made sure he was up to date with the codes for the area, easily able to respond the few times someone called out, either hearing some brush of their clothes against rock, or just being vigilant, making North proud.

They made it to the curve of the Nam, staring down at the band of shining black water passing below. The mountains rising on the other side were dark, with only the occasional searchlight panning the shore they were on, swiftly followed by small arms fire from his soldiers until it went dark again. From the west, the distant roar of naval cannons boomed.

They stealthily descended the ridges, stripping down at the bottom so they were in just their undershorts, before slipping into the dark, cold river. They moved slowly, packs over their heads, careful not to cause ripples or sloshing in case they were heard over the pattering of rain. North's muscles were wound tight, waiting for a shout of discovery or bullets to spray the water.

But they made it to the other side, and he swiftly changed into the 'National Defense Army' uniform he'd requisitioned, grimacing as he pulled the pants on over his wet boxer shorts and soaking bandages. He tucked his damp KPA uniform into his bag, unsurprised to see that China had also changed into the same reactionary uniform he'd worn on their POW camp breakout. His eyes smiled at him as he buttoned up his long sleeves.

The next few hours were nerve-wracking, as they navigated their way through Rhee's line, passing by men prowling through the woods and lining the ridges above them, voices filtering through the trees and down over the rocks. The falling rain and heavy clouds over the moon serves them well, but there were still several close calls, the worst of which came as they were forced to ascend a ridge to escape approaching sentries, who then stopped to have a smoke break below, where the rain couldn't touch them. They chatted lazily while North and China pressed themselves to the rock only a few metres above their heads, in plain sight if they looked up.

"Do you think the commies will sign?" one man's voice drifted up to them with another whiff of cigarette smoke.

"Hope not," the other said. "They still need to get what's coming to 'em."

North grit his teeth. They were so close. It would be too easy-

China's shoulder touched his, and he pulled away, letting the men mosey off back in the direction they'd came from. Then the Countryhumans moved on.

Several times China would stiffen, backpedalling or giving North a signal to find a new direction to go in. The Korean did every time, not hesitating.

And eventually, the Chinese man stopped, tilting his head, then murmured, "Clear."

Some of North's tension eased, though he still remained on guard as he lead them south through the night, past the enemy's rear.

They crossed the roads that led to Kansong and Yangyang, making it safely into the Seorak Mountains, walking until the sun came up, then walking more, working their way around valleys, climbing up and down ridges, and skirting villages.

In the early morning light, as they scaled a ridge that would set Mount Odae within their sights, the final major peaks they had to traverse before leaving the Taebaek mountain range for the Sobaeks, North turned.

Below them, nestled at the foot of Seorak Mountain, was a small village, a cluster of houses with thatched roofs, some with tile. It looked different than when he'd last seen it, visiting as many villages as he could after the elections. It had been bombed thoroughly in the first part of the war, and shoddily rebuilt. He could see villagers creeping out, starting their day, some of them people he likely knew, the ones that hadn't fled or been murdered, going about their lives in Osaek-ri.

It wasn't safe to be exposed so high up, but North still searched around, finding a flat rock and using the tip of the utility knife in his boot to scratch the outline of Daechongbong and the lesser peaks into it. When he was done, he ran his fingers along the lines, satisfied they were deep enough to feel with his fingertips. He stashed the rock in his bag, casting a defensive look at China.

But his comrade said nothing, just spread a pinned sleeve, gesturing for him to lead on.

They reached Mount Odae around nineteen hundred hours, as the sun set. Its peaks weren't as towering as Seorak Mountain's, but as they skirted a winding mountain road, it still put a great chunk of Korea at their feet.

North looked out at the rolling hills and jagged ridges, the white and grey peaks growing a coat of spring green in defiance of the air strikes that were launched even here, targeting guerrillas. Patches of colour bloomed on the ridges, untouched by foraging- bright gold sansuyu, pale pink and white plum blossoms clinging onto their flowers, snowy mountain magnolias like the ones on his northern provinces' flags.

And jindallae, crowning the ridges in vibrant pink and purple, making his teeth clench.

But even that wasn't enough to stop him from welling with that unnameable emotion that always filled his chest when he looked out over his country like this, the same one he felt gazing out over his people.

The sunset had burned away the clouds that had hung heavy all day, leaving the land awash with reds and golds and purples, and even under the scars he could see marring it, the craters in ridges, the severed tree stumps, the burnt patches where napalm had razed all life away, it was still his people's home.

"Korea is very beautiful," China said from beside him, voicing his own thoughts.

North straightened slightly, shaking out his shoulders.

"And *you're* very easy to flatter," his comrade added.

The Korean grimaced, turning his head from the landscape. "Fuck you."

China laughed, padding along the trail after him. "I did mean it, though. Your nation is almost as beautiful as mine."

"Then when it isn't being carpet-bombed, you'll think it's more beautiful," North countered his subtle brag. "You should see Paektusan in winter."

Even if he had, he hadn't seen the 'Korean side' (it was all Korean). The way Chon Lake caught the moon as it rose overhead, or the way the waterfalls froze into fantastic shapes, or how Janggun Peak looked robed in ice and snow.

"And Jeju's canola fields." They had visited in spring during the Occupation, when the flowers stretched across the island like a golden sea. Hae had had to be pried away from them. "And when Mount Kumgang has all its trees, it looks like it's carved out of jade."

North realized he was antsy for China to see his country when it *wasn't* being torn apart. It was unfair that he'd only seen it at its worst, and hadn't been able to see way the rock formations of Chilbo Mountain towered over the pines, or the gold the gingkos shed over Yongmyong Temple, or the old mounds of the Kangso Three Tombs and their vibrant Goguryeo-era paintings, or the mountain magnolias that bloomed on Mount Taesong, filling the air with their sweet scent. Not to mention all the deep blue mountain lakes and thick stands of old growth trees hidden away in the mountains, that had no name but what the locals gave them, or-

"In fall, all these trees turn," North explained, sweeping his arm at the peaks below them. "The entire span of the Taebaeks, from Wonsan to Busan, look like a wildfire."

China's eyes squinched up. "I'm looking forward to seeing it all."

Many of the sights he'd thought of had been destroyed, Yongmyong Temple decimated, the gingkos and mountain magnolias burnt to ash, and even the tucked away forests cut, bombed, or burned by reactionaries. And the canola fields of Jeju had been drowned in blood.

But the land was still here. And so were his people. They would rebuild and replant, heal the wounds and create new sights for them to enjoy. They would make Korea as beautiful as it had been, and then even more so, until no one could doubt they were the most beautiful country on earth.

The thought gave him a fresh burst of energy, getting them over Mount Odae and the road that lead to Gangneung.

But even with that, and all the exercise he did, North could feel his body wanting to flag. It wasn't his blisters- his feet were so callused those almost weren't possible for him anymore. It wasn't hunger, he had a rock for that. And it wasn't his muscles or energy itself. When he was in marching mode, he could push his body past its limit, and only realize when he stopped walking.

It was his stupid burns, the ones around his thighs and... other places. As... non-thick as his legs were right now, they still chafed

after so many hours, the thick bandages rubbing against each other. Getting them wet had only made it worse.

He was almost glad when China started to complain about being tired, even though he pushed them on for another few ri, until it was the middle of the night, and they were in the ridges just north of Jaengsong Town. Then he started searching for something he knew was nearby.

"I think this might be the end of me," China moaned, stumbling up the rocky Geumdaebong Peak. "You'll have to leave me for dead if I don't get a break of at least ten minutes."

"What did I say about no complaining?" North griped. "And how did you do the Long March if you can barely handle twenty-four hours?"

"Do you think we were walking the entire time?" China asked. "If that's what your Arduous March was like, I'm surprised you didn't get where you were going sooner."

North didn't dignify him with a response.

High up on the lowest ridge, he found it, a dark cave mouth gaping in the rock.

"Do you hear anything?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

China prowled to the edge, listening, then shook his head.

North cast a reluctant look up the mountain. They were on the edge of Gangwon province, and still had more than half their journey to go. He didn't want to waste any of their night travel.

"I'm sure I can keep going after an hour or so," China assured him, his ten minutes jumping dramatically.

North could keep going, even with his legs. But if they were ambushed, he didn't want his comrade to be unable to fight or flee.

So he led him into the cave, one of many they'd discovered during their mapping of their country. North Gyeongsang had found this

one, actually, spotting it while answering nature. He'd stuck his head in and ended up tripping and tumbling down the sloping mouth. When North Chungcheong had tried to help him up, he'd fallen again, and taken him with him.

With that in mind, North was very careful as he picked his way down, testing each foothold before placing his weight on it, turning on his flashlight once the light wouldn't be seen from outside. He'd been hoping China might trip, but he made it down safely, peering around in the white glow, harsh after a night of travel in the dark.

It was a limestone cave, the rock pale and rippled, carved into undulating formations by millions of years of erosion, making it look like the walls were melting like ice. Stalagmites rose from the ground, lumpy and misshapen, and stalactites dripped water from the ceiling into a dark pool at the foot of the slope.

North strafed the cave with his light, seeing nothing more threatening than a beetle that scuttled across the wall, likely not one of the Yankees'. A dark opening at the back led to the rest of the cave, where he knew it opened up.

Nodding, he tossed his light to China, dropping his bag on the rock ledge that ran around the pool. It would keep them out of the line of sight if someone were to peer into the cave.

"Toilet," he said, turning back for the slope. When he realized the other man was behind him still, he shot him a look. *"Don't* follow me."

"We need firewood," he pointed out.

Right. Their canteens were low, and they had water and a chance to make a fire. They had to take it while they could.

"I'll get it," North said.

"I can."

The Korean glared at him. "We're only stopping because *you* need to rest. If you aren't going to, then we can leave."

China sighed, retreating. "Very well. But don't leave me alone down here too long." In a small voice, he said, "I'm afraid of the dark."

North shook his head, heading back outside, trying not to hobble. The area before the cave was flat, but stretched far enough that he didn't need to worry about anyone below somehow seeing him in the thin moonlight.

He did take the opportunity to piss, but then he worked his pants down over his thighs, along with his boxer shorts, wincing at what he saw. The bandages around his thighs were dark, and when he pressed his finger to them, they squelched.

Fresh bandages. He supposed he could have brought those.

But he hadn't. And he would be fine. He could handle it for another few days.

North belted his pants back up, then went to find firewood. They didn't need much, just enough for their canteens to boil on. When he had an armful of thin branches chopped off the scrub trees growing out of the rock, he returned.

He tensed, seeing something on the ground outside the cave mouth, one hand going for his pistol as he scanned the mountainside. But as he got closer, he realized it was...

Bandages.

North glared at them, then at the cave mouth. He stalked over, tossing his armful of wood down, listening to it clatter on the rock. Sadly, he didn't hear a yelp.

He snatched up the roll of fabric, thinking of that night in Hyochang Park as he bandaged his wounds by Kim Ku's gravestone, and the steamed buns that had fallen out their wrapping.

Not understanding China any better, North rewrapped his legs, satisfied with the clean, dry new dressings. His thighs were going to be covered in scars, even once the burns healed. But it wasn't like he didn't have worse.

By the time he was back in the cave, China had taken off his mask and started a fire at the back, far enough away that the smoke wouldn't choke them in the short time it took to boil, and their canteens were sitting in it.

And he was *also* rummaging around in North's bag.

He was across the cave in a second, snatching it away from him. "What do you think you're doing?!"

China sat back on his knees, unbothered at being caught. "Snooping. It's admirable I've been able to wait this long, really. By the way, I noticed you use ginseng in your toothpaste mix when the other herbs you use would be sufficient. Since it's harder to find, does that mean you go out of your way to add it?"

"Mind your own business," North growled, the cold limestone leeching through the fabric of his pants as he kneeled to rummage through his bag, making sure everything was still there.

Rock, uniform, toothpaste tin, pine twig, ammunition, socks- North's heart plummeted when he realized he couldn't find something, tearing everything out before spinning around, relief and panic sparking in his chest.

"Give it back."

China looked up from the photograph he was holding, smiling. "Can I get a 'please?'"

"Give it!" North didn't wait for a response, lunging at him.

The other country held the photo up, but North just bowled him over, scuttling over his body to grab onto the paper in his outstretched arm. He tried to pull it from his grasp, but the two fingers China had pinching the corner only tightened, making North's chest do the same.

"China," he growled down at the Countryhuman, whose face was pressed into his sternum. *"Give."*

The fingers released, and North quickly got off him, putting his

back to him as he hurriedly examined the photograph, his shoulders falling as he realized it was fine.

He knew his overreaction had just shown China how much this photo meant to him, but... It *did* mean a lot to him. He couldn't have anything happen to it.

It was a picture of him and South, from right after Liberation, before his flag had changed to the People's Committees'. North Gyeongsang had taken it with his Graflex 4x5 Speed Graphic, and had the photos developed in Seoul. His brother was dressed in the crimson and navy jeogori he'd shown up in, waving enthusiastically at the camera with a broad smile, his other arm around North in his uniform, his lips curved.

He hadn't realized he was smiling when it was taken. The expression looked alien, something that didn't belong on his face. But every time he looked at his brother's grin, lit up from the inside, even in black-and-white, he could remember why it had been there.

"You weren't exactly look-alikes even then, were you?" China said from just over his shoulder.

North jolted, hunching protectively over the photo. "What are you talking about?" he asked irritably. "We were identical."

You couldn't see their slight height difference in the photo. Besides the clothes, the only difference was the colour of their eyebrows. North's were black and South's were white.

"Hm." China leaned back.

"Don't 'Hm,' me," North muttered, carefully tucking his supplies back into his bag to make a safe spot for the photograph.

It had been stupid to bring it. He should have left it with his Premier like his book of names, and like he had once he'd retrieved it from his hidden compartment in the chosonjip. He'd been terrified enough when he had thought it burned with their house. If anything ever happened to it...

But he'd just... wanted it with him.

He took one last look at his brother's face, the way he was beaming.

*'Then why didn't **your** brother follow **you?**'*

It wasn't like North Hamgyong was the first person to ask that. He had spent thirty-three years asking the same thing. Even after being briefly reunited with his brother, North still didn't have an answer.

He didn't have an answer for a lot of things.

Unbidden, his gaze drifted to his own face. The smile wasn't the only thing that made it look so strange to him. Neither was the white flag with its taegeuk.

Looking at this memory, feeling the moment as it was captured in time, it was hard to believe that one boy would ever want to cut the other's eye out.

North shook his head, arranging his uniform around it.

He knew his brother hadn't wanted to do it. He never would have unless he had to. And he knew he regretted it.

'잘못했어.'

"You were so cute," China remarked when the photograph was safely buttoned away again. His eyes flicked critically over North now. "What happened?"

'Life.'

"I was never 'cute,'" the Korean growled.

China hummed skeptically.

Ssi-bal. He hated that he'd seen that. The photograph wasn't private- all their provinces had been there when it was taken, and so had several of their comrades, Choe Bong-nam included. But it *felt* private. He didn't like that China knew he looked at his brother like that.

The acrid smell of smoke was greeting stronger, and North went to check their canteens. They sounded like they were boiling, and the floor didn't look like it was cracking, so he left them for now, heading back to the rock pathway by the pool.

China was sitting on part of the wall where the limestone flowed down, creating a natural bench, with North's flashlight by his feet.

"I'm very sorry for rifling through your things," he said with a gravity that was so sincere it was definitely feigned. "In exchange, I can show you one of my most precious possessions."

"Don't bother," North dismissed, sitting a fair distance away from him (bag safely at his side). His legs screamed with relief from his hips to his feet.

But China was already rummaging overexaggeratedly in his sleeves.

North finally caved. "How do those work?"

"Magic." China's face brightened. "Aha."

He pulled a small stone from his sleeve, holding it up to the beam of the flashlight. It was grey-green and smaller than his palm, with natural edges to it. Green and blue striations glittered inside.

North blinked, unimpressed. "It's a rock."

"Your observations never cease to impress," China teased. "But actually, it's jade, to be specific."

"You have a gold-plated knife, and your most precious possession is a rock."

"One of my most precious possessions." China paused. "Though admittedly it is rather high on the list." His eyes slid to North, and his smile turned sly. "Do you want to know how I got it?"

Wary, North said, "I don't care."

"Hm." China held the rock up again. "Shame."

After a few seconds of watching him fondle the stone, North demanded, "Where?"

"From a man named Kim Hyo-ri."

North froze. "What?"

"No need to ask for Hanja," China said. "It's the one you're thinking of."

Kim Hyo-ri hadn't left Korea's Army after the disastrous Seodaemun mission that had killed his brother. He'd left nine months later, after it came out that North had one.

When he'd recovered from the shock of the name, the Korean demanded, "Tell me everything."

"The Japanese were closing in on a village in my northeast, and I ran into him there," China said, rotating the jade between his fingers. "He was trying to teach my villagers how to fight, since there wasn't time to flee. When my comrades and I volunteered to help, he told me he'd been a part of a little guerrilla group with the Korean Countryhuman."

He cut his eyes to him, passing him the jade. North took it with newfound respect, knowing it had once been in his comrade's hands.

"And interestingly enough, he told me there were actually *two* Korean Countryhumans," China continued. "And that he was looking for his General's brother."

North blinked. "He said that?"

China nodded. "En. He said he wasn't going to give up until he was able to reunite his Countryhuman with his other half."

North was dumbfounded.

When Kim Hyo-ri had announced he was leaving, he hadn't tried to stop him, or ask why. He knew why. He was leaving because he had realized his brother had died because North had been trying to

save his. Because his Countryhuman had failed him.

But he had actually left to... find South for him?

"What happened to him?" he demanded, already knowing.

The man had never returned to Korea. He knew because he had searched for him.

"He died in the defense of the village," China said softly. "Protecting one of my elders."

North squeezed his eye shut. *'Ssi-bal.'* He wished he would have told him. He wished he would have asked.

"Then he died for..." North faltered. "...Our countries."

"En," China said with a small smile. "I found that jade on him. Salvaging, you understand. What he'd told me intrigued me, and so did the stone. Do you know why he would have had it on him?"

North hadn't even known he hadn't despised him.

"No."

"Any guesses?"

Men and women leaving Korea, streaming across the mountains and rivers into China and the Soviet Union, only stopping to bend, coming up with rocks, small stones that wouldn't weigh them down, but still tether them.

"It could have been... a piece of Korea to... bring with him," North said hesitantly.

The other country thought, then nodded, like the answer pleased him.

North looked down at the stone, rolling it between his fingers, like he could read Kim Hyo-ri's will in the small divot on one side and patches where fingers had started to wear it smooth.

Even after North had gotten his brother killed for his own selfishness, he had still loved... his country.

"I buried him," China said quietly. "When the devils were dead, the villagers gave him a funeral. I can bring him home for you when this war is over, if you want."

"...No."

Kim Hyo-sam had been disposed of by the Japanese. It didn't matter where Kim Hyo-ri was buried, if he couldn't rest next to his brother.

"I don't..." North wasn't bold enough to echo China's words from the cemetery, so he silently held out the jade.

China observed him, then gently took the stone back, sliding it into his sleeve. "I'll continue to take good care of it."

North nodded wordlessly, gazing over at the fire, watching it flicker and snap.

In the end, it wasn't just China he misunderstood.

The other country eventually got up, tamping down the flames, leaving their canteens on the ground to cool as he walked back over.

"So," he asked, his voice light as he smiled again. "What is this brother of yours like? It occurs to me I've never asked."

"An idiot," North said bluntly, adjusting to the weight of Kim Hyo-ri, heavier than it had been.

He would update his name in the book. It was all he could do.

China smiled knowingly. "Nothing else?"

"No."

"A man of a singular characteristic. Fascinating."

North sighed. "South is..."

He trailed off, realizing he had been about to say 'kind.' He thought of gunshots in Pyongyang and his brother grabbing Kim Song-hui's gun, of Hae left silent for a night.

The word wouldn't come.

He also realized that he didn't want to talk to China about this at all.

"He's frivolous," he clipped, trying to end the conversation.

China stared at him for a long moment, then said, "En. That is the impression I got when I met him."

That got North's attention, and his neck twisted so fast it cracked. "You *met* my brother? *When?"*

China waved a hand lazily. "A few years ago, 1938, maybe."

During the Occupation, then. And *of course* his comrade hadn't thought to mention this to him before.

"Why?" he demanded. "What did you talk about? What was he doing?"

"Nothing important." Seeing North's Look, he sighed. "Fine. Our acquaintance was brief. I heard that the Korean Countryhuman was staying in my country, so I went to propose an alliance. I was turned down, as I suppose he had his own problems to deal with. Then we went our own ways."

North's mind raced. Kim Tu-bong hadn't found out about South until towards the end, so he wouldn't have known, but Kim Ku had never mentioned that during his visit a few years ago. South had never mentioned it either.

Ssi-bal, if he had known back then that China himself was seeking comrades during the Occupation, they could have coordinated their factions more closely, been even more effective against the Japanese, maybe even stopped that mess of Chinese Communists

accusing his of being spies sooner. What had the Provisional Government even been trying to accomplish?

'Damn adventurists.'

"How was he?" he asked, referring to South, of course.

"A bit shy, but fairly personable. Charming, funny, a fine singer," China listed. "And utterly uninspired. We shared a few drinks, then I decided his help wasn't worth the effort of pursuing."

North bristled on behalf of his brother. "You can't say that if you don't know him well."

South may not have had a mind for politics or leadership, but North was fully aware that he was personally... easier to get along with than him. He had an interest in the arts, singing, dancing, theatre, and- as China said- he certainly had a better sense of humour. South had always been the fun one, the friendly one. China just didn't know him.

The other man made a noise of disagreement. "I can, actually. Getting to know people is like betting on jade. Someone with a skilled eye can learn to tell from the exterior which stones have promise and which are useless. Some are intriguing enough to take a look inside, but they only contain cheap minerals. But a rare few, once you crack them open, hold high-quality jade."

North was gifted with a crystal-clear image of China walking along a table, upon which sat a row of roughhewn grey rocks. He trailed his fingers over them, sleeves flowing behind, occasionally stopping to tap one with a fingernail. He split one open, discarded it, then moved to the next. This one, he pulled a shard of glimmering green jade from, holding it up to his face and smiling in self-satisfaction.

The Korean shuddered in distaste, blinking away the image. "Don't even think about trying to 'crack me open.'"

China gave him an enigmatic smile. "Who says I haven't already?"

'Disturbing bastard.'

"Anyways, you can imagine how disappointed I was to learn I had such a boring neighbour, and how thrilled I was to hear that there was another Korea. Even more so now that I know that unlike your brother, *you're* actually interesting."

North gave him a wary look. 'Interesting' was the exact same word North Pyongan had used to describe the Chinese man just before they'd met. It didn't exactly thrill him to be called that by him.

'We're similar people,' China had said over a year ago.

Should he hit him?

They trailed off into silence as North entertained a brief fantasy about doing so. He wouldn't of course. Not unless China gave him the chance to fight him again. He had more self-control than that.

Behind his lips, he ran his tongue over his canines.

His thoughts turned to his brother, and what words he would use to describe him now. 'Frivolous' was satisfying. 'Light-hearted' if he wanted to sound more charitable. Though it could be said that a heart that remained light in the face of the crimes South had stood by and observed couldn't be considered a virtue, even if none of them were his fault.

He had been kind, once. He had saved the last sip of water for North, had put on performances to try and bolster his spirit. He had been kind to him at least. But maybe in that microcosm of a world that had been just them two, that couldn't be an accurate assessment. The only other people he had ever witnessed South interact with were their guards, with whom he had been polite. Though he had been outright friendly with Toyama Ichiro, their ill-fated accomplice, 'friendly' carried less weight than 'kind.'

Friendly was 'nice,' which was only an upholding of etiquette, an empty word. North saw no use for it and had never tried to claim the attribute for himself. But South had clung to it like a lifeline, hoping that 'niceness' would win them allies and maybe even their freedom. The saboteurs who attempted to infiltrate their People's Committees and Party were 'nice,' simpering and smiling to

ingratiate themselves with others. After all, so long as someone was nice, they could still retain some support even after being exposed as treacherous snakes trying to harm their country.

The word 'nice' had started to lose meaning for North. All it carried were smiles with sharp edges and knives hidden in sleeves.

"We can't tolerate not having all our prisoners of war returned," he said suddenly, his voice echoing as he wrenched himself from his thoughts. A slightly inane declaration, all things considered.

If China was baffled by him randomly (and loudly) repeating something they'd talked about dozens of times before, and was also on its way to being resolved, he made no sign of it. "You'll find no dissent here. I'm sure some of our soldiers would genuinely want to resist, but-"

North cut him off. "So long as even one of them could be being held against their will, we can't give in."

It was hard to believe anyone that wasn't a landlord or former politician would willingly choose South's system over his, but as he knew by now, five years-

'Seven.'

-wasn't enough to sweep away the old mindset completely. Especially not when America was laying all of Rhee's crimes at their feet. Once they won the war, they could continue re-educating those who went against their own interests, and show them what a democratic society could be.

"Then it's a good thing America's diplomats are at least pretending to play along," China said languidly. "I would hate to leave a loyal comrade to be tortured in a camp. Or worse, sent to Taiwan."

It sounded like a joke, but North knew enough to read deeper. If the loyal Chinese soldiers were sent, they *would* be tortured in another camp. And if the disloyal ones were, they would join the Nationalists in slaughtering the Communists and other Taiwanese natives, then be turned on the mainland by Chang Kai-shek.

"What is Taiwan's character like?"

It shouldn't have taken him so long to ask. He knew of his recent history, but far too little of the 'Country'human himself, considering he had been pressing to join the war.

"Unimportant," China dismissed. "He's not the one in control. Seeing as he wasn't present at the meeting to authorize intervention against you, or my trial, I doubt he's incredibly involved in the Nationalists' actions. But if given a few more years, I'm sure he'll be showing them his belly."

His tone implied that he wouldn't like to see him get those years.

"Is he your brother?" North asked, somewhat haltingly, not liking how personal the question came off as when it was supposed to be purely information-gathering.

"No. I have no family." The answer was fairly blunt to come from the usually airy man. "China stands alone."

"What about the other Chinese Countryhumans?"

In his effort to learn more about the world, North had paid particular attention to his large neighbour, considering the history of their countries, and their parallel struggles (or perpendicular). He could name each of the past Countryhumans that could all be considered 'Korean,' along with their biographies. But the Peninsula was compact, self-contained, unlike China. There had been dozens upon dozens of 'Chinese' Countryhumans, dating back thousands of years. From city-states to kingdoms to nations, dynasties rose and fell, along with their personifications. Frequent warring, unifications, and political alliances ended with the embodiments of the states dissolved, merged, or outright executed by conquerors, like Ming had been. There were so many that even *his* head spun trying to remember all of them.

China's civil war had been no exception. North had kept an eye on the situation during his own Occupation and nation-building- there had been multiple 'Chinese' Countryhumans all claiming to be China (though many had been little more than city-states), all

proclaiming support for one army or the other, though none had been so vocal or active as the China that was currently reclining next to him, shivering slightly in the cold of the cave. *If* accounts were to be believed.

"Do you see any of the other Chinese Countryhumans here?" China's voice was sharp. *"I* am the China formed of the will of the people and I am the *only* China."

The slitted look he cast North was clear in its meaning, and he looked away. Unlike certain other countries, when someone wanted something dropped, he would drop it. Sometimes.

The silence between them had gotten somewhat stiff, but North paid it no mind. At least for once he wasn't the one showing his hackles.

After some time, China- with a return to his usual carefree tone- extended, "I suppose if you must give Taiwan a familial title, it would be 'annoying little cousin.'"

With this peace-offering, the cave air slackened, and North tried to find a way to pose the question that had entered his mind when he had thought of all the Countryhumans formed during China's occupation and war, and realized he still didn't know much about his comrade's past, aside from what Lin Heung-won had told him. He knew if he outright asked the man next to him which China he'd been, he would receive either another sharp answer or, more annoyingly, a sidestep.

Instead he tried, "How old are you?"

China raised his eyebrows in exaggerated offense. "Now comrade, you know it's impolite to ask a country their age."

The Korean rolled his eye. "That's for women."

"Really? I think it's common courtesy."

"What year were you formed?"

"Back when tigers used to smoke tobacco..." He trailed off, smiling

as North gave a withering glare at the folktale beginning. "No?"

The Korean country switched tactics. "Where were you formed?"

He knew what China was about to say before he said it.

"China." The innocence is his tone was remarkably well-crafted.

"Forget it." He turned his head to look into the dark of the cave. "I don't actually care."

It wasn't like it actually mattered which China, exactly, he'd been. Like he'd said, he was the only one now, and he was here, helping North's people. He was here on this foolish march south. He didn't know why he'd bothered asking.

China let him stew for a moment, then said, "Maybe I'll tell you someday. If you get me drunk enough to spill my secrets, I might even tell you about my other little 'cousins,' annoying and not."

North got the impression that China wasn't the type to say anything he didn't want to, even under the influence.

He snorted. "You just want free drinks."

His comrade laughed at that, teeth flashing. "More clever than your brother, by far."

—

1936

North stood on the mountaintop, looking out over the border they shared with the Soviet Union.

He was far enough away from the camp that he could no longer hear his provinces chattering about him and his brother, making speculations and assumptions that he had no care for. North Chungcheong had already told him he was going to like South more, since he could actually take a joke.

North had no doubt that most of them *would* like his brother more,

not that that really mattered. By the time they met him, they would only have a short while until they were one person.

Of course, he would have preferred they hadn't learned about him at all until then.

He clenched his fists, thinking of that picture. He just *knew* South had been coerced to take it. He had confiscated the paper after, searching the grainy grey of his face and hand for any sign of discoloration, a bruise or a cut. He hadn't seen any, but of course Japan wouldn't want something like that in the paper. His brother even looked well-fed, or at least not starved, though that was likely just for the photoshoot.

If the news had to come out like this, maybe he should have just told them about his brother back after Seodaemun. It would have saved a lot of hassle.

But it had been... difficult for him to speak of South. Even if it hadn't been for the practical considerations. It had felt... He didn't know. He didn't like to think of his brother's face as he had last seen it- scared, confused, hurt.

Betrayed.

He had no right to feel that way. North had wanted him to come with him, he had *begged* him. If he had, they could both be here, leading their provinces and people to freedom. But South had refused. He would never be able to understand that.

He had tried not to think about his other half for years, especially since Seodaemun. But now that he knew he was alive...

Alive. South was alive.

He squeezed his eyes shut as he finally let himself feel the relief that had flooded his body when he'd seen that picture.

He was alive. His leaving hadn't doomed him, not yet.

His brother was alive.

Now that he knew, North wanted to think only of the future, of the way his brother's face would look when they saw each other again. The way he would beam before he threw himself at North and they embraced, finally together again. Finally one, as they should be.

Now that the provinces knew of him, he knew they wouldn't shut up about it. But at least their anger over the prison break had abated, mended by knowing why exactly he had acted so recklessly on that mission, and why he had lied after. It had been stupid of him, and he deserved the criticism for it, and the tension that had filled the air between them for the past nine months. But...

He didn't want them to mistrust him. It would be bad for the cohesion of their group.

"Korea?" a tentative voice said from behind him.

"South Hwanghae," he said, not turning around as he blinked rapidly.

"Can ah ask you somethin'?"

He sighed. "I said I would only talk about South once."

Even though when he had said it, he knew the provinces wouldn't just give up so easily. He'd have to snap at them at least twice to get them to drop it after today.

"Ayuh, but... Ah haven't slept yet, so technic'lly it's still just once."

North sighed again. "Fine. One more question."

"Can you..." There was a shuffling sound, and he pictured her scuffing her boots in the undergrowth. "Feel him missin'?"

North was silent, and she clarified, "When ah'm not with Hwang, ah can feel it. Like... my heart is lonely. Do you feel like that, too?"

The lamps in the village at the foot of the mountain had flickered off, plunging the landscape into darkness. It was only across the river that the lights of the Soviet towns resumed. Their destination,

to announce to their people that they were fighting for them, and that they wouldn't rest until Korea was free. Both of them.

"I feel it," he said quietly. His fingers twitched with the urge to touch his chest, and he curled them into his palm.

He shouldn't have told her that. He needed to remain strong. He needed to make up for the fact that they knew now that he hadn't been able to protect his brother, needed to keep them believing in him, to stave off their pity if something happened to-

North flinched as her sturdy arms wrapped around him from behind, immediately trying to pry her off.

He shouldn't have told them about South. He should have doubled down on the photo manipulation angle.

Hae didn't budge. "Don't worry, Korea," she chirped, her voice muffled by his jacket. "We'll get him back for you, ah promise."

North stopped his squirming, realizing that he wasn't going to get her off him without hurting her. And also...

"I know," he said, because of course they would. Even if to hear someone else actually say it was...

Suddenly he realized that he couldn't wait to introduce South Hwanghae to his brother. He would love her, everyone did, even if explaining why he had 'South' and 'North' Hwanghae was going to be embarrassing. And SH, South would love to hear her sing. And North Pyongan, too, with his poems. Him and Gyeonggi would get along like fish in a barrel, both enthusiastic and overdramatic. And finally Chungbuk would have someone else to tease about his height.

"We will," he pledged to Hae, feeling himself settle.

Someday soon they would all get to sit around a table covered in enough food for them all, in a warm house that was theirs, in a free country that was *theirs,* him and his brother and all of their provinces. And then it would be Korea and his provinces, and they would know that all of their people were just as safe and joyful as

they were.

'Please, South. Hold on until then.'

Hehe. I think I did a good job subtly foreshadowing that China and South met first. Also the mystery solved of why China has that rock.

Expect the next chapter in ten to twelve business days. It's already written, but now I have to think of a five-line poem for it. And we know how I am with that.

I see a lot of Americans talking about the information in the Epstein files and saying things like 'god should take everyone' or 'the world deserves to end.' No?? The last time I checked, *I* haven't been sex trafficking and raping women and children. I would actually say confidently that the majority of people don't do that, and- being nice to men- *wouldn't* do that. Why does the world need to end because capitalism has taken a handful of humans with no empathy and given them the power to buy and sell lives? Sorry your country is awful, but America is not the entire world. And it's the same people that say violence isn't the answer in response to revolution. So our options are either nothing changes ever or the entire world gets wiped out? I see. It's like they're only not individualists when it comes to punishing literally billions of people for the crimes of probably under ten thousand. Literally 1% of the population deserves to unequivocally die painfully. The rest of us are either fine or could be fine if re-educated.

Down In Your Bones (You Know)

"I can't *believe* him," SH seethed, the water in the bucket sloshing as she aggressively cleaned the dishes from supper. Hwang hadn't been brave enough to claim his spot on the schedule from her tonight.

"That's crazy, because I totally can."

"You get to say *nothing,"* SH hissed, shooting South Pyongan a glare over her shoulder. "I can't believe you just let him walk away!"

South Pyongan had told them about the task she had to accomplish for Korea as soon as she returned a few hours ago, though she was slightly cagey about what it was, until North Pyongan broke her with an expectant look. Now North Pyongan knew she had a smuggler, and they all knew that Korea really had went south, not that they thought the Premier would have lied to them about that.

And they knew she had known he was going.

His sister made a face. "What was I supposed to do? Knock him out? I mean I totally could," she quickly said. "But then he'd just wrap me in a straw mat and bludgeon me when he woke up."

"You could have come told us!"

"And then he pours ash water in my 'nose,'" South Pyongan said confidently. "You know how hard it would be to snort that out without actual nostrils?"

SH was glowering fiercely at her, so North Pyongan stepped in.

"It's not my sister's fault," he told his cousin gently. "We all know Korea would not have accepted her trying to restrain him in any

way."

He wouldn't turn to the... creative punishments his sister had proposed. But it would cause friction between them, which North Pyongan didn't want to see happen, not when they seemed to have finally settled with each other.

SH made a sound of frustration, though her shoulders slumped. She knew as well as the rest of them that if their Countryhuman wanted to leave, then no matter what, he would leave.

"It is my fault," Chagang said suddenly, and they all looked over at him as he emerged from the trees with a moping Hae. "I should have noticed he was planning something."

"No offense, Cha-Cha," South Pyongan said, shifting over on the log to make room for him. "But I'm pretty sure you only learned what noticing even *is* like, a year ago. No one's blaming you, big guy."

"I was on watch," he said stubbornly. "I should have noticed."

"You wouldn't have been able to stop him, either," North Pyongan assured him.

He looked to Hae, dragging her heels as she plopped down on the ground, her legs crossed.

"How is the garden?" he asked.

"The burdock's already sproutin'," she muttered, not launching into her usual stream of excited chatter about her plants.

"Korea will be fine," North Pyongan assured her.

"Ah know he'll be fine," she huffed. "Korea's too smart for the reaction'ries to catch him. But ah want to be with him." Her shoulders hunched. "Why does Comrade Mao Zhilong always get to go, and we don't?"

'Ah.' She wasn't worried. Of course she didn't believe something could befall Korea. She was just jealous he kept disappearing with

China.

"To be fair," Liaotung said, slowly sliding her bowl into SH's wash-water, avoiding her eyes the way a mouse would avoid a cat. "I do doubt that he *chose* to take him with him."

Liaoxi nodded. "Even if someone doesn't want China with them to go, if he thinks it interesting, it will be so."

"In that case, perhaps we should be more worried about Comrade China returning than Korea," Hwang said, having mustered the bravery to dry the dishes SH had washed, fending off her attempts to do it herself.

North Pyongan caught the subtle glance Liaoxi and her sister exchanged, and moved his hand so it was touching hers on their seat.

"They will both return safely," he said, and his... comrade gave him a grateful smile.

"Neither of them are going to return."

North Pyongan looked over to see a North Hamgyong coming back from the latrines, storming for the door.

He also saw the overwhelmingly dark look that crossed SH's face.

"Your positivity is always so refreshing," Liaotung remarked. As with her sister and China, she was skilled at making the sarcasm sounded genuine.

"Fuck you," North Hamgyong snarled. Though the Chinese woman was the one who had spoken, his glare landed on SH. "You know damn well one of these days he's going to get himself killed pulling this stupid shit."

The Southern Hamgyong shot up, and so did North Pyongan, stepping across the clearing and laying a hand on her arm. Her muscles quivered under his touch, then eased as she let out a breath.

With a bright smile, she said to her brother, "Why don't you go back inside? I've always liked it better when you *aren't around."*

Her eyes narrowed pointedly, communicating in that same secret dialect of their silent language that North Pyongan shared with his sister, and he winced as North Hamgyong's face contorted. His pine-skinned cousin stormed back into the air raid shelter.

In the awkward silence, South Pyongan let out a whistle. "Damn SH. Okay."

"Perhaps a bit... harsh," North Pyongan agreed.

"Because *he's* never said anything even slightly harsh to *me."* She didn't even attempt to disguise her sarcasm. "And don't pretend that you actually want him around."

The Korean provinces all gave each other looks as she returned her to her dishwashing, silently agreeing that now was not the best time to deny that.

"I like this side of you," South Pyongan said, impressed "Want to help me drag him down to the river and toss him in while he's sleeping?"

North Pyongan gave her a disapproving look, and she squinted mischievously.

He knew his sister didn't intend to be malicious. He didn't think she actually understood how fraught the Hamgyongs' relationship had become, especially since yesterday.

It relieved him, as did her accepting that Korea didn't want anything to happen to South. Even with the distance being put... No, that they were putting between each other, they were still too close for her to fathom other siblings genuinely disliking each other.

But he understood. SH and her brother had always been... tense. But not like this. The ride to the bunker last night, and those to and from it today had crackled with an uncomfortable energy. Even though SH had been in her usual good mood on the way into the city, talking about their plans for the day, he had noticed how her

eyes refused to even drift towards the front seat and its driver. And when the General had came to meet them at the drop-off point to inform them of Korea, the way she hadn't even cast North Hamgyong a look warning him not to say anything disrespectful in front of their Premier had been louder than actual words would have been. And when they had first got into the truck with Korea the day before that...

Well, North Pyongan had immediately understood why when he'd gone to get his blood taken that night, Kangwon had said to watch out for them.

He just didn't know how. He and his sister had never needed anyone to reconcile them. They rarely ever got under each other's scales, and if they did, like when he had hurt South Pyongan by unintentionally insinuating that she enjoyed killing, it would eventually be worked out, either by him telling her she had gone too far in her pranks and teasing directly, or her awkwardly forcing herself into a 'gross talk.'

And when he knew the Hamgyongs had even more difficulty than her with that, he didn't know what else he could say to help them, just as he didn't know what he could say to Kangwon to soothe his grief over Gangwon.

He knew better than anyone that there were no words that could help.

Their relationship wasn't something the provinces could resolve, or Korea. And neither could their people. In this case, all he could do was offer a prayer to God to see them through their turmoil.

But he knew peace could only come at their own hands.

He sat back down next to Liaoxi, her and her sister both staring at the dark trees as intently as a barehanded fisher would stare into a river, as they always did when the Koreans were having family issues. Though he knew they were both listening intensely, both for China and themselves. The Liaos truly were just as curious as their Countryhuman.

Interrupting SH and South Pyongan's musings about the logistics of carrying North Hamgyong to the Pothong without him waking up (which were getting a little too in-depth), Hwang sighed and said, "I do wish that our proposal had been accepted. Perhaps it might have prevented this."

"I do, too," Chagang agreed, and SH bobbed her head, pursing her lips.

"Ah don't," Hae declared. "Korea doesn't think it should happen, so ah don't either."

"I'm with you there," South Pyongan said, leaning back over the log. "The less people able to tell me what to do, the better. Also SH, I think the plates are clean. You can stop scrubbing now."

North Pyongan shook his head, even though he knew that wasn't her only reason.

"Proposal?" Liaotung asked innocently, while South Pyongan wrestled the already clean dishes away from SH.

The Korean provinces exchanged looks.

"Classified," Hwang said.

"We're sorry," North Pyongan apologized. "We shouldn't be talking about private matters when we cannot involve you in them."

"We don't wish to impose," Liaoxi said politely as her sister jostled her lightly. "If you like, of ourselves we can dispose."

"No," he said, quickly enough that South Pyongan looked over from dumping out the dishwater, sensing something to tease him over as accurately as sharks sensed blood. "That's alright."

Liaoxi's slender brows rose slightly, her lips curling, and he looked away, face warm. His hand reached into his pocket, fingers brushing against the scrap of paper there.

He had been working on this for awhile. And a night when China was gone, so he was sure they weren't being eavesdropped on, was

perfect.

He managed to ignore his sister's looks for the next few minutes, until the others started to trickle off to bed.

"Comrade Liaoxi," he said when it was just them left by the dying fire, and his sister on first watch. "Would you like to go on a walk?"

South Pyongan clapped her hands over her ear slits. *"Ewwww.* I don't want to know about your private lives."

North Pyongan gave her a dry look, and Liaoxi arched a brow.

"To hear that is quite strange," the Chinese woman said. "When our marriage you have been offering to arrange."

North Pyongan hid his face behind steepled fingers, frowning at his sister past them. *'I thought you were only saying that to **me.**'*

She gave him a little smirk. *'Well, if you're going to treat me like the man of the house...'*

"I am so sorry," he said to Liaoxi, then to South Pyongan, "And I was just asking her for a walk. Don't think... that way."

His cheeks flushed, realizing what he was saying in front of Liaoxi, quickly apologizing again.

She only flushed prettily, dipping her head.

"It's alright if you don't want to go," North Pyongan told her, almost grateful that his sister might have just made him lose his chance.

"No, no, that won't be so." Liaoxi put her hand on his elbow. "But is it truly just a walk...?"

"I was also thinking we could... talk," he said, slightly unsure if she was actually looking for assurance that it was, or for him to finish her rhyme.

He had been right about it being the second option, it seemed,

because she smiled, sliding her hand around so their arms were linked.

"Blech," South Pyongan enunciated. "You better go far enough away I can't hear you 'talk.'"

North Pyongan gave her a look dripping with as much disapproval as he could muster. His sister just waggled her eyebrows at him.

Sighing, he and Liaoxi headed off into the woods, through the budding larches that flanked Jangsan, meandering northeast along the curved blade of a mountain.

"I really am sorry for her," he said again. "I can tell her seriously to stop."

She *might* listen.

Liaoxi laughed slightly. "I'm okay with it. But if you heard what Jilin would say if he were here, *you* might have a fit."

She smiled at him, tipping her head, her eyes meeting his like they did when she was trying to make him understand something, and North Pyongan relaxed slightly, thinking he might.

It was the embarrassment she was... He didn't like to say she was faking. She was performing the shy way she had reacted, the way she performed her softer voice.

He still didn't entirely understand why she felt like she had to act. But if that was the dynamic between her and China and their country, then it wasn't his place to say anything. He was only her...

North Pyongan glanced at Liaoxi, finding her already looking at him. Her eyes squinched, and he quickly averted his gaze, thankful it was too dark under the trees to see his purple cheeks.

He didn't entirely know what they were. They had agreed to be together, and both used 'courting' to refer to their relationship. But that wasn't quite the word for it. They weren't trying to decide if they were right enough for each other to be engaged, because they couldn't *be* engaged. They would never be married, so she could

never be his fiancée or... anything else.

And aside from how often they touched now, not much had changed from when they were simply friends. Even when she twined their fingers together at dinner or took his arm like now, he was hesitant to initiate the same things. He... really wasn't used to it. Liaoxi said she wasn't either, but she still had far more confidence than him.

He didn't mind the elusive way she acted. He did enjoy trying to figure out what she was really saying to him past her cí and little smile. To find the meaning hidden in her moonstone eyes.

But it also worried him that he might misread her and make her uncomfortable in some way. He didn't doubt that if she was actually displeased, she would let him know, and he knew since she had no issue with touching him, she likely wouldn't take issue if he touched her. But the idea that she might, and he might not realize, discomforted him. He preferred to let her take the lead on how much contact they had.

But that made him feel like she might not realize how much he liked her. If he didn't show her as much affection as she showed him, wouldn't that leave her feeling unappreciated? He had tentatively asked if she wanted him to be more openly affectionate, and she had told him to do what he was comfortable with.

But he wasn't *un*comfortable being affectionate with her. He only... wasn't sure how to be, physically. It made him worry that she might feel like they were just friends who held hands. He didn't mind if that was what their relationship was like, but he did mind if she didn't know how much he cared for her.

His hand grazed across his pocket, making sure the paper was still in there. The fact that it was made him even more anxious.

But hopefully he could communicate his feelings right this way.

"So," Liaoxi said as they left Jangsan, emerging from the woods into the rolling fields between them and the Hyongje Mountains. "A proposal was mentioned?"

She tipped her head up at him, and North Pyongan's cheeks went hot as his mind went blank, before realizing what she meant.

"Oh," he said, embarrassed. "Right."

Her eyes narrowed mischievously. "What meaning did you think I intentioned?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "And it isn't information Comrade China needs to know. We were just... discussing safety measures."

It wasn't a lie. The 'proposal' Hwang had brought up had been their attempt to propose that Korea give Kim Il-sung, Kim Tu-bong, or both of them the authority to issue commands to the provinces. Technically Kim Il-sung already could as the Supreme Commander of the army, since they should rank beneath him as generals. But as Provincehumans, they had the ability to supersede orders, if needed. And he didn't have any authority at all outside of military operations.

Of course, most of the provinces would listen to him anyways, and Kim Tu-bong. They were the chosen representatives of their people, the former as the Premier and the Chairman of the Worker's Party, and the latter as the Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly. It was why North Pyongan had agreed with the cousins of his that wanted to convey authority over the provinces to them. If they were to guide their people down the path they were travelling, they had to listen to them, to let them guide them in turn. But it was impossible to listen to that many voices. As elected officials, Kim Il-sung and Kim Tu-bong carried the will of the majority, so he'd thought it would be acceptable if their word could restrain at least his cousins- or his sister- from doing something dangerous the way Kangwon had.

But as they had made their case, Korea had looked at him before any of the others, with a sort of disappointment on his face. And North Pyongan had realized that he was just trying to slip back into what was comfortable for him- obeying. Their Premier and Chairman might act as mouthpieces for the masses, but they were still their people. Their voices should be listened to attentively, but they were still just droplets in the rush of the river. He had to help

Korea paddle, not give his oar over to the water.

So he had changed his mind, and helped talk his cousins down. And from the glow in Korea's eye, he knew he had done the right thing.

But it still left them with a problem. They hadn't just decided it was the right thing to do to stop themselves from doing anything reckless in the future. They had been subtly trying to hint to Korea that he should give the men the right to command *him,* even just in the scenario where he had to be stopped from running off again. And hoping that perhaps if the Premier had the authority to command the provinces, it might give him the confidence to order Korea, too, the next time he tried... something exactly like what he was doing this instant.

North Pyongan understood that was wrong now. But his Countryhuman's absence at the moment proved that they'd been right to seek a safeguard.

He didn't actually know if an order from the Premier would stop Korea from his drive to do what he thought was right, and he didn't think one from Kim Tu-bong would at all. But something needed to be done. He still believed that.

"Hmm," Liaoxi said to his words. "Perhaps measures to stop your Countryhuman from with mine absconding?"

North Pyongan could never be sure if she was too observant, or if he was too unskilled at lying. Either way, he silently apologized to Korea.

"I'm sorry," he apologized to her, too, taking responsibility where he knew Korea would not. "My Countryhuman keeps putting yours in danger."

Liaoxi shook her head as they padded along the Hapjang River beneath Mount Ami, following it to the Taedong's main course. "China wouldn't miss an opportunity for bonding. Believe me, my sister and I know the fault is his own."

And yet if something happened to him down in the south, it wouldn't change the fact that he wouldn't have been there if Korea hadn't gone.

"And 'tis better than if your country had gone alone," the Chinese woman added.

It warmed North Pyongan's heart that she cared for Korea's safety, and he should be comforted that he had someone to watch his back for once, just like he had in Seoul and Chorweon. Especially when he believed Liaoxi when she said they had nothing to fear from China.

But he wasn't. Because he also believed that Korea had grown fond of their comrade, at least in the same way that he was fond of CCCP (not that he would ever dare suggest that to him). Even if he hadn't, he knew his Countryhuman wouldn't let the Chinese pay for their aid in this war.

North Pyongan could still remember that day in Namsan Residence with clarity, the way his heart had sank as the Japanese guard levelled his pistol at him, knowing he couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger on his bolt gun. Seeing his sister's face from the corner of his eye, the wild panic on it as she realized she couldn't get to him in time, and he knew he was about to make her watch him 'die.' And he could see the way Korea had came out of nowhere, throwing himself almost directly in front of North Pyongan without even a moment's hesitation, his pistol coming up. He had outdrawn the man, spraying his brains over the pavilion floor just a heartbeat before South Pyongan had won her grapple. But if he hadn't, if he had been just a second slower...

It was better for Korea to be alone than with someone he felt like he had to protect.

"That's just the way it be," Liaoxi said when he had been silent for a few paces. "When you care for one whose self is not their own priori-ty."

"Is Comrade China like that, too?" he asked, wincing apologetically so she knew he wasn't returning to trying to work information from

her.

Liaoxi hesitated, then nodded. "Sharing that I have no fear. It should by now be quite clear. He cares for himself, he really does, but when there's something he's more interested in..."

Her eyes darkened slightly.

"That care becomes a 'was?'" North Pyongan suggested.

She nodded almost grimly, her hold on his arm tightening. Hesitantly, he squeezed back.

He still hadn't been able to get anything out of her on her past with China. Not the full story behind her always leaving one bullet in her rifle, not whether or not she'd been telling the truth about Manchukuo bending the knee, or how she had even met her Countryhuman. He knew she and her sister had been Fengtian, that they were close with Jilin and Heilongjiang, and a scattering of stories about her time in the Chinese army, never specifying time or place or even which army- Red Army, Eighth Route Army, People's Liberation Army. And none of her stories involved China.

He did wish he could know more about her. But he knew she wanted to tell him- she just couldn't.

"So he's done things like this before?" he asked.

"Yes." Liaoxi didn't elaborate. But there was a note to her voice that told him whatever memories they were, they weren't happy.

He supposed that was just the way it was, caring about someone who didn't come first to themselves. He had spent years watching his sister leap headfirst into danger, throwing herself at men far taller and broader than she, over and over again until she got them to break more than her, or luring them into alleyways to mug them for everything they had, no matter the danger it put her in, and had known she was doing it for him. She loved the thrill of combat, yes, but she wouldn't drag herself off the floor with her wrist still broken for another fight if she didn't have to keep him fed.

She had came first to him as well, and he would have taken all

those injuries she received in the ring or on the streets unto himself, if he could have. He would have taken a Kempeitei bullet for her. But with who they were as people, and who they were to each other, it was far more likely that she would be the one getting between him and a barrel, just like Korea had.

Over those years, he had never feared for himself, knowing God and his sister would keep him safe. He had feared for her. He had watched her in the ring, her eyes gleaming as she launched herself at another man that could snap her in half if he got his hands on her, and known that between her desire to win and her love for him, what happened to herself was just an afterthought. The only way he had been able to soothe that fear was reminding himself of how capable she was, and praying to the Lord to keep her safe, even when he should have been able to.

Another injustice he had done to her without even realizing it. Even when they were each other's priority, he hadn't been able to prioritize her the way she could him.

And it did hurt, a little. More than a little. That she couldn't be his priority anymore. Their people were. Even now that he could protect himself, he would never be able to return the favour, to make her feel as cared for and safe as he had felt back then. He knew that wasn't what she wanted anyways, but it was what she deserved.

But as reckless as South Pyongan could sometimes be even now, as much as she had cared more about him eating at night than keeping her own body whole, at least she did care about herself. Korea...

It was difficult sometimes, to care about someone that didn't care about themselves.

He had to wonder where that fit into Korea's philosophy of the path. If they were guiding their people, was it really okay for him to run sprinting off of it at full-speed into danger?

'He probably doesn't see it that way.' The Premier hadn't told them exactly why their Countryhuman had gone south, but if it was for

anything like sneaking across the Raktong River to rescue their POWs, or staying in Seoul to resist the American army until the last, or chasing down Japan on his own, then it was because he thought what he was doing would protect their people, and reaffirm their faith in the path they were walking.

To Korea, things like this were likely about what everything else was- belief. And if so, then any safeguard they could come up with would never be enough.

North Pyongan had thought it before, that his Countryhuman was even more zealous than him. The province could make himself surrender parts of his faith when he knew it was the right thing to do.

But he didn’t think Korea could do the same.

The two provinces were silent as they reached the main channel of the Taedong. The night was cool, the sticky heat of summer still a few moons away. A light breeze rippled the waters, and soothed some of North Pyongan's sympathetic fever, though it did nothing to soothe his nerves. Nightbirds called from the budding trees, returned to Korea with the long winter over, and the only bombs that fell were distant ones.

Again, North Pyongan had to fight the shame that bloomed in his breast. Even if the night was peaceful around them, it wasn't for others. The fever in his head told him his people were still falling sick. Those outside of Pyongyang were under bombardment, and the ones in it were hunkered in their dug-outs or working the fields while they still could. And Korea was ri away, infiltrating enemy-held territory. While they walked along the quiet riverbank, he could be injured or being taken into enemy hands.

But there wasn't anything he could do about any of it tonight, and he couldn't let himself be paralyzed with fear, the way he'd almost been when his sister was taken. He had already confessed his feelings to Liaoxi. If he didn't say what he wanted to now, he would just be making excuses to justify backing down out of nervousness. He couldn't be trusted to guide his people if he couldn't even muster the courage to share what he wanted to with his... close comrade.

The walk stretched out, nearing an hour, and he felt himself anxiously wondering if Liaoxi would ask to turn around. But she seemed content to meander at his side, observing the wheat and barley fields, watching the breeze play though the green stalks that had started to push through the loam in some places.

The Taedong River flowed from the southeast before entering Pyongyang, taking a lazy curve and travelling southwest alongside the city. Above the bend, the Hapjang River and the channel that carved out Reungra Island from the bank formed a spit of land that had used to be blanketed in forest, and was now covered in farmland and felled trees. A narrow hill adorned the tip, watching over where the bridge had used to be.

North Pyongan led Liaoxi towards the shadow cut out of the horizon, staying on the dirt road that ran alongside the Taedong to avoid trampling any crops. He wished he could bring her up to the crest of the hill for the view, but he knew they had anti-aircraft teams stationed up on it. So instead he took her to the shore below, where the steep side of the hill pressed up against the road like it was considering toppling over onto it.

By the riverside, he took off his tunic, spreading it on the ground for Liaoxi. With a small bow, she gracefully folded her legs under herself, and he joined her.

The Taedong was wide here, the dark water reflecting the stars above, and the swelling moon as it rose overhead. The bank across from them was carpeted in shadow, and so were they, hidden under the hill. it made this small section of riverbank feel cozy, even with how exposed it was.

As beautiful as the sight before them was, North Pyongan's gaze was drawn back to Liaoxi, and how her eyes were given a pearlescent lustre by the moonglow. His heart skipped like a stone, and his last doubts fell away.

He reached his hand into his pocket, fingers closing around the paper, and he took a steadying breath.

"I wrote you something."

Liaoxi perked up, her head swivelling from the river. "If I may ask, is it poetry?"

Swallowing, he nodded. "You've recited so many for me. And you asked me awhile ago if you could see one of mine."

He hadn't written in so long. Even with his sister back at his side and the war at a stalemate, he couldn't find his center. He might have been able to pen a few poems about how Jangsan turned to jade with spring, or the way the Taedong glistened like black silk under the stars, but he knew that wasn't right anymore. He couldn't write about the land around them when their people were dying to protect it. As the Premier said, he and their other poets had to doff their horsehair hats. And he had to replace his with his general's flatcap.

But as he had stood guard over Korea while he was ill, attempting to compose, he hadn't been able to craft words to invigorate their soldiers and instill hope in their homefront, too wracked with worry for his Countryhuman.

So he'd thought to start small, with words that didn't make his heart clench with fear for their people or his tongue want to form prayers. With what he should have done when he confessed to Liaoxi in the first place. Though now that he was sitting in front of her, her eyes fixed on him, it didn't feel so small.

Liaoxi nodded vigorously. "That would be just fine."

Her pearl eyes said it would be more than fine, easing him slightly. He held the folded paper out to her, but she didn't take it.

She tipped her head. "Won't you read it to me?"

North Pyongan flushed. "Out loud?"

"I've read many for thee."

"They weren't about *me,"* he tried, but her eyes just squinched expectantly.

It was true she had read other poems to him, and even if they

weren't... like this one, all poetry was inherently soul-bearing. It was why he had barely ever read his poems out loud, even for his cousins. And even then, it was mostly for SH, Hwang, and the Jeollas.

Then again, nothing could be worse than South Pyongan stealing his poetry book and reading them out loud herself.

"Okay," he said, the word coming out almost mumbled.

Liaoxi shifted so she was facing him, her legs crossed, and he mirrored her, their knees bumping together. With slightly clumsy hands, he unfolded the paper, face warming as the words appeared.

"Skies of shadow and flame,
An abyss to swallow all thought.
And then I knew your name,
My pearl of worry was caught.
Your homeland's revolution calls to be seen through,
Yet mine's justice is brought by your scope.
If our nations must be in the fire, then I'm glad to burn with you.
My citrine and moonstone, you bring me hope."

When he was done, he fought not to hide his face behind the paper. But his head still dipped, his hands rising until he was looking at her through thin pulp and ink. Her citrine outline was barely visible as her hands rose to cover her own face.

"Um." The heat painting his cheeks flared. Had he ever said 'um' before in his life? "I know I'm not very... experienced. I don't entirely know how to care for you the way you might want. And... I don't think we can ever be... intimate together."

He didn't want to bring that into it, but the more he thought about it, the more he felt like she should know, in case she was expecting it one day. Waiting until marriage was important to him, and since they could never be wed...

"If that isn't right for you, then I understand," he said. "I just wanted to do something to show you that I really do... care for you."

His eyes flicked up, over the edge of the paper, and he could see that she hadn't been covering her face, but removing her mask. Her white eyes peered out of the shadow of her plum blossom-patterned scarlet scarf.

For a moment, he almost swore she looked... sorrowful.

Then she leaned forward, a beam of moonlight striping her face, and he realized she was smiling. She took his wrists, lowering the poem to his lap, and he squirmed slightly with nothing to hide behind. His eyes flicked to her bow-shaped lips, so rarely revealed when they weren't at the shelter with the others.

But his were dry, burns singeing the edges, just like the rest of his face, charred a hideous black and red, so he couldn't-

"Can I kiss you?" Liaoxi asked, breaking the Commandments by stealing his words.

North Pyongan ducked his head, his cheeks flushing indigo. Shyly, he nodded. "I would like you to."

Liaoxi's hand cupped his cheek, gentle against the bandages there. He wished he could feel her skin, and like she had read his mind, her thumb slipped off the edge of the fabric, caressing his cheek bone. It wasn't soft. He had held her hands enough to know they were those of a gunwoman.

Her lips were, though, as she tilted his head up, and the upper bow brushed his. Her eyes stared into his, closer than he'd ever seen them, like she was seeing into his soul, then shut, her lashes resting on her cheeks. He followed her lead, even though he just wanted to keep looking at her, immersing himself in darkness just as her bottom lip met his, deepening into a proper kiss.

Warmth flowed through him, washing away the little guilty voice saying this was sinful. He knew it wasn't. There was nothing in the Bible against love.

Liaoxi was resting her lips against his, almost in his lap, and his heart was thrumming. He didn't know where to put his hands, but

he knew he wanted to touch her. Carefully, he placed his hand on her cheek, and she didn't move away. She leaned in, putting more pressure between them, then broke contact.

But she didn't shift back. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself farther onto his lap, and burying her face in his shoulder. North Pyongan's hands fluttered like butterflies, before coming to rest on her back.

"Are you-?"

"That was my first real kiss," she murmured into his uniform.

"Me too," North Pyongan admitted, running his hand over her shoulder blade. "I hope nothing was amiss?"

In answer, she lifted her head again, her lips finding his like a honeybee to a flower, drawing him into her. North Pyongan gladly let her.

He still didn't know why Korea had given them his blessing to be together. But he was *very* thankful he had.

—

The Sobaek Mountains split from the Taebaeks on the edge of Gangwon province, trailing diagonally across the country, culminating in Jirisan, the tallest peak in the southern mainland, and the tailbone of Korea's 'spine.' They were filled with plunging valleys, steep peaks, and dozens of caves that wound their way into the earth, perfect for hiding guerrillas. And they were all as familiar to North as the rest of his mountains.

North Chungcheong had found their unit in them, they had sheltered among the peaks before and after freeing the Jeollas, spent time in countless villages around them, including Dan Hoon's, and they'd fled into the maze of towering pillars and thick forests from the Kempeitei more times than could be remembered. He knew the land, and led China confidently across it, easily avoiding the few groups of reactionaries on the prowl for his guerrillas that they almost crossed paths with.

They had reached the range the same night they'd stopped in the limestone cave, something in North's chest squeezing as they left Gangwon province behind, even though he knew his province wasn't there. The next day was spent marching southwest, the sky above them clear and pale blue for the first time in a week.

It was clear in the north, too. North could feel the sizzling in his destroyed nerves burning worse.

For a few hours, the hike had been almost peaceful. But then the sun crested the horizon, and the planes returned from the north, wings of lithe fighter-bombers and heavy B-29s soaring in to the Taejon airfield like owls that had disgorged their pellets coming to roost, making him grit his teeth.

He still hadn't heard anything about Pak Seo-nam after the Ri Gun-hon situation had been resolved. He couldn't risk exposing him to his other agents so they could attempt to hunt him down. And all he had heard about the provinces was that his spies were fairly certain they were all still imprisoned in Busan manors. Gangwon had been moved to one a week after he'd been stolen, a gap that was too long for North to be comfortable with when his condition couldn't be confirmed. And like the others, South Chungcheong hadn't been seen leaving.

'Keep your promise.'

Both of them had better be okay. They *all* had better be.

The two Countryhumans didn't speak much as they travelled. North kept his jaw locked against the pain in his thighs, and China, for once, decided to keep his mouth shut, aside from occasional soft humming that only stopped when he was reluctantly scolded. They only rested twice more, when the Chinese country broke his silence to get whiny. North didn't berate him as much as he could have- both times his legs were reaching their limit, demanding more bandages before they soaked through his pants.

They drank their water sparingly, boiling more in the caves North located for them, and dined on namul he found clinging to the rocks, eating them uncooked. Tough, bitter chwi, garlicky chives,

and small stone namul that he located with the ease of someone that had foraged his meals for twenty-six years. The addition of the tinned fried dace with fermented black beans that China had brought, another 'care package' from his Chairman, saved North from having to crunch on a particularly thick sponge of lichen he spotted growing on a fallen tree.

Fried fish were definitely better than lichen *or* SH's cooking. But North's stomach still churned as he forced them down.

At the end of the second night, they were in the mountains where the boundaries of North Jeolla, South Gyeongsang, and North Gyeongsang met, the place where Gyeong always jokingly said he was 'threatened by eum energy.'

North would have preferred to continue on to Jirisan before leaving the range, but he could see the planes circling the peak on the horizon, and the occasional bombs dropping from them. His guerrillas were still active in the area, which would mean the mountain was also crawling with reactionaries hunting them.

He wanted to meet his comrades there, both the northern soldiers that had stayed behind, and the southerners that lived in the area. Their perseverance deserved to be praised, and they should know that their country was still fighting for them.

But he couldn't. Just like with his soldiers at the front, he couldn't risk one of them knowing where he was and being captured, having the information tortured out of them. If it was just him...

But it wasn't.

So they briefly rested in the high peaks, then left them for the smaller hills and ridges that lined the land between the Sobaeks and the Raktong River, the ones that North's army had fought their way through almost two Julys ago.

There were more enemy patrols here, Rhee's men training in mountain combat to be sent to the front or to hunt guerrillas. A light rain and cloud cover made their daylight travel slightly safer, but they were still forced to slow their pace.

North tried to fight his impatience. They had only been travelling for three and a half full days, which meant they were only slightly behind schedule. And now that they had a vague idea of enemy positions and activity, the route home would be sped up enough to compensate for the burden he'd be carrying.

No. Choe Jong-ok wasn't a burden. Not even when she was dead.

In the early hours of April 15th, they reached the Raktong River. And just like that, they were farther south than they'd made it last summer, and North was standing on ground he had stood on two years ago, that had taken his soldiers over a month to reach, that he and China's hadn't been able to in a year and three months.

If only it was that easy for an army.

The moon was clouded over, casting shadows over the fields, turning the landscape into a jumble of black and grey. But North's boots trod it with familiarity, over the artillery-scarred hills and muddy paths, through the crumbling villages and earth that no longer held any traces of the black ash of napalm or the houses it had burned away, until he was standing on the edge of a field.

The pine was gone, but he hadn't needed it anyway. He picked his way around the rows, careful not to trample the small sprigs of wheat. It didn't matter if it could be used to feed Rhee's army- it could also feed his people.

He hadn't thought about what he'd do if she was gone. If Rhee's butchers had reached her before him.

But they knew most of the bodies buried in the earth were there because of them. They wouldn't dare risk digging up something they shouldn't. She was still right where they'd left her.

He dropped to his knees on the edge of the field closest to the Raktong, among the gnarled roots still clinging to the ground, and unslung his Type 49, leaning it against the jagged stump. The grass was fresh, short blades sprouting thickly in one spot. Wordlessly, he untied the small spade from his belt, and started to dig.

The earth was rich and dark, as soft as it was when he'd put her in it. Softer. Like she was eager for him to bring her home to her sister.

But that was stupid. Choe Jong-ok was dead. He was digging down to a skeleton.

China watched him from a pace away. "Who was this?"

"Choe Jong-ok," North answered. And as the spade entered the ground with a soft *'schk,'* and he heard instead dirt tumbling out of shaking hands to spatter on a body, he found himself saying, "Her favourite colour was blue."

China kneeled on the other side of the grave, widening the hole he'd made with his hands. "Tell me about her."

North did. He told him about how she'd been a quiet child, how she was smart and kind and knew how to listen, how she aided the Korean People's Revolutionary Army after Liberation, how she'd joined the Worker's Party and launched an information campaign to stop people from electing her for her village's People's Committee. How she hadn't wanted to join the army. Everything Choe Jong-mi had told him as she cried over her little sister's grave, he told China, and his comrade listened.

They hadn't been able to bury her deep. Soon his spade hit something with a clang, and North carefully used his hands to extricate her dented metal canteen, setting it aside. He didn't need to look at what he'd written on the message the General had sent him. He remembered every word.

And he remembered the football on the other side.

North switched to his hands, not wanting to damage her. As he plunged them into the earth, he felt coarse fabric and something smooth and cool. Gradually, the dirt fell away, exposing bone that shone white compared to the dark around them. A sweep of his hand revealed her face, one dark hollow staring up at the night sky.

The other eye was covered by the bandages that Kangwon had

wrapped her white phosphorus burns in, and as North gently worked her skull out of the grave, it fell away.

He held Choe Jong-ok's skull up to the heavy clouds, searching the empty sockets and gaping nose slit, the macabre smile of exposed teeth and the scraps of greasy dead hair still clinging to her skull for some hint of the woman that had blushed and scolded her sister on Liberation Day, or charged straight into the path of an enemy plane in order to save a comrade.

But it was just a skeleton. Of course.

North set her down gently, brushing a strand of short hair out of her face, before liberating the rest of her bones from the grave. China helped, handling them with care, until they couldn't find anything in the dirt but the rotting bandages and the shift she'd died in.

Lined up on the grass, the bones looked both too little and too much. Too little to make a person and too much... Too much.

North untied the burlap sack he'd had on his belt, unrolling it. He nestled her bones inside, along with her canteen and her scorched uniform. Behind him, China reburied the other fabric without being told.

By the time they were done, the black sky was turning grey. North stood, hoisting the sack onto his back, and bent forwards slightly, picking up the final thing he'd brought- a broad white cloth with thick straps that he'd kept rolled under his pack.

China stepped forward, and though he wanted to snap at him, he let him steady the bag of bones on his spine.

Choe Jong-ok was his responsibility. He should do this by himself. But he wouldn't risk her falling.

North wrapped the podaegi around his back, bringing the straps around his front and crossing them up over his shoulders, pulling them tight under the bulge of the bag, before wrapping them around his waist and tying them tightly at his front, leaving the

bones snugly pressed against his back, the way mothers carried their infants before they could walk. His hands made the motions with familiarity, having used this method to transport supplies many times before. Now he would use it carry one of his people.

He straightened, and even though he should be turning north, his eye went to the east.

He couldn't see the Raktong from here. Only the hills before it, and those that rose across it. The high cliffs South Pyongan's tank had fallen from. Obong-ri, that they'd protected so fiercely. The hill where they'd looked at Yeongsan and been so damn *close-*

China stepped back, looking at him from above his mask with serious eyes. "Are we going anywhere else?"

He knew what he was really asking. The same thing South Pyongan had been.

North looked east as the light grew paler, like a beacon. He could feel the cord in his chest aching as it felt more slack between him and the person the other end was tied to than it had in a year and eight months.

Busan was there, only half a day's walk away. His provinces were there, waiting for him to save them. America was there, thinking he was safe so far from the front. *South* was there.

Whispers of memory crowded in, the voices that had called out to him with worry and fear as he stood nearby and told them they had to retreat, threaded through with his provinces', his brother's, his own.

'Don' make us wait too long, you hear?'
'I will not lose another province.'
'This will be the last Liberation Day that we spend Divided.'
'You said this would be over soon.'
'We will return.'
'I will come for you.'
'See you soon?'
'See you soon.'

'Keep your promise.'
'I promise.'

Intention wrapped around the cord, holding it tight.

He could try. He could try to kill America, try to rescue his provinces, try to knock his brother out or make him see sense or just *talk to him,* to tell him everything that America and his army had done to their people, to convince him to come with him and end this, to prove that the word he'd used for him back then was right and he was still-

But he couldn't. Killing America would be tantamount to suicide, as his crumbling nation lashed out in a final death rattle. He had let Japan slip from his grasp for that same reason. And Japan hadn't had the atom bomb.

Freeing his provinces' bodies wouldn't free their minds from the Commands. They might even have ones to stop that from happening. He didn't trust America not to have forced South to program them to harm themselves or... And it would only draw out a ceasefire.

And in the end, that hadn't been what his promise to South Chungcheong had meant. When he had sent her off to the south after the Division, and in their first communication after the war began in earnest, he hadn't promised to keep her safe or rescue her.

He had promised to Liberate their country.

And he had failed at that. He hadn't been able to Liberate it in time, or in the way they wanted. He had seen it in her eyes when they met in the POW holding camp- he had let her down, just like everyone else.

But just like how his soldiers kept fighting, even now she had passed his instructions on to Pak Seo-nam, when it wasn't an order. And she had saved his book of names from the chosonjip of her own volition. Even when she had to know he couldn't bring the army sweeping down on Busan to Liberate them directly, she had still placed her faith in him. She still believed he could free them.

And the way to do that was though the armistice. He couldn't jeopardize that. When he had made that promise to come for his provinces no matter what, it had been when he was naïve, and hadn't understood fully what war cost. He did now. They all did.

He couldn't risk trying to save them when it would only disrupt the ceasefire, put Korea in danger, and possibly even get them hurt or worse. Not when he knew America wouldn't risk killing them right now.

If it was just him, he would still have to try. But he had promised his General he wouldn't do anything to jeopardize Korea.

And looking at China standing next to him, looking at him with eyes similar to the way he'd looked at him in Seoul...

'What do you want to do?'

He thought if he chose to go, it would jeopardize more than Korea.

And his brother...

'She begged him to run. And he tore the gun out of her hands.'

He'd been cautious of him notifying America if he showed up in Busan at the beginning of the war. Now...

His mental grip on the cord that bound them loosened, leaving it slack and aching.

He couldn't jeopardize their country.

"No," he said to China, trying to pretend the word didn't fall as reluctantly as it did.

His comrade nodded, giving no indication as to how he felt about that. "Do you have anything else you need to bring back?"

North's gaze was drawn across the hills, towards the small rice paddies beyond them.

Roe Chul was buried there, along with the rest of South Pyongan's tank crew.

'You better have meant what you said about my bones being buried here. I'll come back and haunt you if you don't.'

'I promise, Comrade Roe Chul. Your bones will be buried in Chaejon-ri.'

The man was dead. But the promise had been made when he was alive.

But to dig those bones up, to haul them across the Peninsula for over a thousand ri, over mountains and though the frontline with a deadline, like he had no other choice...

It felt like an admission. One he couldn't make.

"No," he said again to China, tearing his eye away from the distant grave. "We're done here."

Corpses didn't care where they were buried. The living did. And there was no one waiting for the soldiers of Tank 44 to come home. No one that couldn't wait. No one that didn't need to wait.

And he knew Roe Chul would haunt him anyways.

"Come on," he said, heading back for the hills, back for the north, like he had two years ago. "Let's go."

He would be back. And when Korea was Liberated, he would bury Roe Chul in his hometown with his own hands.

He could still keep his promise.

Heartwarming: forty-five year old woman and forty-one year old man share their first kiss. <3
And forty-one year old man and □□□ year old man go sanctioned graverobbing.

Well, it's *technically* not Liaoxi's first kiss, as Manchukuo once burst into Fengtian's room, forcibly kissed her, was slapped

hard enough to send him sprawling, then proceeded to kneel on her floor with his hands over his head while she stood there uncomfortably as his minders dragged him away. But it's her first kiss as Liaoxi and the first one she actually chose. So her first kiss.

I wrote this chapter in one day. The other days were spent trying to think of a poem. Embarrassing. There needs to be a study conducted on how I can write almost anything without flinching except for poetry. I don't even flinch writing intimate scenes. I just get embarrassed re-reading them. But my face was heating up as I wrote North Pyongan's and I was squirming like I was the one having to read it out loud.
If any of you left a comment making fun of it know that by the time you reach the end of this sentence, I will be dead. If you didn't, thank you.

Also I've been slowly editing Chasing Liberty (looking for spelling errors, contradictions, or anything), and at the speed I go, if I did ten chapters a day it would take me nineteen days from where I am now. I read fast, but I do not edit fast.

Shattering Delusions

Korea was supposed to be back by now.

Sure, he hadn't given Pyo an actual day he'd come back, but he *had* given her that message to give to the guy she was acting all suspicious about, and wanted him at the front on the 17th. And Hae knew he wouldn't want him to wait around, 'cuz if he was a good guy he might get hurt, and if he was a bad guy, one of the bad seeds lurkin' in their soil waiting to sprout, he might turn him over to the enemy. If Korea wanted him there on the 17th, then he was supposed to be there on the 17th.

A good revolutionary was flexible, because plans din't work out all the time. Hae wouldn't have minded if it was a day he was late by, 'cuz sometimes that happened. Like when she thought she could get an entire field turned over before the rain came, but she only got three-quarters done since she had to take a break to tighten the tang on her homi.

But Korea didn't make mistakes like that. Not when he only had to worry about himself, and not when Hae knew he'd be mad that he missed the miguk-nom turnin' in their stupid list.

And he was late by three whole days.

"He wouldn't have missed the deadline," SH said, pacing around the wooden bathing tub. "I *know* he wouldn't have."

It was evenin' bath time, and Hae had her flashlight out so they could see, which meant her cousin had to swat li'l midges out of her face as she went.

Now that the snow was gone and it was getting warmer, more an' more bugs were coming out. Hae didn't like it. Now she couldn't tell which ones were normal and which ones were agents sent by 'Merica to poison them. Some bugs were good for crops, too, but she had to kill all of them, just in case, even the helpful ones. It

made her feel bad.

"It's probably a good thing he did," Pyo said, kicking her legs up on the side of the tub, sloshin' bathwater everywhere. "Otherwise he might've throttled the Yank that handed over that bullshit list."

"Ah wish he would," Hae muttered.

She wasn't the best with numbers math unless she was usin' it to predict harvests, but if the Yankees had came up with that new number on accident, it would mean even *she* could count better than them.

But she knew all of the guys 'Merica had doing that stuff would be rich and privileged. They could afford school. So they were either choosin' to be stupid like him, or they were evil. Hae had decided was probably both.

"I wish I had some soap," Pyo said, scrubbing hard at her arms with the clear water, makin' it the same yucky brown-red colour it always turned when Hae bathed.

SH suddenly stopped, whirling around to them with her eyes wide. "You don't think that's why they gave us that list like that, do you? If they caught him, America might want to drag out the war more to-"

"I don't think he really needs an excuse to drag out the war," Pyo interrupted, and Hae could see her talkin' to SH with her eyes.

'Hey, not in front of Hae.'

Hae pouted, resting her chin on the edge of the tub, making sure to keep her flashlight up so South Pyongan could see.

She wasn't a kid. She wasn't going to start screaming an' cryin' just because she was scared Korea might be in trouble. She'd been real brave in the holding camp, hadn't she?

The Gen'ral wouldn't tell her what exactly Korea was doing down south, but he'd told her he hadn't been planning on going to Busan. And if he didn't, then she knew there was no way 'Merica or any of

the traitors would ever catch him. Korea was too fast and tough for that, and knew their country way too well. If he wanted to, he could probably play cat and mouse with 'em for days, the way they'd used to. And Mao Zhilong was pretty sneaky, too. He'd snuck up on Hae a couple times to slip candy into her pockets (*not* a bribe since she hadn't accepted it, she'd just found it there). So she wasn't too worried for Korea, not in the way she'd been worried for Kang an' Gang in dumb ol' Norway.

But she was more worried than she'd been a few days ago.

But SH was even more worried. So Hae smiled at her, pretendin' she hadn't seen Pyo's look.

"There's no way Korea would get got," she said confidently. "He probably just ran into some reaction'ries, so he has to take the long way home."

Pyo nodded. "Yeah, what she said. Now come here and tell me if this looks like a rash."

"Can you take this seriously?" SH asked, all distressed as she threw her hands down.

"I take scarlet fever very seriously," Pyo assured, turning around so Hae could look at her back instead, sweeping her flashlight over it.

Her skin was smooth and the same pretty blue it always was, with only her paler scars mottlin' it. And all those stupid burns.

"Not a rash," she declared.

"Korea is *missing,"* SH stressed, eyes flashin'. "He's somewhere down south doing who knows what, surrounded by the enemy, and we need him back *now* to deal with America throwing the talks again."

"Freaking out about it isn't going to solve anything," Pyo pointed out.

"I'm not 'freaking out,'" SH snapped. "I am *worried."*

Hae looked down at the dirty water in Pyo's tub, sloshing as she shifted around, ripples makin' her reflection go all wobbly.

Korea had been real upset that he'd missed the secret sessions starting, and she knew even though he'd been saying the POW problem was almost all settled, he had to have known 'Merica might be schemin' something like this up again, too. She knew he wouldn't have missed the list deadline unless he really, *really* had to.

"Ah'm... a li'l worried, too," she admitted.

She hadn't even got to see Korea that much since he woke up. He'd only been up for eleven days before he left, and most of them he'd either been worrying over Kang an' Gang or holed up in Jonsung complex. They'd only really talked once, and it was when she was tellin' him everything that happened, and he was scolding her for getting Kang to not tell him that she died. And even though he'd been more mad at her cousin at that point, and hadn't been *too* disappointed in her, he had still been disappointed.

If somethin' had happened to him, and that was the last time she ever-

'Nope! Bad thought, go away.'

South Pyongan looked at her an' SH, then heaved a big sigh, sitting up to grip the tub's rim with her hands.

"Look, I'm really sorry I let him go, okay?" she said, all uncomfortable-like. "But I told you I don't think he was planning on storming Busan or anything. If I did, I would've dragged him back here. You've got to trust me on this."

SH sighed, all the fight going out of her as she slumped against the tree growin' next to the tub.

"I *do* trust you," she said. "And I'm not mad at you or anything, really. But you know even if he really wasn't planning on doing anything drastic, that can change. You know he can be..." She thought for a second, then settled on, "Impulsive."

Hae frowned. That was a word Korea used a lot for Pyo, usually

when he was criticizin' her, which meant SH was probably using it in a bad way.

"Korea ain't impulsive," she protested. "He just realizes he needs to do things, then he does 'em without thinkin' too much about it."

"If I said that to him during a criticism session, he'd probably hit me over the head," South Pyongan pointed out, and Hae nodded proudly.

"Ayuh."

SH shook her head. "Even if those were different things-"

"And they're not," Pyo cut in.

"-it still ends the same way." SH crossed her arms, lookin' out into the dark that crowded in around the clearing.

Hae huddled in closer to the tub, feelin' the warm water against her chest though the wood. She wished she'd got to cuddle with Korea before he left.

South Pyongan looked between them again, then huffed. "C'mon, comrades. There's no way he'd risk our asses getting bombed just to go shank the Yank. He said all that crap at the big session last January about not killing him unless we had to, right?"

"That was last year," SH said, all tense. "Before things..."

She trailed off, her fingers grabbing the hem of her tunic.

Pyo's grip on the tub tightened, but she shook her head. "What hasn't changed is the Yankee loser's big bomb. No matter how impulsive he is, Korea's not gonna risk us getting Japaned just for a little revenge. He's..." The corner of her lips dimpled a li'l, but Hae couldn't tell if she was smilin' or frowning. "More responsible than that, yeah?"

Hae watched SH's uniform stretch, and thought she'd have to remind her that ripping it would be violatin' the army economization order, and she'd have to report her.

But then she let go, exhaling real slow.

"You're right," she said. "I'm sure he wouldn't do something that risky."

"He probably wouldn't be planning a Geoje jailbreak either," Pyo added, leaning back in the tub again. "He's got to know there's no way even he could get everyone back here. It'd just be saving a few and getting way more killed, which is like, the opposite of his whole thing."

SH nodded confidently. "And I don't think he would risk rescuing our cousins when we're-" Her smile got a li'l tight. "When we *were* so close to a ceasefire."

She said the last part to Hae, like she might be worried he would try. And since she sounded less upset than she had since the Gen'ral told them Korea had taken off again, her cousin bobbed her head.

"Right," she chirped. "Korea din't know 'Merica was goin' to mess with the numbers, so ah don't think he'd go cause trouble when things were goin' smooth."

And the sessions were secret, which meant he wouldn't hear about it on the radio when he was down south or anythin'.

Hae thought that was probably why the miguk-nom had made the sessions private in the first place. Not in case they talked about the massacres they'd been doin' on Geoje Island after all ('cuz they never had), but so they could hide the no-good, rotten thing they'd been planning on doing.

SH's shoulders relaxed. "Yes," she said. "You're right. I'm sure he's just got caught up in something, and he'll be back any day now. Now hurry up and get out of the tub," she ordered Pyo. "You're burning all the wood, and we still need our turns."

Hae sat on her log while SH briskly scrubbed down Pyo's back, and she complained about germs. She pulled her knees up to her chest, balancin' her flashlight on them for her cousins, and gazed out into the forest, towards the south, where Korea had gone

without them. Again.

She wasn't worried about Korea gettin' caught trying to 'shank' 'Merica. She already knew he'd never do something like that, even though she really wanted him to. Hambu had been grumbly about it, but he was right that if Korea hadn't killed Japan when he had the chance, he wouldn't go out'a his way to kill the miguk-nom. Japan had put her in the hole, after all, and he'd done all that bad stuff to all of them. America was just as bad, but he hadn't had the chance to do anything too awful himself (even though Hae was still mad about that slap).

She wasn't worried about him gettin' got at the Geoje camp either. It wasn't like he *couldn't* get their POWs all the way back here- Korea could do anything. But he couldn't do it stealthily. It would make a big mess and take the wheel off the talks, even now that the Yanks had broke it. And she wasn't worried about him getting caught tryin' to free their cousins. In the POW camp, she'd known Korea was going to come for her 'cuz he could. And he'd promised that if he could, he would.

But he couldn't right now. There were the Commands and the negotiations, and even if the Yankees were dastardly liars that were messing things up again, Korea wouldn't risk messin' 'em up even more.

Neither SH or Pyo had mentioned what she was really worried about. Looking at their faces, SH's exasperated expression as their blue cousin worried about rashes and stuff, Hae wondered if it was 'cuz that was what they were really worried about, too, and didn't know how to make her feel better when they couldn't make themselves feel better.

Korea was too good to get caught by the Yanks or the traitors. He was quick and strong and clever, and he could get out of anything. Hae had seen it happen maybe a thousand times, and exaggerating facts was a tool of the reactionaries, so that wasn't what she was doing. He was always one'a the first to notice when there was an ambush, or if an enemy scout was watching from the hills, or when a villager was acting too suspicious to be anythin' but a Japanese spy.

But somehow, the Southern One had took his eye. Even though he was a whiny li'l yellow-belly that wasn't Korea, he'd hunted him down in their forests and cut the real Korea's eye out.

Korea said it was an ambush, and he wouldn't lie. Which meant he really hadn't seen it coming.

And *that* was what worried Hae.

She wished he'd taken her with him, or one of the others. She liked Mao Zhilong, she wouldn't mind if he tagged along, but he din't know the stuff they knew. And even if he did, Hae couldn't count on him to protect her country, 'cuz even if he was nice, he wasn't one of them.

She knew to watch out for the Southern One, and she'd give her life for Korea in a second. But he never took her with him. Not to fight Japan, not to stay in Seoul, not to Chorweon or the most dangerous missions after they'd joined the KPRA.

Hae was the only one that knew how lonely his heart felt, and she thought she might be the only one that realized the Division had made it worse. And if he was down south and felt that ache, the same one she'd felt every single day in the hole...

She drew her legs closer, trying to beam her thoughts across their land like a radio, hopin' her country could hear them.

'Please come home soon, Korea.'

—

A few days earlier

North and China trekked back towards the Sobaeks, stopping for a rest as soon as they were out of the foothills. It was slightly longer than the others, since they'd pushed themselves hard the night before to reach the Raktong while it was still dark.

It made North itch, but it was still only the 15th. Three days was enough time to make it back behind their lines, and wouldn't leave South Pyongan's merchant waiting for long. Even if it ended up

being four, so long as they got back at some point on the 19th, he'd be able to join the discussion on the revised list of POWs.

Or do damage control.

The Korean pretended he didn't see the look China was giving him as they settled in, taking first rest since he refused, sleeping curled up in the back of a shallow cave with Choe Jong-ok's bones still on his back.

In the bunker, he always fell asleep after the other country. Doing it while he was awake, and they were deep in enemy-held territory, made it difficult to close his eye. But the pressure against his spine made it easier, even knowing what it was.

The soft humming filling the cave had nothing to do with it.

The next day, their conversations had fizzled out entirely, except for when he would turn down China's offer to wear the podaegi or carry his pack for a few ri. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, only the one that fell between soldiers on the march. North couldn't do much but focus on not letting himself limp, and China was still giving him that look, watching him out of the corner of his eye.

It was night, and they were padding through the still thickly-forested ridges above Huibang Falls, almost at the Taebaeks again, when he finally demanded, "What?"

China eyed him again, that long contemplative stare that made his hackles raise. The falls ran below, the ridges amplifying the sound between them, turning it into a distant thunder.

"Before I tell you this, can I get a promise that you won't storm off?"

The words made North's hackles rise more.

"What is it?"

His comrade kept walking. "A promise, please. I don't want either of us to end up stranded in the mountains."

"Fine, I won't 'storm off,'" the Korean agreed impatiently. "Now tell me."

China was still silent for a few more paces, sliding through the gnarled yew trunks. Then he said, "Do you remember that letter America left in Gyeongmudae for you?"

The one he had torn into pieces, and China had pieced back together before burning.

North eyed him, wary of where this was going. "...Yes."

"There was some information on it I think you should hear."

"Then spit it out," North snapped, tense.

China cut his eyes to him. "It said that your brother was the one who ordered Seoul burned."

North halted, his boots suddenly rooted to the forest floor. "What?"

China stopped, turning back.

"Aside from all the taunts, America was telling you that the one who gave the order to burn Seoul during their retreat last year was your brother."

"Don't screw around."

"I'm not." The eyes over his mask were solemn.

Pressure started to build in North's chest. "You said it was nonsense. 'Useless taunts and nonsense.'"

China stared into his eye. "And *you* told me your brother would never hurt you."

"He *wouldn't."*

The other country tipped his head. "I know he's the one who took your eye."

North's jaw locked for a second, fighting the urge to cover his

eyepatch. "Who told you that?"

"Does it matter?" he responded. "It's true, isn't it? You told O-geun that the enemy took your eye, but it was your brother all along."

"America made him," he shot back, and even though the look in China's eyes didn't change, it still made him bristle. "And that doesn't matter. He would never burn Seoul."

China's head tipped the other way. "And why not, when he cut his brother's eye out with his own hands?"

Because that was just North. But burning Seoul would have hurt South, too, it would have hurt Gyeonggi, it had hurt their *people.*

"America was lying," North clipped, the pressure moving into his throat, trying to choke the words. "South would never do that. He was lying to try and turn me against him, just like he's trying to turn him against me."

The accusation Kangwon had hurled at his brother from his report echoed in his mind. *'If you're against our people, you're against us.'*

South *wasn't* against their people, and he wasn't against North either. He was just scared. That was why he had came after him that night at the Parallel, it was why he hadn't followed him at the Raktong. Because he was scared and didn't realize who America was.

But he had to now. America had been the one to burn Seoul, him and MacArthur. South knew now, he was still just scared. North knew, he *knew* because his brother had left his own note.

'잘못했어.'

North jerked his head up, lips peeling back from his teeth. "But I won't let him. And I won't let *you* try to me against him, either."

"I'm not trying to," China said calmly. "I just thought you should know. 'The more knowledge Korea has, the better.'"

North spun away, branches cracking as he paced in a tight circle

before reeling on him again.

"Then why didn't you tell me before?!" he demanded, voice echoing under the trees. "Why did you tell me it was fucking nonsense just to say it wasn't now?!"

China stared at him quietly, and North bared his teeth at him.

"My brother would never burn Seoul," he snarled. "And he would *never* hurt me."

The foreigner gave him that look, the same one his provinces had around the criticism circle that made his skin itch and jaw creak.

"America *lied,"* he growled, advancing on China. "He was fucking *lying.* This is exactly what he wants- for me to doubt my brother the way-"

His chest spasmed, and he suddenly slammed by China, shoulder-checking him so hard he hit a tree, shaking the leaves.

"I'm going ahead," he clipped. "Don't catch up to me if you know what's fucking good for you."

"I told you while we were here specifically so you couldn't run away," China called after him. "What happened to not storming off?"

North didn't answer, stomping over the bare ridgeline, sliding down into another stand of yews.

His body felt hot and prickly, his burnt skin too tight for his body.

China was lying. And even if he wasn't, even if he really was just telling him now because things were different than last year, America *was.*

South would never hurt him, he would *never* hurt their people. He knew he hadn't burned Seoul because he knew he'd realized by then that he should have gone with North at the Raktong. He'd seen the way America had treated their provinces, seen the way he treated their POWs, seen the way he treated Korea, and understood that he

was *wrong.* He'd realized the second he went back to Busan. All those things his provinces had reported him saying were just falsehoods America had fed him and things he felt like he had to say because he knew he was being monitored. He only stayed because he wasn't North and he was *afraid.* North *knew* America was lying because America didn't know his brother had left that note, tucked away in the desk like they'd done when they were young, apologizing. South had *apologized,* he had said he was sorry for not going with North, and North sank his claws into that, refusing to let it struggle free.

'잘못했어 *jalmothaesseo jalmot-'*

North froze suddenly, his insides going cold.

잘못했어. 'I'm sorry.'

Or more, 'It's my fault.'

South had never apologized with jalmothaesseo. He had always used mian. When he would tug the blanket off North at night or accidentally touch one of his bruises, it was always *'Miaaaaan,'* in that little guilty whine that left his brother no choice but to forgive him, even if he'd actually been upset. Even when he apologized at the Raktong, when he had *cut out his eye,* standing there with that blankly calm look the shock on his face had morphed into and said he was really sorry with North's blood still dripping from his Yankee blade, he had used it. *'Jeongmal mian, hyung.'*

'잘못했어.' The word North had clung to for over a year, he now desperately tried to push away, to expunge its meaning from his mind entirely and pretend it had none.

But he knew it did. 'It's my fault' settled into the hollow in his chest in a way 'I'm sorry' never had, and the dreadful truth sank into his bones.

South hadn't been apologizing. He had been taking responsibility.

The fires raging in Seoul as the KPA entered, the thick, black, choking smoke curling over it, the empty streets and torched slums

and flattened Yongsan district, the civilians cowering in the hills and pulled out of the rubble, charred and blackened and just as decimated as their capital. The pain that would have enveloped Gyeonggi, making him whimper and writhe like he had on the way to the Raktong, the all-consuming agony that enveloped North as he set foot in the city, solely glad that he was lifting it from his brother. South had given the order. He had been responsible for all of it.

'Family always knows where it hurts most.'

A thick darkness roiled inside of North, hot and black and choking like the smoke from the fires that razed Seoul, and he thought that he might scream.

And then it extinguished, his entire body freezing, every hair left on it standing at attention as the space between his shoulder blades began to prickle.

He was being watched.

North didn't look around, standing rooted under the trees below the ridge. He could hear them now, the soft rustle of undergrowth as bodies moved through it, the *'clink'* of firearms, almost inaudible under the echoing waterfall, the things he hadn't heard in his fury.

He was surrounded.

Run. He had to run. To duck and dive and pull his Type 49 from his back without damaging Choe Jong-ok's bones, and he had to do it *now*.

The tension in him built, his calves flexed, and-

"Comrade!"

It happened in a second. The cry came from the top of the ridge, strident and clear, demanding attention. The trees shook as the men jumped, startled from their hunting crouch. North lunged for where he hadn't heard noise, trying to escape the encirclement.

Behind him, a rifle cracked.

North twisted as he dove, stomach dropping as he realized he didn't feel pain spreading through his body, just in time to see the figure standing on the ridge stagger.

And, silhouetted by the faint moonlight, China fell to his knees.

—

1945

"Absolutely not."

The American soldiers looked down on North, unflinching in the face of his anger. Their faces were pale and gaunt, with protruding noses and unnaturally deep-set eyes, heavy shadows caking them. Their khaki uniforms were rumpled and well-worn. The men had likely been mobilized from some Japanese island, or maybe China, sent to Korea as swiftly as possible.

To claim them.

"I'm afraid it must be so, sir," the one suit with them spoke.

He was a tall man with a long face and small moustache, who had introduced himself as Patrick Hurley, American ambassador to the Republic of China.

"I have explicit orders to detain the Korean Countryhuman until Mr. America arrives to oversee the surrender of Japan," Hurley said, and his eyes slid from North to South. "Or Korean Countryhumans, as it seems."

"Your 'orders' do not apply to us," North growled.

"North," South whispered, scandalized.

North made an effort to reign in his tone and not snap at the first real foreign diplomat he'd had to deal with, conscious of the eyes on them. It was like the bastards had purposefully waited until the declaration of the People's Republic and his denouncement and tacit acceptance of the Joint Administration were over to ambush them like this.

North drew himself up, glaring cold, professional daggers at the foreign men outside of the Gyeonggi Girls' High School.

"You have no authority to enter our country and detain a Korean Countryhuman," North said coldly. "You would not have it if there were one of us, and you do not have it now."

They hadn't even known there were two Korean Countryhumans. They hadn't known about their People's Committees or the proclamation of the People's Republic or how North had fought the Japanese for over twenty years or how South had been imprisoned in the same damn country Hurley had been squatting in. They didn't know a single fucking *thing* about Korea, yet here they were, rushing to put their boots in their country and on their necks.

"Korea is to be divided," Hurley said, just as cold. "The southern half is to be placed under American authority, including this city."

There was an uneasy rumbling from the crowd, and North knew he couldn't back down. He was already being forced to accept this. He wouldn't tolerate being ordered around in their own country.

"You are not in charge yet." He glared up at the man. "And you will never *be* in charge. Korea denies this forced Joint Administration. We deny the idea that we need foreigners to put our country back in order when it was *them* that destroyed it in the first place. We deny taking orders in our own land, and we deny any 'authority' your country thinks it has. We have already began rebuilding our nation."

He swept a hand at Seoul, at the thousand men and women gathered outside the school, independence activists and his revolutionaries, cheeks still glowing. The People's Republic might be only a symbolic declaration, but it had still given them hope to come together to declare it.

"We do not need your 'aid.'" He narrowed his eye at the pale man. "Just as we did not need your trade when your nation attempted to force ours open seventy-four years ago."

A look of confusion flickered in the man's eyes, and North's lip

fought not to curl. He didn't even know about the Shinmiyangyo.

Of course he didn't. Korea was just another country in the long list of nations the United States of American thought it had any claim to.

"I don't expect *you* to know this," he said, knowing he didn't. "But your *SS General Sherman* invaded our river and broke our laws, violating our native religions and kidnapping our officials. And when our people fought back, you *murdered* our civilians."

North hadn't been alive for it, but his comrade Kim Il-sung had described the events in detail, his great-grandfather having been there. So had others. And his common sense held the memory in a place of righteous defiance. The crowd murmured, feeling the same way.

"But we kept fighting," he told Hurley, stepping forward, glaring up at him. "And we destroyed your ship. And when your country returned to make us pay for the crime of defending our sovereignty, we still did not bow. And we will not now."

He looked away from the foreigner, boldly turning his back on the armed men to address his people, his provinces lurking to the side, ready to act, and his cowering brother. He couldn't spare a reassuring look for him. Words would have to be enough.

"Korea will not bow to invaders," he announced, his voice ringing over the plaza. "Gone are the years where foreigners can do as they please to our nation and our people. Even if this unjust administration is to be accepted, Korea will *never* accept any authority but its people's. We are entering our long-awaited shining future, blazing forward to freedom and independence."

The crowd cheered as he easily relit that spark of wild elation that had followed them since Liberation and echoed in the rafters of the school assembly hall. He could see the tears in Lyuh Woon-hyung's eyes.

Satisfied, North turned back to the Americans.

"We are letting the Soviet Union and America walk hand in hand with us towards that future," he said, keeping the grudge out of his voice, projecting only confidence and magnanimity. "We are giving your nations the chance to say that they played a role in the shining paradise our country will become."

He cooled his voice, looking up from under his lids at the man.

"But *you* decide what that role will be."

North didn't threaten him, not outright. That was what soldiers did, not politicians. But he was still clearly one of the former. His uniform was neat, but worn, even more so than the foreign soldiers'. The red star on his cap was the colour of the blood it was obvious he knew how to spill. And the pistol on his hip glinted coldly in the early autumn sun.

And the Americans were outnumbered. The crowd was pressing in, his words having stirred them, reminded them of how long their nation had truly been menaced by invaders, how Japan wasn't the start and should have been the end. The men and women here had all fought the Japanese government in some way, and by the looks on their faces, they were willing to fight these foreigners, too.

There was a part of North that wanted to let them. To help eliminate these invaders with his people, then go to CCCP and take back his acceptance, to tell him he had a week to get his soldiers out of their country before he declared war, and to tell America that any American that set foot on their soil would be considered his own declaration.

But it wasn't what their country needed. So he settled for not ordering his guerrillas to back off as they moved in closer with the others, coming to stand at their country's back with a deadly promise in their eyes.

And even though their country was the one Dividing Korea, even though they had just dropped bombs that hadn't been thought possible even a few years ago on their former Occupier, even though the American soldiers were armed, and they all stood head and shoulders above North and most of his people, Patrick Hurley

stepped back.

"Very well," he said stiffly, moustache quivering in indignation. "You may go."

He was trying to salvage his pride by acting like he had a say in it.

North didn't respond, just curled his lip in disdain, letting the words linger pathetically as he turned around, not sparing another look for them.

"Comrades!" he called, raising his arms for his people. "We have done something great today!"

No matter his views on the People's Republic or the men they'd elected, it was still a milestone in their journey towards liberty. He wouldn't begrudge them that. Any criticisms were best saved for private, political-minded company.

"Korea and our provinces will be moving on," he announced. "To spread the word of our People's Committees across the country and congratulate our people on the freedom we have all fought so ardently for. But I trust that you will handle matters here, and play your part in restoring our nation and moving it beyond what it once was, just as you played your parts in Liberating it.

"We wouldn't be here without you."

His throat swelled as he scanned the sea of white clothes and Korean flags, the taegeuk now striped with crimson. Though these were more well-stitched, they didn't stir his heart the same way those sloppy ones that had flown in Pyongyang did. But the faces of those waving them did.

"Long live the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army!" he called, having completely forgotten the foreign men behind him. "Long live our independence activists! Long live all the Korean people who have fought for our country!"

"LONG LIVE KOREA!" those people roared back, and their voice thrummed in Korea's heart with no Japanese blades to cut it short, no less precious than every other time he had heard it.

South had flinched at the noise, hunching in on himself, so North put his arm around him, making him stand straight. They were cheering for him, too.

His brother smiled at him. But his brows drew in.

North didn't notice. He wanted to stay and let his people embrace him, but they'd already done that inside. And there was too much work to do.

He nodded to his provinces, and they peeled off the wall, marching along behind him as he headed for the meeting spot he'd set with Lyuh Woon-hyung.

He spoke with the man for over an hour, counselling him on how to handle the Americans when they arrived, and cautioning him on the president of the People's Republic. They couldn't have real elections yet, so the decision had been made by the returned members of the Provisional Government and some that had still been here. Lyuh Woon-hyung had been appointed Vice President, while a man named Rhee Syngman was to be President.

North didn't know much about him personally, only that he'd been absent from Korea almost since the Occupation began, was the President of the Provisional Government for a few years, and was in America right now. And while not everyone in the organization was a rightist (Kim Tu-bong, the man that had discovered and brought his brother to him, was a Communist), it was said Rhee Syngman was. And though he didn't begrudge the people of his that had been forced to flee Korea, he *did* begrudge those that went to America to beg aid from a nation that approved of their colonization in the first place.

He tried to involve South in the conversation, since while Rhee Syngman had been out of office by the time he arrived in China, he had still been in the country. But his brother had apparently never met him. He hadn't met many of the Provisional Government.

He didn't blame the men for keeping his brother's existence a secret (this didn't extend to those that had also known North was out there, and could have told him his brother was safe). Being

mostly isolated was better than being recaptured by Japan. But he wished they'd given him more coaching on politics. Even if they fed him their own views, at least it would give North a base for teaching him the right ones for their nation. He could practically hear the birds chirping in his brother's head as he and Lyuh Woon-hyung discussed the governance of Seoul, like whenever he tried to explain Marxism to him.

It wasn't South's fault, though. And he would have time to teach him, even if he didn't stay in Seoul during the Division.

North... still hadn't decided whether he would or not. It wasn't a decision he wanted to make until he had to.

When he was done, he left, and their unit set out for the edge of the city. It was still a thrill to let his steps ring on the stones, unafraid of drawing attention. Once he'd crept through the streets with his insides crushed and blood spilling out of his chest, dragging himself from alleyway to alleyway. Alone. Now he walked proudly with his brother at his side, the way it should be.

But after a second, he realized he wasn't.

North stopped, looking back, and his provinces did, too. South stood on the main road, rubbing his arm.

"What's wrong?" North asked, automatically scanning him and their surroundings.

Had one of the Americans done something earlier? Had a Japanese still in the city just shot him with a dart?

But he looked fine. Just... ashamed.

"I think... maybe we should stay here."

"We can't," North replied. "There's too much to do. And our people have it handled here."

They had to solidify a revolutionary base in the People's Committees as soon as possible, especially in the south where the Americans would soon take control, then they had to get back to

CCCP and the guerrillas they'd left with him to make sure he really had obeyed his order not to return to Pyongyang without them. And he still wanted to get to the far north to make sure the Soviets behaved themselves before their military police arrived. America coming put a deadline on things, which he hated, but he needed to-

"No," South said. "I mean, I think we should stay with the Americans."

North blinked. He couldn't immediately process the words.

When he did, he demanded, *"What?"*

South shifted uncomfortably, but before he could open his mouth, North grabbed his wrist, dragging him down the street.

"We'll be back," he called to his provinces, trying to ignore the stunned looks on some of their faces.

Ssi-bal. South Chungcheong, South Pyongan, Hwang, and North Hamgyong were still skeptical about the time his brother had spent with Japan. They'd been behaving themselves so far, but even that sentence had probably just set him back with them.

North found a quiet alley in the slums on the edge of the city, between two leaning shacks.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

South looked down, away from his eyes. "America's going to be here soon, isn't he? Mr. Hurley said it would be in the next five days at most."

"So?" North demanded, baffled.

"So it's not like there much we can do in five days," his brother replied, rubbing his arm again. "Wouldn't it make more sense to stay here?"

"Even if it did, we can't give those bastards what they want." North's lip curled as he remembered the smug look in Hurley's eyes, so sure the Koreas would obey him. "Didn't you hear anything I

said?"

"I heard you pretty much threaten him," South said, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't threaten him," North dismissed. "I warned him."

"Those are just semantics." His brother clutched at his hand. "Brother, those are the guys coming to Divide us, and you're trying to make them our enemies."

"I am *trying* to make sure they don't make *themselves* our enemies," the taller Korea growled. "Did you see the look on that bastard's face? He thinks he can walk all over us, just like America. Were you even listening when I told you about the *General Sherman* and Hawaii and everything he's done?"

"Even if his country's done bad things, that doesn't mean he has," South tried to point out.

"But he *has,"* North growled, clenching his fists.

America hadn't changed since his formation. He was the same Countryhuman that had colonized North America, wiped out its indigenous population and forced the survivors into open-air cages to crush their culture. He was the same country that had turned Cuba and Hawaii into sugar plantations, and he had been the one to authorize the Shinmiyangyo, trying to force them open, cutting down their civilians and occupying their forts on Ganghwa Island, thinking he could do whatever he wanted because that was what colonizers *did.*

"He also defeated Japan," South argued.

"America didn't defeat Japan!" North snapped. "The Soviet Union did. And *our* country spent decades fighting him. America didn't do shit when we were being cut down in the streets. He only stepped in because he was threatened, and he only dropped the atom bomb on Japan to threaten CCCP."

"Okay," South said, in that grating 'this is why we shouldn't try to escape today' voice that North could remember so well. "We know

him and CCCP hate each other, and we know they're both going to be administering us. Aren't things going to be tense enough already? Do you really need to make things worse by disobeying them?"

The word made North's teeth creak.

"I am not 'disobeying' them," he growled. "They do not have the authority to give us orders. We don't have to obey."

"But it would make it easier."

There was a popping sound in North's temple.

"It *would* make it easier, wouldn't it?" he snapped, eyes blazing. "Just like it was always easier to play nice with the Japs and do everything Japan wanted, *wasn't* it? Just like it was easier to eat their food and wear their clothes and obey their rules." His eyes narrowed. "Just like it was easier to stay."

South's eyes flashed indignantly. "It wasn't easier to stay! Do you think anything I went through was *easy?"*

North's teeth ground together, thinking of his brother locked up alone for years, his brother who had always gotten upset if North didn't feel like talking for even a few minutes, who craved conversation like the rice they were given, even if it was one-sided, his brother who had never stuttered before.

No. He didn't think it was easy. But it was like South thought that over twenty years of war, of taking bullets and slaughtering Japanese and burying their comrades *had* been.

He shook his head. "Then why do you want to stay now?"

"Because America isn't Japan," South said, his fingers digging into his arm. "And you already said we're going to accept it, so why do *you* want to fight it?"

"Because it deserves to be fought!" North snapped, then sucked in a breath, trying to calm himself.

"If you want to g-go," South said into the silence of the alleyway. "It's... okay." The words were reluctant, like they were being dragged out of him. "M-Maybe if one of us stays here, it'll make the Americans happy. And you can do all your political stuff, then come back here and stay with me. Did you ask Mr.- Um, CCCP if we could stay together? Even if he said no, maybe I could try and lay on the charm and see if the Americans will let us."

'Let.' Like they needed permission from great powers to do what they wanted to in their own country, to stay together after they'd been separated for so long.

"I... don't really want to be away from you, even for a few days," his brother said, rubbing his arm, using the voice he'd always used when he wanted North to do something. "But if you really have to..."

South smiled tremulously, trying to make a peace offering. But peace wasn't freedom.

And North was starting to remember why his feet had kept walking that night.

"No," he said, and the word made his brother's lips waver.

"No?" South asked hesitantly when he didn't continue.

"No," North repeated. "We can't stay together."

After meeting even that minor American representative, North knew CCCP was right- they wouldn't both be allowed to stay with him. And North couldn't stay with America. If he did, he could work undercover, helping his people if the foreigners went too far. But he wouldn't have the same power that he would have with CCCP, the power to not just put bandages on their country by saving individuals, but the power to *change* things. To finally take control of their country, to put his people's hands on his reins and help them cauterize it for good. To prepare a base of their people's power for when the Division was disposed of in a few months. If there really was going to be a four-way trusteeship with Britain and the Republic of China, two other capitalist powers, then they

needed to form a vanguard party as soon as possible and prepare their people in order to stave off their influence and counter the propaganda they were sure to bring to bear against them.

He couldn't do that here. Not when he would have his brother in his 'ear,' begging him to behave, to keep his head down and not cause problems, just like he always had.

South's face had crumpled at his words, like he'd put his fist into it. "W-What are you saying?" he asked after a moment, words wavering.

"I am saying that if you don't come with me right now, then we won't be together again until the Division is over." The ultimatum tasted like ash in North's mouth.

But he had to make the decision now, or he wouldn't make it at all. And it had to be the one he'd made before.

His brother's eyes widened. "N-No. Nononononono. North-" He threw himself forward, clutching at the collar of North's uniform with his soft white hands. "Please don't leave me, please, not again, *please-!"*

"Do you think I want to?!" North snapped, making him flinch back with his ferocity, though he didn't let go. "I want you to come with me, South, just like back then! I *wanted* you to come with me."

It was the closest they'd gotten to talking about it, and it made the fingers around his collar tighten.

He searched his brother's face, looking for what he wanted to see. But all he found was the wide glimmering white eyes that had always begged him to stop fighting, the ones that begged him to stay. The ones that had almost made his feet turn around all those years ago, to slink back to his cage and just keep *taking it.*

The ones that could make him give up.

"But you didn't," he spat. "Because you're a coward. And you still are."

South flinched like he'd hit him, and his hands slid off his uniform.

North stifled the urge to pull them back, to crush them in his and never let go again.

The tears in his eyes spilled over, running over his disbelieving expression. "You're leaving me again."

He was the one leaving. He was the one that wanted to crawl to the Americans with his tail between his legs.

North wanted to be angry, to scream at him for being like this, for making him walk away again.

But he was his brother. He couldn't be mad at him, not truly. Mostly he'd felt what he had back then, as he had looked into those anchor eyes and known that there wouldn't be any convincing him.

"You're letting me."

South shrank in on himself. "Please," he whispered.

'Please just give up.'

North gritted his teeth. And for once he turned the plea back on him, taking his shoulders firmly in his hands.

"Please, South," he begged. "Come with me."

Even for a few more days, they hadn't had enough time, just a few more days-

But his brother just gave him that despairing look, the same one from their prison doorway, like there was an impassable river between them that he couldn't ford, that he didn't even want to try.

"I- I can't," he whispered, his voice breaking.

North had always wondered if he should have pleaded with him to leave all those years ago. It had always stuck in his head, digging into his brain like a thorn- what if he just hadn't tried hard enough? What if he had just taken one more second to say 'please,' that little word that always broke him?

He supposed it should be a comfort to know now that it wouldn't have changed anything.

He let go of his brother's shoulders, stepping away.

"Then I'm going."

South grabbed for him, but North was already out of the alleyway, back into the warm fall afternoon. And his brother didn't cross the threshold.

"Please," he said again from behind him, raw and desperate.

"I'll see you at the Division, brother," North answered, walking away.

He didn't want to look back. But he had to.

South was watching him with that same look from twenty-six years ago. Scared, hurt, confused. Betrayed. Even though *he* was the one choosing to stay.

North's feet didn't waver this time as he turned the corner, leaving his brother behind.

Their provinces were waiting for him where he'd left them.

"There you are," Sang said, relieved. Then her brows furrowed. "Where's-?"

"He is staying here," North clipped, making some of his provinces' eyes widen in shock. Others only narrowed. He glared at all of them. "Would any of you like to do the same?"

The answer was instantaneous. "No, Korea."

"Then we move out."

He strode past them, and they followed, knowing not to ask questions.

As he left Seoul and South this time, he was marching, not

crawling. But he could feel his heart growing lonely again, the way it hadn't been in weeks. The way he thought it would never have to be again.

But he had to do this. He couldn't stay, just like he hadn't been able to stay back then. It was easy to slip back into being North when he was with his brother. Too easy. And he couldn't be him.

He was Korea. And he had a country to raise from the ashes.

He knew it wasn't South's fault that he was still just South. But if he had just came with him back then, he wouldn't be. North just couldn't understand *why*-

Whatever. It was in the past. And this wasn't like last time. America couldn't torture South when this Joint Administration was so public, and negotiations would come in three months. North would get his brother back, and he would call him an idiot, flick him on the forehead, and apologize. Then they would just have to put up with five years of trusteeship, giving him time to educate his brother and make sure he was ready to be Korea. He didn't want the end of the Division to Unify them, and he doubted it would- Korea could only Unify when the contradictions that had created two of them in the first place were reconciled.

And once they were Unified, they would be Korea, and their country would be finally, truly, irrevocably Liberated. South would be fine until then.

After all, this Division would only last a few months.

There is a very small hint in here about where China learned South was the one responsible for North's eye. Veryyy small. Also Safeway Pyongyang reference!!

Patrick Hurley was the US ambassador to the ROC at the time of the Division, and from what I can find, he was in China. But in real life he didn't go to Korea. In this, America just wanted someone to lock down the Korean Countryhuman before the commies could get to him (completely unaware of North's history or there being two of them).

I can't talk about this much because the topic makes me reasonably feel insane with rage and grief, but the sheer amount of Slavic girls and women in the Epstein files is heartbreaking. Soviet women went from being one of the most advanced and liberated in the world, with high education and some of the most female scientists to commodities. Bodies to be shipped across the seas. And it's especially the Slavic ones because racist Western men can still get the 'purity' of a white woman, but still with an 'exotic' air to her, and no ability to gain independence when she's across the sea from her homeland and family, and can't speak English. How the men in the files talk about not liking black women. They want all the vulnerabilities of an immigrant, but in a pale package. They want whiteness, but they also want the thrill of conquering the other that comes with Slavic women. Girls. The post-collapse period interviews with the kids who are talking about how they sell their bodies, how they're eleven and so young, are some of the worst things I've ever seen. How many of them ended up in America under some capitalist man or on his plate? And how Western men immediately went from portraying the Soviet woman as brutish and 'manly' to mail-order bimbo brides or whores. They can't stand to see a woman or women as a whole have real power, when they do they need to crush them down and brutalize them, make us 'women' again. Even the idea of the Soviet woman couldn't be allowed to stand, she had to be fetishized, torn down and conquered. It doesn't matter that the Soviet Union was revisionist towards the end, the collapse was still one of the worst things to happen in history. And for women, I might say it *is* the worst, maybe only under the formation of patriarchal religions. It's a very good thing I discovered Marxism because if I didn't I would be a virulent misandrist with an interest in adventurism. As it stands I know men aren't the enemy-capitalism and the intimate relationship it has with the patriarchy is. And hurting random men on the street will not solve that.

Fetters Of Conscience

There was no time for reflection on the battlefield, no time to process things. If you stopped to take the situation in, you died.

North had survived thirty-three years of real combat. He was already moving as China went down, springing away from the encirclement, darting through the woods while shots rang out behind him, turning the yew trunks to splinters. Behind him he could hear boots scrabbling up the mountain ridge, and he knew the reactionaries were going for China to finish him off.

He hadn't gone far enough to double back safely, but he did it anyways, turning sharply, a bullet whizzing by his face close enough to feel. North charged for the ridge, bursting from the trees and sprinting straight into the few men jogging up it. They scattered, shouting in alarm as bullets pelted the rocky ground around them. North tore through, ducking to stop a man from grabbing him, ignoring the pain in his thighs and the heat that shot through his leg as one grazed his calf.

China wasn't on the top of the incline, and he almost felt a moment of relief, thinking the shot hadn't hit him, he'd only been faking it-

But as he crested the ridge, he could see a figure crumpled halfway down, unmoving.

"Get the North!"

Still with no time to pause, North pelted down the slope, throwing himself forward as the men behind him followed, spraying the mountains with gunfire. He grit his teeth, knowing there wasn't any time to carry China down. So even though his comrade was injured, he slid across the final stretch, slamming into him at full speed, both of them tumbling off an outcrop, falling back towards the forest they'd been walking through.

North twisted in mid-air, not wanting to land on China in his arms or Choe Jong-ok's bones on his back. So it was his side that hit the ground a few metres down with full force, agony lancing through his burn gash. He gasped, but China let out a worse noise, a thick gurgle that made his blood run cold. He couldn't let it stun him, so he forced himself up, hauling the other man with him, wrapping his arm around him and dragging him forward as the men chasing them took the slightly longer way down, calling for his head.

North's heart thundered in his chest, China's blood soaking his side. His comrade's breathing was wet as his feet stumbled along.

"I think they shot me in the lung," he panted, raspy and whistling as the air leaked out of him.

"No fucking shit," North growled, panic shooting through him.

Ssi-bal. Lung punctures were almost always fatal unless they were treated immediately. And even if they weren't being shot at-

A rifle cracked in the woods, and he hurried forward, dropping China in the tangled white branches of a fallen yew tree, cramming him into the cage of limbs, cursing at every crack of dead wood. They couldn't get away like this, and he couldn't fight holding him.

The front of China's uniform was soaked with blood, and his black mask glistened wetly as it soaked through the fabric. Still, as he looked up at North, hand over the crimson liquid pouring from his stomach, the Korean could tell he was smiling.

"Ah," he said, far too calmly, his words drowning in his own blood. "Sorry, comrade. But I'm about to pass out."

His eyes rolled back in his head, and he slumped back.

North wanted to shake him, to slap him back awake. But there wasn't time.

His mind raced. His comrade needed medical attention and he needed it *now*. But even if they could lose the reactionaries, the front was still days away, and he hadn't brought an aid kit.

The blood kept pouring out of China, the stain spreading.

This was his fault. He shouldn't have let him come, he shouldn't have raised his voice or stormed off, he shouldn't have-

Raised voices in the woods nearby, undergrowth cracking under dozens of boots, firearms stuttering, striking wood, stone, and earth in a violent staccato.

North couldn't think about that. He couldn't think about how the other Countryhuman would die if he didn't get medical attention, or how he had taken the shot meant for him, he couldn't think about how many more ri were left until the front or how his brother was just one more person he hadn't understood. All he could think about was destroying the enemy.

His body hadn't stopped moving, snatching China's Type 50, tearing off the podaegi and shoving the bones and his pack in with his wounded comrade, covering them both in dead branches, hoping his rasping, gurgling breathing wouldn't give him away. He stood, ammunition in his pouch, submachine guns slung over his shoulders and pistol at his hip, leaving China with his in case he woke up. They hadn't brought rifles.

Everything drained from him, his panic and rage and grief and pain, leaving him cold and ready to kill.

He couldn't afford to be stealthy. He needed to lure the men away from China. So he took off back into the woods, crashing through them loud enough to draw fire.

Three men he'd seen climbing the ridge, and he'd heard at least six when he was surrounded. Likely a patrol unit, so he could expect ten or more, and at least one sent off for reinforcements. From their hunting cries, they had realized who he was, so there wouldn't be any giving up the chase. He had to finish this quickly.

"My quarry isn't with you!" he called as he wove through the trees, avoiding a bare stretch of slope. If he could convince one or two to defect, it would help. "I'm not here to kill you!"

Except for whoever had shot China. He was going to tear him to pieces.

He didn't use his gun until he was far enough away that stray shots wouldn't hit his comrade's shelter. When he was, he turned, firing with his Type 49, spraying the woods and sending the men diving into the darkness. Someone shouted, and in the chaos, he dove to the ground, pressing himself to the thick trunk of a fir as the men returned fire, guns stuttering until someone called to hold.

There was a moment of silence as the reactionaries listened, and North held as still as possible. He needed a rifle for what he had planned.

"Fan out," the unit commander barked.

"Should we double back?" a young-sounding man asked. "He might try and go back for the casualty."

"No need," another answered, tinged with smugness. "I'm sure I got a killshot."

North grit his teeth, but didn't peer around the trunk to try and spot who was speaking.

"Kim's right," the commander said. "Take Pak and head back. Stay on alert. The North is vicious."

He would show him vicious. Before those two men got too far away. North stayed still as the unit spread out to search. There were no shadows under the trees, so he had to count on footsteps, listening as a pair tread closer.

When they were just around the tree, he lunged. A rifle blasted, but he'd aimed low, and the shot went over his head. He grabbed the man's legs, yanking back as more shots followed, dragging him behind the tree and plunging his tiger-hilted dagger into his throat, not wasting a second before he tore the rifle out of his grasp and ran, hoping that the two that had left would return to follow.

North fled until he burst out of the trees, heading up a bare ridge, sacrificing cover for high ground. Rocks and dirt slid under his

heels, almost sending him plummeting, but he kept his footing and reached the top of the ridge, throwing himself to the ground, heart pounding. He propped his rifle up, wriggling until he could peer down the steep slope, and the second there was break in the bullets flying around him, he raised his upper half, firing two shots.

One man went down, a round in his head, but he had to duck as fire was returned, and the other he'd been aiming for only cried out as his shot took him in the shoulder instead.

Ssi-bal. He needed to make every rifle bullet count before they got too close. As soon as there was another gap in shooting, he fired again, managing to get two headshots before being pinned. His next attack got one, and the sight of half of the reactionary men advancing before he was pressed down under a constant barrage of submachine fire.

The men alternated, some climbing while others shot, then switching roles so they advanced piecemeal up the ridge, inexorably. North was only able to get three more shots off, and two of them went wide as his targets zigzagged.

Now that they were close enough, he switched to his Type 49, spraying the climbers, watching two go down before the whites of their eyes were close enough to see, and he took off running again, sliding down the rolling hill on the other side of the ridge, taking sharp turns and still feeling rounds strike clods of dirt from under his boots.

Down into the valley and up onto the next ridge, where he hit the ground and repeated his strategy. The soldiers used their cover and advance method from the start, spreading wide when they got close enough for his Type 49, so he only got two, and one man in the chest. But he was already thinning the herd. The patrol had been bigger than he'd thought, sixteen if the seven men below were all that remained.

"I don't want to hurt you!" he repeated, his voice echoing down the ridgeline. "I am not the enemy! America and the Syngman Rhee regime are. If you leave now, you don't have to die."

“Tough words for someone who’s outnumbered!” someone shouted back over the submachine fire that made him press his face to the ground.

Grit flew into his eye, and he slammed it shut, feeling his chest tighten in a mix of alarm and-

He had given them their chance. And they had chosen. He didn’t need to regret what would come next.

When the shouts echoed from the other side of the ridge, the reinforcements of what sounded like at least another patrol coming to flank him, instead of his stomach sinking, the excitement inside him only built.

He burst up, taking off along the spine of the ridge, stable, but still thin enough that if he zigzagged too wide, he’d go tumbling off and down the hill. He twisted just as the first patrol reached the crest behind him, his last rifle round taking a man in the head, sending him reeling back below, before he tossed aside the empty gun.

He didn't risk firing again, keeping his submachine guns on his back as he pelted along the rocky ground, a hail of bullets falling around him, tearing through his enemy jacket and screaming by his face close enough to taste gunpowder, and this was even better than tearing apart the guerrillas in the Osok Mountains with South Pyongan. He didn’t have to worry about having her out of his sight or holding back to make sure she learned the lesson he wanted her to, and he didn't have to fear a bomb hitting his soldiers down below, the way he had when he'd shot down that plane.

The crisp mountain air streamed against his face, washing away the sympathetic fever and eternal heat from his burns. Sobaek Mountain rose before him, the ridge rising to meet its spine, and the forested hills fell away on either side, silver seas under the light of the half moon peeking through the heavy clouds, an entire mountain for him to use against the men chasing him, either as a maze or a killing ground.

He didn't have to worry about the bullets flying around him

because they would only hit him. And he didn't have to worry about getting caught.

It was finally just North.

He should have went east. Even if South alerted America that he was there, he could have escaped. The foreigner didn't know their country, and neither did his men. And Rhee and his brass had spent the Occupation in America and China, never having to learn the lay of the land to survive. Most of the ones that had, like Paik Sun-yup and Kim Sok-won, had already been eliminated in the first and third stages of the war.

Part of him wondered if he should just let the men catch him, bring him to Busan and his brother. He needed to confront him about Seoul, ask if what America's letter had allegedly said had been true. He knew it was. But he needed to hear him *say* it. He needed to know if he would. And then he needed to do what he should have by the Raktong- drag him back to Pyongyang even if he kicked and screamed.

North didn't flinch as a bullet shot by him, gouging the side of his skull, hot blood running down his cheek.

No. He couldn't. Because it wasn't just him out here. China was hidden down below, bleeding out. He had taken that bullet, and he was depending on North to get him back to safety, and soon.

So the Korean Countryhuman stopped dancing with the gunfire, and plunged suddenly down the ridge, down into the forest that carpeted Sobaek Mountain. And his pursuers followed.

They wove in and out of the firs and yews, North leading them down into the deforested hills and back up into the wilderness as he pleased, emerging from cracks in the land to grab men, tearing their helmets off like shells so he could smash their skulls open on the rocks, leading them into defiles where he deftly scrambled up half-hidden handholds, leaving them trapped in a killing corridor for him to pepper with submachine gun rounds, and leaping from the shadows of trees to grapple with them, using the knife China had given him to finish them off. Slashing, stabbing, shooting, soaking

himself and the mountain in hot streams of blood, some of it pouring from him.

He didn't allow himself to get caught up in the rush of hunting, or take risks. He kept his movements simple and deadly, refusing to get bogged down in brawling. The one time he wasn't able to retreat immediately after he'd jammed his blade into the back of a soldier's neck, and been slammed to the ground by two others, he prioritized getting away over killing them, slamming his knee into one of their groins before tearing himself free and fleeing into the dark. He didn't let himself forget that China was waiting for him, or that Choe Jong-mi was waiting for her sister.

Twenty-five kills he counted, almost all of them he was sure. Just a few more, and he knew he could save China. He even started to work his way back towards where he'd left him, the footsteps cracking off in the woods now sparse, the voices far fewer, only raising to yelp as they stumbled now. Just a couple more ambushes and he knew he would have won.

Until he rounded a corner on a narrow mountain footpath that ran between two steep ridges and should have spit him out on a broad slope whose limited cover he could use to pick off the men on his heels, and was met by a dead end instead.

North skidded to a halt, the jumble of rocks and earth in front of him not making sense to his adrenaline-filled brain, until he looked up, instinctively searching for a way out, and realized the debris had came from the ridges above.

He hadn't been able to come here in years. In that time, a flood had caused a rockslide.

He was trapped.

His body wanted to back up, to try and flee back the way he'd came, but the men were already behind him, boots pounding down the rocky path. He lunged forward instead to scramble up the wall of stone, but before he could, someone shouted, *"Halt!"*

North froze, his shoulders prickling, every muscle in his body

demanding to climb, to escape. But he could feel the guns on him.

Slowly, he turned around.

Three men stood in the defile behind him, a pistol and two submachine guns raised. The chests behind them heaved, their uniforms smeared with mud and blood. One was young, with the red armband of a recruit, and the other two were older, more grizzled. A scar stretched across the lead man's thick neck.

"Put… down your weapon," this one panted.

He was out of breath, just like the other two, exhausted from two hours of sprinting over rough terrain, much of it uphill. The one with the pistol was holding it in one hand, the other arm hanging limply, a victim of trying to grab North while he was slipping back into the woods after eviscerating his partner. They were weak and exhausted, and had just watched two entire units get obliterated by one man.

But so was North. He hadn't rested well in days, pushing himself to the brink on the hike, and the pain and exhaustion he'd been fleeing just as much as the reactionaries was finally starting to catch up to him. His burns all throbbed in time, the heat of the fever building again, made worse by the narrow walls of the pass, and his bandages had finally bled through. He didn't need to look down to know his entire lower half was soaked in blood. He had suffered several hits, too, mostly grazes and a broken rib. But one bullet had taken him in the back of his left arm, making it want to tremble as he aimed China's Type 50 back at the men.

And even though they should be low on ammo by now, their confidence as they held their guns pointed straight at him told him they weren't low enough. Any attempts to climb would end with a bullet in his back.

"Put down your weapon," the lead repeated tightly.

Every damaged nerve in North's body told him not to do it, told him he needed to shoot, to throw himself at the men standing between him and freedom and *escape*. The walls of the defile were

closing in on him, and his body was screaming, *'TRAPPED TRAPPED TRAPPED.'*

But he smothered it. He lowered his gun, though he didn't put it down. He slung it over his shoulder instead, where it knocked against his Type 49, making his injured arm twinge.

The scarred man blinked, uncertain with the half-obedience. He didn't look like a commander, only a survivor.

North drew himself up, putting his shoulders back, even as it made them groan.

"I don't want to hurt you."

The men blinked, taken aback.

After a second, the recruit said, "You're joking, right?"

It sounded like he was trying to scoff. But the question came out more uncertain.

Glad that there wasn't any way for them to tell the difference between the blood that covered his uniform from their fellow soldiers and the blood that came from him, North said, "No. I don't want to hurt you."

The trio was stunned into silence at his purposeful misunderstanding of what the boy had meant, though their sights didn't waver.

"I told you I didn't come here to kill you," North said into the silence, steady and authoritative. "If you hadn't engaged me, every single one of your compatriots that have made this mountain their grave would still be alive. No one would have ever even known I was here."

The scarred man recovered from his uncertainty, his lip curling. "And we're supposed to believe that with everything else you've done?"

How many posters of him with horns and fangs and blood-soaked

hands were plastered in the southern cities now?

North didn't let his jaw feather. "The Korean People's Army hasn't committed the crimes your propaganda says it has. And neither have I."

He wanted to scream it at them, to tell them the truth of Taejon and Jeju and Pyongyang. To tell them America's army was the one herding their people into rail tunnels and firing on them for days, to tell them Rhee's army was the one that had left tens of thousands dead in every city they'd pulled back from, to make them see what their countrymen in the north were going through even now, forced into caves, unable to go even a single day without that infernal buzzing from the skies. To tell them South was the one that had burned Seoul.

But he didn't.

"I don't expect you to believe me." He didn't let the fury he felt at that colour his voice. "Because America doesn't want you to. But I will ask you this."

He met each of their eyes, ending with the scarred man.

"Do you want the war to end?"

The man's lips tightened. But after a second, he said, "Yes," and the other two echoed him.

The boy said it most reluctantly. He looked young enough to have only just reached conscription age, and hadn't experienced the horror of real combat yet. The thunder of artillery, screams of thousands of dying men, and fires raging in the trenches that would make this hunt across the mountain seem like exercise. But he still said yes.

Good. This wouldn't work if they were like the men he'd overheard at the front. And none of them sounded like the man that had shot China.

North nodded decisively, like there could be no other answer. "So do I."

The boy's eyes flashed, his grip on his submachine gun tightening. "You're the ones who started it!"

'We only attacked once you did.'

North was able to keep his temper better with the men than with his brother. "You were lied to. The Korean People's Army didn't cross the Parallel until Rhee's did. And we only marched on Seoul once his general attack was launched."

He swung his head back to the scarred man, narrowing his eye. "And I think you know that."

The soldier was grizzled, with the familiar weary air of someone who had seen too many months or years of combat. And he had a Kangwon accent.

His guess seemed to be correct. The man's lips pressed thin, though he said nothing.

"And regardless of who started it, *I* am the one that wants to end it," North said, keeping his voice clear even as the pain in his legs made them want to shake. "The Americans have admitted to their crime of bombing the neutral zone, killing one of Korea's precious children to prevent a ceasefire, and they are the ones refusing to follow international law so that the POW issue can be settled. They are the ones drawing these talks out when this war could have been over months ago."

'Years ago.'

His voice grew more heated. "They are the reason you and I are fighting here in these hills, they are the reason your brothers-in-arms had to die today, and *they* are the reason you could end this night lying alongside them instead of at home, fighting to rebuild our country."

These men shouldn't be his enemy. They should be working for him in their factories or fields, while he worked for them in both, and in the assembly halls. He shouldn't have to hesitate to call them his people- they *were* his people.

“America is the reason Korea is still Divided,” he delivered, taking a step forward, making the men tense. “America is the reason Korea was Divided in the first place. No matter how you feel about our Socialist system, *he* is your enemy, not me, and not our countrymen.”

He had to fight every instinct in his body not to duck away from the dead black eyes of the bores trained on him, only a few feet away now. He took one more step, until he was directly in front of the scarred man, the gun barrel almost touching his chest, his head held high.

“I want to end this war,” he insisted, letting some of his desperation in to show them he was sincere. “I want to see Korea Reunified. But if you shoot me here, if you bring me back to America and Rhee, then what do you think will happen? What would happen if my soldiers took S- the South to the north?”

They didn’t answer, but they didn’t need to. Neither America nor Rhee’s clique would accept that. As long as South was in their possession, they could pretend they had Korea’s support. North knew that even if he had gone to Busan and abducted South, or convinced him to come back with him, America wouldn’t tolerate it. Even if he got his brother to tell the world that he stood with him against Rhee’s regime, the enemy would just say he was being threatened to. And if he went to stand before the United Nations to show that he was sincere, America would steal him the way he’d stole Gangwon and tried to steal Kangwon, and use him to spread even more propaganda against them, to claim North had starved him or tortured him to make him say what he wanted. His brother would never do that to-

For a moment, the sharp tang of gunpowder and the cloying stench of his own burnt flesh and blood were choked out of the crisp night air. All he could smell was smoke.

It didn't matter if South would lie. It would be America’s word that was believed, whether it contradicted Korea’s or not. And if North refused to let him go to the UN, America would never let the war end with his brother at his side.

And his own government couldn't sign an armistice with him in enemy hands. It would make it seem like they were paying a ransom for a hostage, giving in out of fear. And while they had orders against doing something like that…

'We don't want to lose our country, and we don't want to lose ***you.'***

Certain members of his government were compromised by emotion. While he trusted his General not to be overcome by it, if the voices arrayed against him were united, he would either have to follow their will or keep waging the war with a divided cabinet, the way America wanted.

North couldn't let either of those things happen.

"If you attempt to take me now, then you will all die."

North met each of the men's eyes, showing them that he was sure he meant it. The boy bristled, indignant, the man with the broken arm quailed slightly, and the scarred one met his gaze, unflinching.

"And even if you do not, if you succeed, your only reward will be more months of this bloody war, more months of risking your lives hunting down your own countrymen like animals while Rhee lounges in Busan and hosts banquets. More months of our people being slaughtered." North looked at the two older men, knowing the words would reach them deeper. "The boy the Yankees killed at Kaesong is only a drop in the sea of blood they have spilled. There is no one in the north that hasn't lost someone. And I know it isn't any different in the south."

The pistol in the other man's hand wavered slightly, his eyes shuttering.

"I want to end that," North said, words ringing clear. "I did not come here to hurt my people, even those fighting for the army that has killed hundreds of thousands of them. I didn't even come here to sabotage the Americans. I came for a personal matter, and I would have left peacefully if I could. And I would still leave as peacefully as possible. I promise you if you let me go, I will return to the north and keep fighting for real peace for Korea, and for

you.”

His voice lowered. "And I promise if you don’t, then either this war will never end, or you won’t live to see it.”

The boy’s mouth still pinched at the threat, but the scarred man was the one that mattered. He gazed into North’s eye as the Countryhuman tried not to shift, his dread over China building.

It had been too long. He needed to get back to him.

His heart pounded, the walls pressing in to crush him as the tension the guns raised inside him wound tighter, telling him to lash out and kill the enemy, to get away get away get-

“Lift your eyepatch.”

North wrested himself out of his building panic, but his muscles didn’t stop quivering.

The lead soldier stared at him grimly. North didn’t bother asking why. Trying not to show his reluctance, he pinched the edge of the circular eyepatch between his fingers, flipping it up to expose the hollow, stifling a shiver as the cool air brushed across it.

It shouldn't bother him to show them. He hadn’t worn an eyepatch for the first eight months after… losing it. He’d even taken the bandages off as soon as possible, preferring to look like a soldier than a patient.

But ever since his provinces gave him his patch, he hadn’t taken it off unless necessary. And it almost never was. He even wore it when he slept in the bunker with China, regretting how he’d removed it that first time.

It was stupid to regret that Choe Jong-mi hadn’t examined it. Even if she had, he would still have to show it to these soldiers. It wouldn’t change anything. But it still somehow rankled that the first of his people he was choosing to expose it to in years were these reactionaries.

Still, even though it could show them how weak he was, how

he'd been stupid enough to let himself be permanently handicapped, North held still, letting their gazes crawl across the empty hollow, trying not to twitch.

The scarred man's jaw worked like it was something he'd been expecting, and he looked back to his remaining eye.

"Who did it?"

North didn't want to spread the same malice against his brother that South was letting- that Rhee and America were spreading about him. Even now. But he knew if the man was asking, it was because he had heard rumours. If he wanted to walk away, he couldn't lie to him.

"The South." His throat closed at the admission, but he forced out, "Under America's orders."

Even if South had burned Seoul of his own free will, he still had that, at least.

The man stared at him, long and hard, knuckles tight around his firearm. North's blood beat in his temples and legs, and blood trickled down his arm, plastering his uniform to his skin.

Every single fiber of his body was poised to fight through the pain and move. He would have to go low, aim for the young man first. He was less experienced, but more eager to fight. Once he had his weapon, he would only be facing one submachine gun. Neither older man seemed the type to shoot their own, so he could use the boy as a shield while he took out the lead. Then the broken-armed one and his pistol would easily follow. But if he took any more injuries, he wouldn't be able to carry everything he needed to back to the north.

Everything would hinge on the first few seconds.

North narrowed his eye, ready.

And the scarred man's gun dipped, his hold on it loosening.

"Go," he said, stepping aside and jerking his head at the exit.

The boy swung his head to him, eyes wide. “But he killed our guys! And he’s a commie!”

“That’s not what this is about.” The man grabbed the muzzle of his firearm, forcing it down. “I’m your commanding officer now. We’re letting him go.”

The boy stewed, but he didn't try to wrest his gun free. The other man slowly lowered his, stepping aside.

North’s muscles unwound so suddenly his aching legs almost shook.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly.

“Just put an end to this damn war,” the man replied.

North moved past them. It was a struggle not to limp now, and he could feel his skin prickling as he put his back to them. But he still stopped at the bend in the pass, looking back.

“What are your names?”

The scarred man’s eyes flicked over him. “Ok Jong-mun.”

The boy wouldn’t give him his name, but the wounded man did. North would need to add them to his book, and find the missing one after. When the war was over, Ok Jong-mun should receive acknowledgement, and the boy should receive special attention in his re-education.

North dipped his head to them, then left the defile, moving away from them as fast as he could. As soon as he was out of earshot, he took off running.

Or tried to. His legs would only let him move with an awkward, stilted gait. But North pushed through it to swiftly hobble up and down torturous ridges, back up to where he’d left China.

As he approached the tangle of dead yews, he could hear branches cracking, and see a shape moving in the dim light left from the setting moon, poking around in the undergrowth, too close

to where China should be hidden.

North didn't bother talking this time. The man tried to scream as he hit him, but he gripped his head with one hand, smashing it back onto the ground as they both went over. The other brought the tiger knife around, plunging it into his face, piercing cartilage and bone with a crunch, again and again until he stopped screaming, and then he stabbed him one more time.

North slumped forward as the bit of energy he'd mustered drained from him all at once. He straddled the dead man for a moment longer, his face buried in the moist soil beside his head, and his fingers still wrapped around the hilt buried in his skull.

'Skull.' Choe Jong-ok and China.

The Korean rolled off his kill, wrenching the blade after him, wiping the blood on his pant leg. But the fabric was too wet. It only smeared more on the silver blade. He tucked it away in its sheath, and forced himself up, staggering over to the dead yew, dropping to his knees again in front of the white wood, and heart stopped.

He couldn't hear China breathing.

North tore though the branches, not caring how much noise it made, until his hands found his comrade's body, still warm. He grabbed onto him, holding still, trying to feel his breath or his pulse or *something.*

It was there. Faint, his sides barely expanding, but it was there.

Whether awake or asleep, China's breaths were always quiet, barely audible. But this wasn't the same. His lips were parted, and a low gurgling came from them.

North dragged him out into the moonlight, unbuckling the belt around his waist and lifting his uniform shirts up. It was too dark to see, and he didn't want to draw attention with his flashlight, so he felt around in the blood that slicked his red skin, finding the bullet wound near the middle of his ribs, hot and swollen to the touch.

Ssi-bal. It was definitely a lung shot. Not in the center, but

towards the bottom right lobe. It didn't have to be fatal, but if North didn't give him at least emergency field care, it would be.

And he couldn't. He had no doctors, no supplies, and at least two days to go until the front, more when they were both like this.

He shouldn't have brought him, shouldn't have let him come, shouldn't have let him stay, shouldn't-

North shook his head, digging his blunt nails into his own thighs, using the pain to center his bleary mind.

That was the past. He had to focus on the future. He had to get out of here before those men notified their superiors and more reactionaries were sent after him. And he needed to get China someplace he could try to at least clean his wound.

North didn't need his mental map. He was in North Gyeongsang province, nearing where the Sobaek range met the Taebaeks. He knew every village in the area, and had visited plenty of them during the Occupation. He couldn't trust any of them now, couldn't trust that Rhee wouldn't have soldiers there or that some reactionary or someone desperate for the reward for turning him in wouldn't sell him out.

But he knew someone that wouldn't. He didn't know if she was still there, and if she wasn't, if would just add time to their travel, and if she was, it could put her at risk. But-

'Comrade!'

North grit teeth. He had to try.

He took something from his belt, a hollow reed he'd cut from next to a mountain stream on the way here. It was too dangerous to go digging around in China's wound for the bullet, but he could feel the airflow coming from the hole, which meant his lung had been penetrated. This was Kangwon's field, but he'd had him explain treating men that had taken shots like this before, and knew if the lung stayed deflated, it could collapse permanently.

Still, North hesitated for a moment. As it stood, if China died it

was because of the reactionary's bullet. He would eventually revive. But if North intervened and complicated it, what if that counted as him striking the killing blow, and it killed the other Countryhuman permanently?

China's breath hitched in his throat, a strangled rattle, and he made up his mind, stripping off his jacket and tossing it over them to muffle the glow of his flashlight. The bloodflow had mostly stopped by now, and he tried to wipe his skin clean with the sleeve of his undershirt, smearing dark red over the scarlet.

Gritting his teeth and hoping any mistakes he made wouldn't kill him, North stuck the end of the reed into his chest, working it into the soft tissue of his lung. It was unsanitary and risky, but he knew if he let his lung collapse, if it hadn't already, even if it healed it would be more likely to collapse again. The idea of China getting crippled because North had let his guard down and hadn't even tried to do anything-

He breathed gently into the reed, just once, and thankfully felt his chest expand. The bullet was still lodged in there, but he could get his airflow going again, and drain the blood he could hear bubbling inside him.

With precise movements, he cut off a swathe of the dead reactionary's uniform to tie around China's torso, staunching the bleeding and fixing the reed in place. He retrieved Choe Jong-ok's bones and placed their packs in with them, before tying the podaegi back on with difficulty. It placed more weight on his back, but he couldn't carry both bags separately. He arranged their firearms around it, buckling them firmly in place. Then he took a deep breath.

Leaning down, he slid one arm under China's upper back, the other under his knees, and *heaved.*

China was heavier than he looked, but North still could have handled him on a good day. But those were few and far between, and definitely not today. He staggered, the weight of the podaegi almost dragging him back, and panic surged into his throat as he realized he was going to crush Choe Jong-ok and injure his comrade

even more.

He grit his teeth, straining his legs and spine, making them scream. But it helped him gain his balance. And then he was standing with China cradled in his arms.

It wasn't comfortable. His torso was scrunched up, and too much of him hung past North's arms, his head lolling and his annoying legs causing them to cant to the right.

"Why are you so damn… *long?"* North grunted in exasperation, managing to center them.

China didn't reply, and something in his chest twinged as he realized he'd halfway been expecting him to be faking, to open his eyes and make some quip about the Korean carrying him.

He couldn't waste any time. With everything gathered, North set off. His steps were halting and pained, each one making his teeth grind and his muscles cramp. China flopped awkwardly in his arms, no matter how much he tried to rearrange him, and their guns banged against his sides, the repetitive motion cracking his burns and making his temples pound.

But he forged on. China had came with him. He was here.

And Korea wasn't letting a foreign country die for him.

Being suspended made my cliffhanger last a little too long. Forced tension.

I saw an American girl online saying 'How do North Koreans not know?? (I guess 'not know how oppressed they are') How can they not turn against their government?' And it's like… the cognitive dissonance… You have just found out (behind the rest of the world) that your government is ran by a ring of cannibalistic pedophiles that openly discuss how to control society's thinking and get rid of all poor people. The ones that aren't actively doing it are still aware in some way or the

other. Why do YOU not turn against YOUR government?? Because a huge chunk of Americans still support Trump, and many more see him as this idol of evil that if he's removed everything will be sunshine and rainbows, and think the system that put him there, that created people like him and made it so that only they can take power, is perfectly fine. Protesting is not turning on your government, posting 'I hate orange man' online is not turning on your government. Turning on your government is realizing that the very core of your system is wrong and needs to change, and changing it violently. And America is *not* turning on its government. She was like 'I didn't even realize how brainwashed they are… so scary… Their psychology…' It's so clear that she doesn't even see North Koreans as people. Like they're this hivemind that can't think at a human capacity. People aren't like that! Every human on earth can think! Even at the peak of the repression in South Korea, there were still thousands that organized and fought back, like in the Gwangju Uprising. There are millions of people in the DPRK and they all have unique thought processes and views, just like everywhere else. Some of them hate their government, whether because they're rightists or ultra-leftists, more love it, most are just living life. Like every other place on earth, the DPRK isn't perfect, but many of its issues are caused by external forces like sanctions, and since they actually teach their children about imperialism, that is more widely understood. And the ones that are internal clearly aren't enough to spark revolt because there is no pacifying people that are inherently miserable. No amount of propaganda can distract people from their material conditions forever, especially when a huge chunk of that population has arms training and access to weapons. If the majority of people were not at least tolerating of the Worker's Party of Korea and had hope in Socialism, the DPRK would not have made it through the Arduous March.

Societies have a prevailing 'psychology,' yes, but if you want to talk about the North Korean 'psychology,' it isn't shaped by posters and speeches- it is shaped by the very real conditions in their country and the history they've gone though, such as having over 20% of their population genocided by America. It's that American view of 'Well, my country told me how awful

your country is, so since I, a wise enlightened American who is right about everything, know how miserable and oppressed you are, why don't you? Why aren't you revolting? It can't possibly be because my country that has been at war with yours since before its foundation and has been proven to have lied about dozens of nations before is lying again. We couldn't possibly be wrong after all. It must instead be because your entire populace is stupid and lacks any capacity for human thought.'

And there's the cognitive dissonance. They can't tell you anything about the Korean War, they can't tell you about what sectors and parts of everyday life the sanctions impact, they can't tell you about how the defector industry and Hanawon work, they couldn't tell you about the policies the North Korean government enacts, all they can tell you is 'North Korea bad, North Koreans brainwashed,' because that's what *their* government told *them.* Americans are so brainwashed by their own state that they can't even hear the irony in a sentence like 'Why don't they turn against their government?' passing their lips as their baby-killing, pedophile, rapist president sits comfortably in his office surrounded by other men and women like him. They are so chained to the political line of their country that they think dancing in the streets and calling Trump old and fat online is turning against their government, while their government, their entire system, murders them by the thousands and us by the millions. This also shows that 'brainwashing' in the pseudo-magical 'everyone is a sheep who thinks the exact same' sense isn't real. The US spends more money than any nation on earth on propaganda, trillions each year, every piece of their entertainment is drenched in it, their social media is actively programmed to boost things that slander their enemies and cause division, and they have wealthy men talking about how to shape minds casually in e-mails. Yet American civilians still realize their material conditions are deteriorating, and that they haven't ever truly compared to the wealth of their nation. They've just been directed towards blaming other factors for them- immigrants, globalism, the red party or the blue party, Jews- instead of the actual core cause- capitalism. If you in the heart of the Empire can still realize that your conditions are unjust and deserve to

change, why wouldn't North Koreans? The only way you can say they wouldn't is if you view them as inherently different than you, a monolith that can't think for themselves, which is exactly how Americans view most foreigners, and exactly how they've been *taught* to view them.

The DPRK's conditions also visibly improve. It is a developing nation and it has kept developing, despite all its hurdles and how outclassed by the US it is economically. It is so objective that the only way to deny that it has is to say all the houses and factories and greenhouses they build are fake. And the only way to believe *that* is to operate on the worldview that every single person with any sort of authority in the DPRK is insane, and that North Koreans are such sheep that they would never even protest billions of won and labour going towards building houses and factories that no one is allowed to live or work in while they starve. Meanwhile the US is visibly deteriorating. All of its progress is in AI to replace workers, more bread and circuses (and even those are declining rapidly in quality), and more ways to make money for the men that already have all of it. There is undeniable evidence that your criminal president is a pedophile and your nation is controlled by old money men and Mossad agents who don't even view their wives and daughters as people, let alone *you,* while every call for a real investigation is overturned, and even if one was initiated, no one would pay the way they deserve to for it. Why don't *you* turn against *your* government? Why don't *you* change that? Or is it easier to take comfort in the belief that your victims are worse than you, and pride yourself for at least being 'human' enough to realize that your government hates you while never actually *doing anything about it.*

History Marches On

One foot after the other, just like escaping Seoul. No matter the exhaustion bearing down on him, or the throbbing that started in his burn gash and spread throughout his entire body, or the pain that tore through his thighs with every movement, North just had to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

He kept China in his arms, facing away from him and slightly angled so the blood in his lung could flow out the hollow reed. It would leave an obvious trail, but there wasn't anything he could do for it. Every few ri, he would tilt him towards him and carefully breathe into the reed to make sure his lung wasn't collapsing. He tried not to pay attention to how often his sides rose and fell against him or how faint his heart was beating. Even if it stopped, he couldn't do anything but keep walking.

The green-grey peaks blurred above him, melting into the thick clouds as the sky turned from black to blue to slate. It was all North could do to remember his destination, to force his way higher into the Sobaeks, sticking to less-travelled paths. He could hear horns behind and below him, but luckily they stayed distant. He knew he wasn't in a condition to fight anymore, and if he was caught, he would have to. He couldn't let them take China, couldn't let Yao Song and his countrymen pay for their Countryhuman's stupidity, or his own.

His legs had started to buckle with every upward step. Pressure built in the gash as he raised and lowered his boot, culminating in a burst of agony that made his vision flash white as it met the ground, waves of pain coursing through his body, washing through every patch of charred flesh on it, before the pressure built again as his other foot moved forwards, an unrelenting cycle. But he couldn't stop to rest because he knew if he did, he wouldn't be able to lift China again. His injured arm could barely hold him as it was, every ounce of willpower going towards keeping it steady under his upper back, blood running down it, the strain refusing to let a scab form.

North let the pain blur together, letting all of it hurt so much that none of it hurt anymore, turning it into a sensation that made his mind and body scream, but couldn't master him. This was nothing. He had went through worse than this. Japan's attempt at using 'something worse' to force obedience into Korea hadn't taught him the lesson he wanted, backfiring like all the others. It had only taught North that he could survive anything, and that no matter how bad it hurt, no matter how much he wished for the suffering to end, it was only a shadow compared to what his people had felt. He would survive and keep dragging himself forward, because if he didn't, they would pay for his weakness.

China wasn't his, but he was in his country, and he had saved those who were. Even if he was trying to turn North against his brother, he had still taken that stupid fucking bullet for him. He was North's until he was safe, and couldn't say he owed him.

The hike should have only been a few hours. North didn't know how long it was. The sun never rose, buried behind the clouds. The grey shroud only lightened, then darkened, and that could have been his vision fading. Eventually he knew it was. The ridge had narrowed to just in front of him, an endless tunnel stretching through shadows. North tried to fight them off, but even sinking his teeth into his cheek only added a new voice to the screaming inside him, and the coppery taste of blood to his mouth. As he used every drop of strength to breathe into China once more, his lips left red smears on the reed.

His head wouldn't raise all the way again, his neck bending under the weight on his back, spine aching so much it felt like it would snap.

Then he saw it. Down below, on the mountainside, were over a dozen houses, small fields planted where they could be, open-air kitchens with smoke rising from them, and a stage in the center of town, the same stage he'd once stood on for Chuseok and told his people they had no gods, only themselves.

He could see villagers heading in for the day with jige on their backs and bundles of herbs in baskets, but he didn't call out. Too many eyes, too many people he couldn't let see China's red skin.

But he was almost there. North bared his teeth, mustering every single last bit of energy to keep moving, to not stumble as he navigated the hills around the village until he found the footpath that led up from it, just wide enough for a wagon. At the end of it, nestled under the shadow of a peak, was a peasant's giwajip. It was small and homely, the tiles on the slanted roof chipped.

He could tell it was still inhabited. As weathered as they were, the tiles he'd once helped replace the old thatch roof with were clean. The door was firmly closed, there were no signs of looting in the yard, and the small vegetable patch carved into the rocky soil looked freshly-planted.

She'd been old when he last saw her, and that was nine years ago, before the Yankees, before Rhee's butchers, before the war. There wasn't any way to tell if it was still her living here, or if he was about to walk into the home of someone that would run straight to the enemy.

But he had came too far, and he couldn't turn back. He could barely make it the last few metres to the door, and he didn't trust himself to try and open it.

"Song Dong-nyo," he called, his jaw aching as he unlocked it.

He could hear footsteps inside, shuffling towards the door. He shifted China in his arms, his strength slowly waning.

And he realized he wasn't breathing.

Blinding panic shot through North, and the second the wooden panels swung open, he barged past whoever was on the other side. It didn't matter.

He went for the low table in the center of the room, shoving a half-finished jogak-po and scraps of fabric aside to lay China out on it, his legs giving out at the same time, knees smashing into the floor. There wasn't time to remove the podaegi, so he forced himself to bear its weight as he leaned over the other man, tearing off his mask and upper clothing.

How would Kangwon do this? He'd shown North how to do chest compressions, but with China's punctured lung, would they just make it worse?

There wasn't time to think about that. North put the heels of his hands over China's heart, opposite the gunshot would, and started to pump, trying to keep a steady pace and not frantically slam his chest.

Pump pump pump pump-

"Comrade Korea?" a voice said from the door, Song Dong-nyo's after all. "Is that one of your guerrilla boys?"

"Go boil water," North ordered, not looking over, and the woman jumped into action like the days he would spill into her house with her grandson and their injured comrades had been just yesterday, hustling through the kitchen doors.

Pump pump pump-

He could hear the sound of blood spurting into the reed as it was forced out of China's lung and ssi-bal this wasn't working at all.

North stopped, tearing off his guns and podaegi, opening the bone sack and pulling out China's pack, rummaging through it. If he'd brought bandages, maybe-

There. He came out with a first aid kit, hoping it might have something like what he'd used in Seoul. It did.

North pulled out the little vial of smelling salts, waving it under China's 'nose' before setting it on the table and turning his face towards it, then resumed pumping his chest, harder and harder as he grew desperate, his own heart beating fast enough for both of them.

Pump pump pump pump pump-

Still China didn't move, his head lolling slightly under the force of North's palm thrusts.

He couldn't let him die on his watch, he couldn't be responsible for this.

Pump pump-

"Wake up you fucking bastard!" North hissed in frustration, cracking his palm across the dead man's pale cheek.

And as his hands slammed down on his sternum again, China took a gasping breath, small and weak, but his own.

North didn't let himself feel relieved. He kept pumping, worried that if he stopped helping his heart pump blood, it couldn't. But he finally made himself lift his hands before he could break his ribs, leaning over to press his 'ear' against the man's chest, listening tensely.

His heart beat under it, barely discernible over the Korean's ragged breathing. But it *was* beating again, and it kept beating.

North went light-headed, and he had to make the effort not to slump over on top of China, leaning back instead, unable to stop himself from falling back onto the straw mat flooring. The ceiling spun above him, the central beam threatening to crash down.

He wanted to close his eye, but he knew if he did, he would pass out. And China wasn't in the clear yet.

He forced himself up, writhing slightly, unable to get his injured arm under himself, glad that Song Dong-nyo was in the other room. When he was sitting again, he examined what he'd pulled out of the aid kit. The smelling salts, forceps, needles, surgical thread, cotton pads, antiseptic, and the bandages in China's pack.

The aid kit was just bare essentials, but there were enough bandages to last a couple weeks. It was actually all he'd brought, aside from the tins of fish.

A bandage roll squeezed in North's hand as he looked back at China.

He should let him die. It might teach him a lesson.

The other country went suddenly still, and North tensed, ready to restart chest compressions. But his breathing kept rasping.

North turned him onto his side again so the reed could help him get oxygen into his lung. His teeth itched to start trying to fix him, but he needed the boiled water first. He'd already touched the wound too much.

He looked around the house to scan for threats and keep himself conscious.

It was mostly the way he remembered it, the sparse sitting room with the kitchen doors to the left of the front one, and two small sleeping rooms off to the right. Song Dong-nyo had used to have a larger house down in the mountain village, before the cough that had swept through it, taking her son and daughter-in-law with it, leaving her to raise her grandson alone. She hadn't wanted to risk getting sick, so she'd taken him up to the hills, building a chogajip mostly by herself. Or so North had been told over tea she had foisted on him.

He leaned over, picking up the jogak-po he'd tossed on the floor, guiltily folding it. As he did, he paused, examining the multi-coloured fabric.

The patchwork was uneven and messy. And while that was the point of a peasant's bojagi, to keep scraps of fabric from clothes and blankets from going to waste, Song Dong-nyo had never made it seem like simple frugality. North had met her a handful of times and seen her work, and Dan Hoon would always keep an eye out for fabrics for her, and would bring back things she'd made for them- jogak-po to wrap their supplies in, gloves or hats, thin blankets. The woman had even been responsible for tailoring some of their uniforms before they'd joined the KPRA, making them less Japanese and more theirs. He would always catch SH glaring at her clothes when she was done with them, the stitches barely even noticeable.

These weren't like that. They were obvious, meandering and uncertain, and he could see pinpricks in the fabric where she'd had to retrace her steps. And the colours clashed in a way they never had.

North felt a twinge as he set down the cloth. She was seventy-nine by now. Her body must be starting to go.

That shouldn't bother him. All humans would someday die. It was his goal to make sure most of them died of old age.

Unlike Dan Hoon.

The door behind him opened, and North was on his feet in an instant, his pistol drawn. His vision fizzled black, and when it cleared, he was dumbstruck for a second, thinking he'd somehow summoned the-

No. It wasn't him, even though he looked remarkably similar. Flat, dark brown hair, an oval face, slightly wide hazel eyes.

"What the hell?" the man in the doorway asked, those eyes bulging out of his head as they darted between North and China, half-dead on the table.

"Shut the door," the Countryhuman ordered, only slightly lowering his gun.

The man blinked, but did as he was told, just as Song Dong-nyo emerged from the kitchen. As soon as she saw the man, her face lit up with relief.

"Hoon!" she cried. "There's my boy!"

"It's me, halmeoni," he said, smiling tiredly.

Immediately her face went sour. "What are you doing here so soon? Shouldn't you be chasing Japs into the sea? Don't tell me you dragged Comrade Korea here just because you couldn't stop worrying about me long enough to do your job?"

The man ignored the suspicious look North was giving him. "Grandmother, this can wait. Comrade Korea's..." His eyes flicked to China's red skin, exposed. "Comrade looks like he needs help."

Satisfied that at least the newcomer wasn't going to strike or take off running, North turned back to Song Dong-nyo.

"Is the water boiled?"

"Boiled water..." She perked up. "Oh, I was just boiling water for..." Her eyes flickered with uncertainty. "For tea, I'm sure. Would you like a cup?"

"Just bring a bowl in and leave the rest boiling for Comrade Korea," the man said before he could say anything, and the old woman nodded, hustling back for the kitchen.

She stopped in the doorway, squinting back. "But don't think this is over, Hoon. I won't have you missing out on Liberating our country just to fuss over your grandmother. I waited thirteen years for you to come home. I can wait a little while longer."

North's chest seized, but the man just said, "Of course, grandmother."

When the old woman was gone, his shoulders slumped, and he let out a tired sigh.

North narrowed his eye. "You aren't Dan Hoon."

He was too young, barely older than twenty. The guerrilla would have been forty-two by now.

And he was dead.

"No," the man said, kicking his shoes off in the entryway. "I'm not."

North observed him. "Dan Hoon-jo."

Dan Hoon's son dipped his head. "Yep."

"What's going on here?"

Dan Hoon-jo looked past him at the table. "I could probably ask you the same thing."

North stepped between him and China, holstering his pistol.

"Right." The man's smile was slightly bitter. "Guerrilla

confidentiality."

They looked over as Song Dong-nyo re-entered the room, carrying a deep clay bowl filled with steaming water. Dan Hoon-jo hustled over to take it from her, but she brushed him off, chiding him for treating her like an invalid.

She was on the verge of it, thin and gnarled like a tree root, shaking slightly as she hauled the water over to the table. The black that had clung to her hair for so long was gone, replaced by wiry steel grey. But she was still relatively hale for her age.

It was the look in her eyes North didn't like.

"Here you be," she huffed, setting the water down on the floor. "Take care of your boy. But I expect the place cleaned up like usual, I don't care how eager you are to go celebrate."

"Comrade Korea needs his space, I think, grandmother," Dan Hoon-jo said, gently guiding her away.

"Oh of course, of course, the men need their space to talk," his 'grandmother' replied sarcastically. "You would think you grew up listening to your grandfather. It's a good thing that old codger had that fall, or heavens tremble to think how you'd have turned out."

The man shepherded her into her room with her jogak-po, closing the door.

North shoved the strangeness out of his mind. "I do need space," he told Dan Hoon-jo.

"Right."

"Your room," he ordered as the man started for the front door.

He paused, then nodded, disappearing into the side room, and North turned his full attention on China.

Getting the bullet out wasn't the priority. He knew that. With lung injuries, so long as it wasn't in danger of interfering with the arteries in the center of the chest, shrapnel could be left inside.

Kangwon had left one in Pak Mun-yong after the Battle of Pochonbo. His favourite gag was to ask if someone needed ammo, then tear open his shirt and tell them to come get it. North had hated it, mostly because he'd got him with it once.

China's wound wasn't near the center of his lung, so even if the bullet had shifted, it shouldn't be an issue. But the idea of letting it stay there...

The possibility of the enemy leaving something in his body had always repulsed him. Kangwon and Kim Yong-hwan both had standing orders that if he was ever killed by a bullet or shrapnel, they had to remove the object from him, no matter how risky it was.

North knew he shouldn't treat China off his own sensibilities. They weren't similar people, and the other Countryhuman probably didn't even care. But as he went to the kitchen to disinfect the forceps and needle in the water boiling on the hearth, he still thought hard on how the man might feel about the bullet being left in him.

It might help if he knew how he felt about anything ever.

The other country always fixed himself immediately after engagements, cleaning and stitching his uniform and washing at least his face and hands as soon as possible. But he also didn't seem that bothered when he couldn't, even when he complained. It seemed more about presentation than anything.

The only thing North could think of that might offer any insight was what he had said that day at the riverbank, when the Korean had come to wash Paik Sun-yup's blood off his clothes, and seen those scars on his back for the first time.

'I suppose one day I might have them removed, but until then, they're my reminder of what, exactly, is at risk if I fail.'

That meant he had thought about having them removed. Did they bother him the same way North's scars had once bothered him?

He moved the boiling water off the hearth, leaving it to cool to the

side, and his hand went up to touch his left eyebrow, and the mark Japan had left just over it, the first one he had given him personally. It was barely visible after all these years, only a slightly lighter shade of blue than the rest of his skin, and not even a quarter of the size of the nail on his little finger.

But he still knew it was there. He could *feel* it. Just like he could feel every single other scar Japan and his followers had left on him, and now the Americans and theirs.

It had used to drive him crazy, knowing that his body would always bear the alien marks they forced on him, knowing his brother couldn't help but see them when he looked at him, see that he was too weak to defend himself, let alone him.

His fingertips drifted over to the edge of his eyepatch.

He had managed to overcome that after the March First Movement. To stop viewing them as violations inflicted on him and start seeing them as medals he'd earned by fighting back. They were still badges of shame, signs he hadn't been strong enough to stop what had been done to him, but they were *his* badges. The enemy didn't get a medal for failing to make him submit.

That grievous scar on his chest wasn't Japan's- it was *his*. His reminder that Korea never gave up, never begged. His reminder that he hadn't suffered half as much as his people, that he took the pain now to save them from it later. That he...

...North would remove the bullet from China.

His energy was flagging again, draining like his comrade's blood. He couldn't wait for the water to cool down any further.

He unwrapped the stained bandages from around his hands, revealing his red-black mottled skin. Folding them carefully, he shoved them in his pocket, not wanting to contaminate the kitchen.

The cast iron pot of water was still steaming. North grit his teeth, letting himself feel the throbbing from his burns and the ache in his arms and legs again, then plunged his hands in.

The water was so hot it felt cold, raising all his body hair and shocking his burns, sending sickening waves of pain up his entire arms. His temples bulged as his teeth locked down. He found the medical instruments, pulled them out and made himself put his hands back in, holding them under as he scrubbed them together, flaying charred flesh off along with the dirt, until they were obscured by the brown water. Every rasp of skin against skin felt like sandpaper grating him down to the bone, but he kept going, making sure his hands were as sterile as he could get them.

The pressure in his temples built and built, and when he couldn't take it anymore, he kept going for another two seconds, just to prove he could. Then he tore his hands out, water spattering the hearth, hissing on the still-warm stone.

His skin was tingling and raw, the few untouched bits more purple than blue. But now he could operate on China more hygienically. And he felt more awake.

Before that could fade, he wrapped his hands in fresh bandages, took the forceps and needle, and returned to the living room, kneeling next to China, making sure he was still breathing. He was.

He rolled him onto his back again, and started with dipping one of the scraps of jogak-po fabric Song Dong-nyo had left behind in the clean water she'd brought him, wiping down the area around the bullet wound. Then he threaded the surgical thread through the needle. He didn't need to worry about it being absorbable, since he wouldn't be stitching China's lung directly.

He held his flashlight in his stinging left hand. The beam wavered as his arm trembled, but he couldn't rest his elbow on the table or it would buckle. Grimly glad it wasn't his dominant arm that was injured, North slowly removed the reed from China's chest, his breathing getting more laboured as he set it aside, then picked up the forceps.

He hesitated as he looked at the dark red hole, fresh blood leaking out as the light scabbing around the edges was disturbed.

He should just sew him up. Ignore the bullet, disinfect, and suture

his skin. It would be safer.

His eye traced the torn edges of the wound, the wide impact radius of damaged skin and the deeper cavity in the center.

It would scar for certain. China would always have a mark there, no matter how many creams or poultices he used. And unlike North, he had no Reunification to look forward to to erase it for good. He would always carry a reminder of Korea.

North didn't want him to. He wanted him to forget all of this. He wanted to win the war and send China home so he could forget about Seoul and Chorweon and debts and taking bullets and talking in their room at night. He wanted him to forget he had ever been here so *he* could forget he had ever been here.

But he couldn't do that. China would bear that scar no matter how well he did at stitching him up. If it would bother him as much as North's scars had once bothered him, then the least he could do was remove the bullet. If there was even a chance he would feel as... violated as North would with it inside him, then he had to get rid of it. And quickly.

He shone the flashlight into the wound, illuminating the red and pink flesh, not seeing any sign of a glint. Rifle rounds had a straight trajectory and didn't open up a large cavity, so it shouldn't be much off from the channel. North hadn't felt any resistance when he shoved the reed in, so he hoped that meant he hadn't shoved it deeper into the lung tissue.

The forceps hovered over the entrance wound.

Maybe he should get one of the humans to do this, just to be safe. Song Dong-nyo had experience with treating minor wounds for their soldiers after all.

But he didn't think he could depend on her body anymore. Or her mind, he suspected. And he hadn't seen Dan Hoon-jo since he was sixteen. He didn't know anything about the man he was or if he could be trusted with China. And if North passed off the task, and that just made it worse-

He slid the forceps in. They were long and thin, and the reed had spread the sides of the hole slightly, but he still moved slowly, careful not to jab with them. When they met the slight resistance of his lung, they were almost completely inside. North gently prodded around, trying to angle the flashlight better.

The fleshy sides of the wound pulsed in time with China's heartbeat, letting him see how weak it was. He set himself a limit- if he didn't find the bullet in a minute, he'd give it up and settle with stitches.

China's insides squelched, making North wince. He'd performed field surgeries before, and wasn't squeamish about them, but this was really more than he'd ever wanted to see of a foreign country. Unless he was disemboweling Japan or America. Or Norway.

His minute was running out, and he awkwardly spread his fingers in desperation, opening the entrance wound slightly wider. Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-

The light in his hand glinted off something buried among the squishy pink flesh and lighter-coloured lung tissue, and North went for it like a guided rocket. It looked like it had been dislodged from his lung, probably when he'd slammed into him after he first got shot. It was buried in the side of the canal. He guided the forceps to it, pushing back China's flesh to pinch the side of the round, and carefully wiggle it loose.

China moaned low in his throat, making him tense as he shifted slightly. Not wanting him to move and drive the forceps or bullet into his lung again, North swiftly pulled the round free, setting it on the table. His comrade stilled, and he exhaled.

'Got it.'

But he wasn't done. He used the forceps to pluck something small and white out of the flesh just inside the wound, a tiny shard of bone. The round had somehow gone almost directly between his fifth and sixth ribs, only taking a small chip out of the latter instead of shattering them and filling him with bone shrapnel that likely would have shredded his insides when North was dragging him to

cover.

What was it he'd said back when they'd set off on the Second Phase Offensive? That he had a lot of luck?

Clearly none of it had rubbed off on North after all, or they wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

He soaked some cotton from the aid kit in the disinfectant, unable to pour it straight into the wound without filling his lung with fluid again. He used the forceps to dab the inside clean, forcing another sound from China's throat, which he ignored. Then he stitched him up with the surgical thread, the easy step.

If he was human, North would have to suture his lung directly. But that would require cutting him open so he had space to operate, which he wasn't going to do. The reed had drained the excess oxygen and blood from his lung, so now that the bullet wouldn't leak lead for his system to fight off, and it didn't have to devote as much energy to sealing his external wound, the life-threatening puncture should close soon. It could still collapse again, but it was now safer than leaving the reed in. If Kangwon wanted to open him again up when he brought him back, North knew he could handle it. But he wasn't going to risk it.

He dabbed more antiseptic on the stitches, hoping they were tight enough, hoping his comrade wouldn't get an infection from the reed, that he'd made the right decision not to touch the lung, that he hadn't damaged him more getting the bullet out, that-

This was why he let Kangwon handle surgeries.

North hovered over China, feeling like there was more he should do, and also like he was about to collapse. He ended up wiping the rest of the blood from his stomach and chest, then pouring the last of his canteen into his mouth, holding him up so he wouldn't choke. He wanted to cover him, but both of their uniforms were soaked through. North's had dried, and crinkled uncomfortably with every movement. He settled for taking China's scarf off and spreading it over his bare upper half. Dan Hoon-jo had already seen him anyways.

'Ssi-bal.' He splashed his face with the slightly bloody boiled water in the bowl, trying to make himself look less haggard. He tried to stand, but his thighs wouldn't hold him.

He arranged them under himself instead, and called, "You can come out."

One side room door slid open, and Dan Hoon-jo stepped out, his eyes going straight to China.

"Is he going to be... alright?"

"Yes." He had better be.

Song Dong-nyo poked her head out of her room, and her brows shot up as she saw him. "Comrade Korea? What brings you here?"

"He got here earlier, grandmother," Dan Hoon-jo cut in.

"Oh, yes, yes. I remember now." She frowned at her great-grandson. "Hoon-jo? When you did get home? Is your father back?"

The man's jaw feathered slightly. "Not yet, great-grandmother."

Her eyebrows furrowed "Really? But I could have sworn..."

"I think Comrade Korea might need to stay the night," Dan Hoon-jo interjected.

North despised the idea of being slowed down more, but he knew he wasn't going anywhere until he recovered at least a little.

"I do," he said, looking to Song Dong-nyo. "Would that be alright?"

She clicked her tongue. "There you go asking again. How many times have I told you- my house is always open, as humble as it may be. It's the least I can do for taking care of my grandson for me."

The Arisaka rifle swinging around, its target locked in a grapple, unable to reach his gun. North's coming up, pulling the trigger, taking the Japanese man's head off, too late.

He hadn't.

"Why don't you make him some tea, jeungjomo?" Dan Hoon-jo prompted.

The woman narrowed her eyes. "Don't tell me what to do, boy. I'll make your father tan your hide when he gets back." To North, she asked politely, "Would Comrade Korea like some tea?"

He badly needed a drink, and to get her out of the room.

"If you don't mind."

"I would never mind doing something for my *country."* She shot another glare at her great-grandson, then marched pointedly into the kitchen, skirt swishing.

As soon as she was gone, North lifted his head to Dan Hoon-jo. "What's wrong with her?"

The man let out a heavy sigh, lowering himself to the floor next to him.

"Her mind's going," he admitted quietly. "It started just before the war broke out. It was small at first. She'd forget she already made tea, or slip up and call me dad's name. Thought she was just getting old. Then one day I came to check on her, and she threw her arms around me, asked if I'd heard the news."

North stared at him, waiting. He had a suspicion.

After a moment of fiddling with the goreum on his waistband, Dan Hoon-jo said quietly, "She told me we'd just been Liberated. She heard it on the radio, same way she did in 1945."

That was why she had mentioned celebrating, and 'Dan Hoon' having a job to do, driving the Japanese into the sea.

"And she..." His eyes flickered. "She told me it meant dad was coming home soon."

North grit his teeth. "Were you ever informed of what happened

to him?"

Dan Hoon had died in one of their final engagements before they'd reached Busan, against a unit of Japanese soldiers launching a kamikaze attack after the Hiroshima bombing. He had sent two of the Korea's Army core off with his body immediately after.

Dan Hoon-jo nodded. "A couple of his comrades came by and told us. He's buried in the hills with his parents."

In the same family tombs they'd once helped clean on Chuseok.

North nodded. "Good."

Most of his guerrillas hadn't been able to be buried at home, either because there wasn't any chance or they no longer had one. Dan Hoon had. He'd wanted to make sure he reached it.

"Great-grandmother... She broke down," Dan Hoon-jo told him. "She keened for the entire day. Wouldn't let anyone else but me touch him at the funeral. It wrecked her, and she never really recovered after. She wouldn't clean or cook or even work on her sewing. She'd just lay in bed. And then one day, it was like she just... forgot. Like none of it ever happened."

North's had met a couple elders like that before. The confusion of old age could grow so bad that they couldn't recognize their own family members, or would get the year confused. Usually they ended up confined in a back room or outbuilding until they died.

Kangwon had called it by some foreign name, and said it was caused by the brain degenerating. It was one of the diseases that made North grateful he wasn't human.

"She's stuck in 1945," Dan Hoon-jo said, looking down. "We've always just been Liberated, and dad is always coming home soon."

What would that be like, to always be living in those days after Liberation, before they'd known about the Division, before he'd had to leave his brother behind again? When life was just travelling from village to village, celebrating with their people, peasants and proletariats and patriotic capitalists alike, freedom melting the class

barriers away for one shining second. Their provinces and their comrades finally free, him and his brother finally together, finally knowing what it felt like to be happy. To be stuck in those golden days forever, never moving forward.

A shudder ran through him.

"And you just let her think that's true?" he demanded.

"Do you think I want to?" Dan Hoon-jo's knuckles tightened on his pant legs. "I tried to remind her. For two months I *tried.* Every time I came to visit her I told her what happened after Liberation, that dad was never coming home. And every damn time she reacted the same way she did the first time, breaking down, wailing until her voice went, like I was breaking her heart all over again."

He looked up, glaring challengingly at North. "Is it so wrong to let her be happy? To let her think her grandson is going to walk through those doors any second? To believe we really are Liberated? She spent more than half her life waiting for our country to be free, it was all she'd talk about ever since you took dad away. Is it so wrong to let her believe she got her wish?"

The country grit his teeth.

It was. Because they *weren't* free. North had failed at Liberating their country, he'd failed to protect Dan Hoon. She shouldn't be allowed to think he hadn't.

The kitchen door opened, and they looked up as Song Dong-nyo made her way in with two cups of tea. North tried to stand to take them from her, but his legs wouldn't even unfold now.

"Here you be." She placed them on the table.

They were chipped porcelain, salvages from her old home. She'd never had enough cups to serve all of them during their guerrilla days, but she had always made sure North got one of them instead of the clay.

"And I want to see you drink all of this," she said, shooting him a look. "It's barley tea, from that Min Yol-won's field, and I paid a

pretty sum for it."

She might have forgotten the past seven years, but she clearly hadn't forgotten how to guilt-trip him.

North agreed he would, and she released his cup, satisfied.

"There's a cup for your..." Her eyes moved to China, and the wrinkles around them deepened.

"It's North Gyeongsang," North said, pulling China's scarf up to cover his five-starred flag.

"Ah, the clumsy one we happen to live in." Her lips pursed shrewdly. "Well, when he wakes up, make sure he gets his tea. And tell him not to go breaking any more of my dishes."

She lifted her head, seeing the darkness outside the paper-covered windows. "Heavens, is it that late already? I'd best be heading to bed. You can have Hoon-jo's room tonight. I'm sure he won't mind sleeping on the floor."

Dan Hoon-jo opened his mouth, then thought better. "Of course not, great-grandmother."

"Come wake me up if you be needing anything," the woman said, shuffling off to her room, muttering under her breath about not being born a few more ri north, in North Chungcheong province.

"You can have your room," North said when she was gone again.

Dan Hoon-jo shook his head. "It's not my room anymore. I live with my wife's family now."

North rubbed under his eyepatch. "You should have brought her north. I would have made sure she was taken care of."

She had done too much for them not to.

"I thought about it," Dan Hoon-jo admitted. "But even just moving her down into the village with us made her worse. Being here gives her more lucid moments. I just want her to be able to live as

normally as possible before she's... gone."

He looked at him with solemn eyes, clearly asking North to stay silent.

The Countryhuman heaved a sigh. He was too tired for this.

"I need to get my comrade comfortable," he told him. And he needed to rest.

Dan Hoon-jo didn't look satisfied, but he stood anyway. "Right."

"You can't leave."

The man paused at his shoes, looking at him. "What?"

North stared back. "You need to stay here tonight."

"My wife is pregnant," the man protested. "Eight months."

"I can't risk letting you leave with the information you have."

If the reactionaries tracked him here, or there were already some in the area, Dan Hoon-jo could report them. If North was cornered, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to defend China and Song Dong-nyo in the condition he was in. And if even one got away, it would already be too late for China's country.

North braced himself, forcing his legs out from under his body to stand, his vision almost going black again.

"I can't let you leave," he repeated.

He couldn't trust him. He hadn't missed the accusation about taking his father away.

Dan Hoon-jo eyed him, tense, like he was ready to flee. North was ready to pursue. He didn't exactly want to tie up the boy he'd once helped teach how to load a rifle, but he wasn't going to risk letting him get away.

Then the man's shoulders slumped, and he let out a weary sigh,

the exhaustion falling over him again.

"I used to think my dad was so cool," he said, making North blink. "He'd show up, show off all his guns, tell me about all the things he'd done and seen, how he'd fought by your side. But as I grew up..."

He crossed his arms over his chest, shame on his face as he confessed, "I started to resent him for it. He was never home. And when it was, it was to flit in and out. I never got to show him the first tooth I lost, or have him at my coming-of-age ceremony, or tell him about the girl I liked. All because he was off fighting for *you."*

Korea's Army had never been large, more informants and suppliers than fighters. They needed to stay small to avoid being caught. Most of their members had been people driven completely out of society for one reason or another, with nowhere else to go, especially in those early days. Most of them had no one to leave behind.

But Dan Hoon had been the first. And he had.

"Your father did what he felt he needed to," North replied, and Dan Hoon-jo smiled bitterly.

"That's what he told me. He was fighting for our country, like he had to. A fight he wouldn't let me join, even after I became a man."

North hadn't known the boy had asked. It must have been when Dan Hoon was visiting alone. And he must have purposefully hidden it from him.

"It was so important that he couldn't even stay to raise his own son," Dan Hoon-jo said, his fists clenching. "But not so important that I was needed. Four to seventeen I saw my own father's face so little that I couldn't even remember what he looked like when he wasn't there. And he was *never* there.

"And then he went and died on me."

North looked away slightly. It wasn't a rare story. It was why the Mangyongdae School For Bereaved Family of Revolutionary Martyrs

even existed. As they'd gathered more soldiers and joined with the KPRA, and more and more Koreans had risen up against the Japanese, the more guerrillas had people to leave lonely. The life of a revolutionary wasn't one that lent itself to visits home on Chuseok. Dan Hoon-jo was one of many children that had lost their father before he had even died, and he'd still been luckier than most.

"I was such a brat in those last few years," Dan Hoon-jo murmured, some of his anger fading. "I'd make sure I was out in the hills when he came so I didn't have to see him. I felt like he'd chosen you over me."

North shifted uncomfortably, but before he could deny that, the man raised his head.

"I resented him so much. And I resented *you,* for taking him away, for letting him risk making me an orphan for you." Dan Hoon-jo was quiet for a long moment, then shook his head. "But now that I have my own kid on the way, I get it. I know why he left me. It was never really about you, was it?"

No. It wasn't.

His comrade's son gazed at him with sorrow. "It was about our country. About making sure that I had somewhere to live. That I'd be able to go to school and get a job, and that I wouldn't lose my wife the way he lost mom, just because we couldn't afford to get a doctor up here. That I'd be able to grow up safe. And even if I couldn't, that my kids would."

'Why do you want to come with us?'

'Because I want to free Korea.'

'Why?'

'Because I want my son to live in a world without fear. I want ***all*** *children to.'*

"Yes," North said to Dan Hoon-jo, the same thing he'd said to his father's request to join them.

It wasn't him that had drawn all those people from their lives and into the struggle. It was what he represented. Korea, and a hopeful future.

The man's eyes squeezed shut at the confirmation, and he whispered , "It was all for me. And I can't resent him when I know I'd do the exact same thing for my son or daughter. I forgive him."

North hunched at his choked voice. "Why are you telling me this?"

It came out too blunt. But his legs were starting to shake again.

Dan Hoon-jo took a deep breath. "Because I never got to tell him. And I never will. But I don't resent him anymore. And I want for my son what he wanted for me. I don't want kids to have to grow up without their parents so that their kids can grow up at all. And I want to be able to look my great-grandmother in the face and not be lying when I tell her we're free."

After a long moment, North broke eye contact. "...You can go."

Dan Hoon-jo dipped his head. "I promise I won't betray my father's dream."

North turned his back on him. When the door shut, he fell to his knees, resting his forehead on the table.

He should have been able to save Dan Hoon. He should have been faster, kept a better eye on him. He had promised Song Dong-nyo he would take care of him, he owed it to the boy he'd left behind.

But he could only keep carrying him forward.

North jerked slightly, and he realized his eye had shut. He needed to sleep or they'd never make it back north.

He gulped down his warm barley tea, then painstakingly climbed to his feet again, forcing his knees straight as they tried to buckle. Laboriously, he took China in his arms, moving him to Dan Hoon and Hoon-jo's old room.

It was small and mostly empty, with a pile of blankets and child-

sized clothes in the corner, the men's hand-me-downs, likely ready to be moved down to the village for Dan Hoon-jo's child.

North noted with a pang that some of them had been mended with thick, messy stitches.

He laid China out on the thin rice straw mattress, covering him with his scarf again. His comrade didn't stir at all. Hopefully that meant he was fully in a recuperative coma. North fed him his cup of barley tea, then left the room, extinguishing his flashlight.

He tried to sleep in front of the entryway so he'd be able to catch intruders right away, but it unnerved him too much not to be able to hear China's breathing. He settled for lying down on the floor just inside the room, where he could. It was more raspy than gurgling now, reassuring him, at least a little.

Ssi-bal. He didn't know how he was going to explain all of this. He wasn't going to be able to make it back tomorrow, and he knew that South Pyongan would have at least told North Pyongan about sending the merchant for the 17th. And he would have told everyone else. They were going to worry.

They had better not do anything stupid. Maybe he *should* have given the General permission-

No. He didn't want that. North couldn't either.

He was going to worry, too. Kangwon would be shaking his head in that 'you're hopeless' way of his that North couldn't stand, and SH would already be plotting how to lock him in the bunker when he got back. And North Hamgyong was going to smug about something finally going wrong on one of these missions, especially since it hadn't been North that got injured. And Hae-

He should have slept in the bunker at least once after he woke up from his coma.

He turned his head to the side, trying to banish the thoughts. It was stupid to think about that now. His provinces wouldn't risk crossing the Parallel after him, not after he went off on Kangwon.

They would be fine, and that was all that mattered. What he *should* be worried about was how to tell Peng Dehuai that he'd gotten his Countryhuman shot.

'Comrade!'

North grit his teeth, turning his head the other way, towards the door.

Why the fuck had he *done* that? With his hearing, he had to have known North had just walked into an ambush. And standing on top of the ridge like that, practically daring them... to...

North's thoughts scattered and dissolved, not even being on guard in enemy-held territory enough to keep his throbbing body conscious anymore, though he clung onto the part of his mind that would help him reject the recuperative coma it wanted to drag him into.

As he went under, the thoughts he'd been trying to hold back leaked in, thick, black, and choking.

They smelled like smoke.

—

It was still dark when North opened his eye again, with only a faint grey light coming in the windows. He immediately tried to scrabble up, but all his limbs were cramped, and he fell back to the floor as fresh pain coursed through him.

He lay there, cheek to the warm straw mats, and as blood started to seep out of his arm again, he remembered he hadn't tended to his own wounds.

Sleep was clawing at him again, but he forced himself to stay awake. He was too stiff for it to still be the same night he'd passed out on. It had to be the next.

Ssi-bal. He'd slept through the entire day. They definitely wouldn't be able to get back by the19th now.

'Stupid.' He shouldn't have brought-

He jerked up, half-squirming across the floor to China's side, until he was close enough to hear that he was still breathing, it was just quieter.

North let out a breath. He was healing. He had to be.

But he'd need more calories to *keep* healing. So the Korean made himself do light stretches, reaching for his toes, rotating his shoulders, and rolling his neck, until he was limber enough to stand.

He stripped down by the light of his flashlight (covering China's face with his scarf, just in case), and treated his wounds, putting antiseptic on the worst grazes, like the one on his calf, and dousing his arm with it. The last thing he needed right now was an infection. Then he firmly wrapped them, along with his burns, relieved to get rid of the filthy fabric crusted to his skin.

When he was dressed, he pulled the scarf back over China's chest after disinfecting the scabbing stitches again.

North had only put on his undershirt and pants, not wanting to wear his KPA tunic in case he had to leave quickly, and not wanting to wear the entire blood-crusted reactionary uniform. But as soon as he emerged into the sitting room, he found two fresh sets of clothes folded on the table. Quietly, he retreated back to the room, dressing in the white peasant's shirt and trousers, setting aside the other pair for China, even though he doubted he would wake up to wear them.

Next to where the clothes had been, North found a small clay jar of barley, likely left there by Dan Hoon-jo. He hated to take from the village when he knew their harvests were never large, and were likely even smaller with Rhee's war taxes. But he needed to get food into China, and the fried dace would be too tough, and risk getting a bone lodged in his throat.

He hadn't used Song Dong-nyo's kitchen before, but he'd watched her and South Gyeongsang use it, so he was able to navigate by the

light of his flashlight, setting the barley grain to boil, stirring it as he cooked it down into juk.

The house was quiet. Only the calls of a few nightbirds filtered through the window slats above the stove as his ladle scraped against the pot. North watched the pale grain part with a gentle squelch for the wooden spoon to pass, closing ranks behind it after. He focused on the swirls it left behind, keeping the rest of his mind carefully blank until he finally had a watery slurry that wouldn't choke China.

The smell of the woodsmoke from the agungi followed him back into the bedroom. But this wasn't the place to think about that.

'Where is?'

North shoved the thought aside, devoting himself to the awkward task of feeding China, sliding the barley juk (in the meanest sense of the word) into his mouth and massaging his throat to make him swallow, trying not to think about how Kangwon and his General must have done this to him, or that song.

China's throat flexed under his palm as the porridge went down. North didn't immediately lift the next spoonful, keeping his hand on his neck, feeling the blood in his arteries beat weakly under his fingerpads.

It would be so easy to kill him. To apply just a little pressure and stop his heart from beating for good. No one would ever even know. He could tell Peng Dehuai that the enemy had shot his Countryhuman and taken him to America to be killed, and there wouldn't be any proof against it because he wouldn't leave a body behind. He could be blamed for letting him go with him, but not for the death itself.

China was entirely vulnerable right now, completely at North's mercy. Which he had to have known could happen when he drew the fire of every damn reactionary on Sobaek Mountain. So *why-?*

North realized he was squeezing his neck, and went back to feeding him, working fast until the bowl was gone. He gave him the

last of his own canteen, and used the scarf to dry the water at the corner of his lips, again trying not to think of Kangwon.

He shouldn't have entered that coma. He should have just dealt with the fever.

Back in the sitting room, he sat heavily on the floor, head slumping over onto the table. China had stabilized. There was nothing wrong with sleeping here.

But the door opened, and he groggily raised his head to see Song Dong-nyo shuffling out of her room.

North was prepared to explain himself, but she didn't seem surprised to see him.

"There's you." She clucked her tongue. "Always prowling around in the dark instead of just sleeping. But I supposed you've got more than enough of that for once."

"You remember me getting here?"

She gave him a glare. "I'm not so old I can't remember just yesterday." She made her way over to the table. "Is that barley I smell?"

North nodded. "Dan Hoon-jo brought it."

"That boy does have a good heart, when he feels like it." She squinted at the room. "Though I see he's not sleeping on the floor like I told him."

North didn't answer.

"No matter." The woman turned her squint on him. "I also see you have a bowl there. I assume it's for..." She trailed off, her brows furrowing.

"North Gyeongsang," North supplied.

"I know who it's for," she grumbled. "Not you, that's who. Even though I bet you've been crawling all over these mountains

yourself."

"I-"

"Stay right there, stay right there. I'll go make you a bowl."

She shambled off to the kitchen, seamlessly steamrolling him, like when she'd coerced him into folding songpyeon. North huffed, deciding to humour her. The more healed his arm was, the shorter the walk north would be.

In a few minutes she was back, setting a bowl of barley on the table, and sitting across from him with her own.

"I hope you don't begrudge sharing with a poor old woman," she said.

"It's your grain." North set the tins he'd brought from the bedroom on the table. "These are for you."

She squinted at them, holding one up to the flashlight. "My eyesight's not what it was."

The characters on the can were also in Mandarin. North didn't say that, not wanting her to wonder why he might have Chinese canned food.

"It's fish."

It wasn't enough to make up for the grain, but it would still likely be her first taste of meat in awhile.

"Oho." She slid the can across to him. "Open that up, if you please. Let's eat like we're Joseon tonight."

"You should store these." Canned fish and barley made one meal. Barley one night and canned fish another made two.

"Bah," she dismissed. "This is our victory feast, isn't it? Soon all the fish and grain in Korea will be feeding us, not the Japs. We might finally get to stop rationing."

North's eye flicked to the table. He picked up the can, working the lid off and filling the room with the pungent smell of fish and fermented black beans.

"Now there we go," Song Dong-nyo crowed, rubbing her leathery hands together. "You can imagine we don't get a lot of fish up here. I feel like I haven't tasted any in... awhile."

She doled some out into his bowl and some into hers, one tough fillet for each of them. A spine poked out of his. North tried to pretend his mouth wasn't filling with saliva.

"By the by, I don't suppose my troublesome son made his way here with you?"

The Countryhuman looked up. Her expression was mildly exasperated, but the eyes that gleamed from the shadows under her steely-grey brows showed her worry.

"...No," he said. "He's not here."

"Well." She leaned back. "Then he better be cleaning the last Japs out."

He wouldn't tell her. Not tonight. He couldn't handle tears. Not when she had left the kitchen doors open, and the smoke was creeping among the rafters.

North wordlessly picked up his spoon, filling his mouth with the barley. He'd managed to convince this village that he wasn't a god, but they were convinced out of tradition less easily. Even though he was only half Song Dong-nyo's age, he was her Countryhuman. She wouldn't eat until he did.

She had added garlic scape kimchi to the grain. It was fresh and crisp, cracking like bone in a way the softened fish bones didn't.

"Phew," the old woman said as she gnawed on the dace. "This is almost as salty as last year's kimchi."

North snorted. They were. Even he'd been able to taste it through the ash in his mouth. He had almost expected China to complain,

but he'd just waxed poetic about the convenience of canned fish.

They were convenient. He'd have to consider their own for the production of their uniform post-war field ration kits. For now they had to stick to livestock. China's army had already switched to compressed rations, replacing their fried noodles and potato powder, when the supply lines were open.

The two of them ate their meals over the light of a candle she brought out to save his flashlight battery, and talked, 'catching up.'

North had always felt... uncomfortable around people whose minds weren't entirely there. The drunk or mentally ill, or elders who had started to live more in their own heads than reality. It wasn't them he was uncomfortable with, but their unpredictability. It was difficult enough to guess what someone with all their faculties might be planning, let alone someone who didn't even know what they themselves were going to do next.

But he wasn't uncomfortable around Song Dong-nyo. And not just because she was an elderly woman he could easily defeat. She was the same person he remembered, even if he had to gently remind her about things that had once happened, or tell her information he already had years ago.

She eventually brought out her jogak-po, working on it while they picked at the black beans and scraps of meat left in the can with their chopsticks, North mostly just pretending so she wouldn't scold him.

"It's for Hoon," she explained, holding up the fabric. "I started working on it as soon as I heard the radio broadcast."

"Mm." North's chest squeezed.

"I've been thinking he needs to remarry once he gets back," she continued, guiding the thread through the cloth with shaking hands. "I know it should be Hoon-jo I worry about finding a wife, but there's a girl in the village he's taken a shine to. You know her- she's the younger sister of Kim Hyang-rae, the one who was always trying to get you to make an honest woman of her."

North grimaced. He'd been hoping she would grow out of that, but the last time they were here, she had almost said outright that she would leave her husband for him.

"A good girl," Song Dong-nyo appraised, frowning as she unravelled the stitch she'd just made. "Nothing like that sister of hers. And only a year younger than him. But with him settled, I think it's time Hoon moves on. It's going to be hard enough getting him to settle down and live the quiet life again- he needs a woman to tether him." Her unsteady fingers struggled to pull the needle back through. "And since we don't have much in the way of dowry money, he's going to have to hope to win some poor sot over."

North didn't say anything, setting his chopsticks down on his bowl.

It wasn't a jogak-po she was making. It was supposed to be a kirogi-po, the kind a groom would give to his wife's family, wrapped around a wooden goose, or a real goose in this impoverished village. Some of the malformed stitches were meant to look like sheaths of rice.

"But I'm sure you know by now he doesn't have a lick of sense in his body." Her jaw firmed as she had to unravel her stitch again. "So it's up to his grandmother to do the wooing for him. I'd like to make a cloth she can pass down to their daughter one day. I just can't seem to get the *stitches-"*

A tremor shook her, and the needle slid into her thumbpad, making her hiss, her wrinkled face contorting in frustration and what looked like shame.

North came around the small table, touching her thin wrist just before she could toss the kirogi-po to the ground.

"Let me do it."

Song Dong-nyo gave an embarrassed laugh, smoothing her thick hair as she relinquished the needle. "Sorry about that. It feels like I've been working on this forever."

"You're just tired." North guided the needle through the multi-

coloured cloth, making the stitches small and straight. "I woke you up in the middle of the night, and I've kept you up."

"You don't need to make me feel better," the woman scoffed, leaning back. "I know I'm not what I used to be. My knees ache when it's cold, and I swear I need two more breaks when I'm bringing water from the well than I did just last week."

If she usually thought it was 1945, then she also thought she was seven years younger than she was. It really might seem like her body was suddenly shutting down around her.

North grit his teeth.

"I'd say don't get old, but you don't have to worry about that, do you?" she asked.

"No."

As he stitched the square in, her eyes roved his face.

"You look different," she said, finally noticing his blue skin, or maybe that he didn't look like a boy anymore.

"It's the flag of our People's Republic," North said, not looking at her. "The one we'll fly over a free Korea."

It wasn't a lie. Not really. And she didn't know enough about Countryhumans to question the change.

"It suits you," Song Dong-nyo decided. "White never did."

North looked down at his white shirt and pants. It was true he felt more comfortable in a uniform, but-

"Nothing can suit Korea more than the same clothes our people wear," he told her.

He wasn't like Joseon with his crowns and robes and twelve ornaments. He had never minded wearing plain peasant's garb. It was better than the scratchy workshirt and shorts he had been forced to wear for nine years of his life.

"I wasn't talking about the clothes."

North finished stitching the olive square of fabric in place, and passed the kirogi-po back to her. "You should get some sleep."

Song Dong-nyo ran her hand across the stitches, clicking her tongue. "When the man that can't even fold a half-decent songpyeon makes a better stitch than me, I suppose I need it."

"They were supposed to look like seashells," North muttered, making her chuckle.

"I'd say don't bother with the dishes, but I'm sure I'll wake up to them done anyway," she said.

"You will," North confirmed, helping her stand after he was sure he wasn't going to fall over. "I'll leave the other can of fish for you. And you don't need to save any barley for me."

"You've always been so charitable to us," the old woman said as he helped her to her bedroom door.

"It's not charity."

Even if Dan Hoon-jo hadn't given him their barley, it still wouldn't be. Even when he didn't receive anything in return for what he gave, it didn't matter. His people had given him existence, and the chance to fight for them. Anything he gave in return wasn't nearly an equal trade.

"I know, I know, it's 'mutual aid.'" She pointedly stepped on his foot. "I'm trying to say that the same way you're thankful for having the most generous people in the world, we're thankful for having the most generous country. Accept a compliment."

North wasn't generous, not in the same way he'd praised them for. They had so little to give and they gave it anyway. He had nothing to give but himself, and that was just what he owed them. He was just doing his duty.

But the tops of his feet were burned, and still hurt from walking all those ri. He kept his mouth shut so he wouldn't get stepped on

again.

North helped her into bed, did the dishes, then returned to the side room to stare at the ceiling and listen to China breathe.

Then, unable to help it, he got up again, turning on his flashlight and going to the pile of children's clothes in the corner. Under the wide-legged pants and loose shirts that Dan Hoon and his son had once worn, there were more colourful fabrics, what he'd thought were blankets. North picked one up, unfolding it.

It was a jogak-po, made of dozens of patchwork materials in different colours, clumsily stitched together. The stitches were obvious, clearly done by a shaking hand.

'It feels like I've been working on this forever.'

North's jaw closed tight, and he doused the light.

He didn't wake as late the next day. It was still fully light out, even though that light was heavy and grey, and he could hear wind rattling the roof tiles. Voices were just audible under it, and they made his heart pound before he realized it was Song Dong-nyo and Dan Hoon-jo.

He made sure China was still stable, and that his stitches weren't swollen (though his skin made it hard to tell if they were red), put the last of the antiseptic on his wound, then made his way outside.

Dan Hoon-jo looked over at him from the garden, brushing his hands off on his white pants. Song Dong-nyo followed his gaze.

North could see the momentary flicker of confusion in her eyes, wondering what he was doing here, why he looked like that, before it settled.

"You're up," Dan Hoon-jo noted, coming over.

"I'm leaving tonight."

The man raised his brows. "Are you sure? The weather's not too good, and your... Comrade North Gyeongsang looked pretty rough."

"I need to get back."

The longer North stayed here, the more danger he put China and the family in. And the entire village, if Rhee found them here and decided they were all leftist sympathizers.

And tomorrow was the 19th.

"Don't try and stop him, Hoon-jo." Song Dong-nyo appeared to recognize her grandson today. "He's a stubborn one. And he's got to get back to fighting the good fight like your father."

Dan Hoon-jo hesitated, then nodded. "Right. I'll come by before sunset and bring some supplies by then."

"That's fine," North said. "You've already done enough."

"Then I'll just come by to see you off."

North acquiesced, then went inside to boil water for their canteens. Song Dong-nyo had left some of the barley for him anyways, so he fed the rest of it to the other man, rubbing his throat and resolving to tell him that he'd let him starve while he was out.

When it got a little later, North wandered outside, leaving Song Dong-nyo to work on her kirogi-po. She was almost finished.

He headed up into the hills, looking for the group of mounds he'd helped pick weeds from years ago, and finding it. They were sheltered by the peak behind them. There was one more than the last time he had been here.

North stared down at the mound as the sun dipped below the western ridges, casting long shadows over the mountain village, and the sky turned a muddy orange. He didn't look over as footsteps crunched over the grass towards him. He didn't need to when they sounded just like his had.

"Your father named our guerrilla unit," he said.

He hadn't been sure if they were ready to take on human recruits

yet. But still, in 1932, when they had paid their second visit to this village, and the young man that had showed them around the area with such enthusiasm the first time had asked to come with them, North had accepted. And when they had met a man on the run for getting in a fight with a police officer to protect a woman's honour, Dan Hoon had said he should come with 'Korea's Army.'

"Heh. I think I remember him telling me that," Dan Hoon-jo replied, far away as he gazed at his father's grave.

North raised his eye to him. "Korea will never forget Dan Hoon."

It was all he could give him, like always. Never enough.

Dan Hoon-jo's lips twisted. "Then remember him for me."

North bent, plucking a weed off the grave mound. "I will."

They walked back down to the house in silence, and North dressed in the reactionary uniform again, the dried blood rubbing unpleasantly against his skin. He put China's uniform and mask back on him, and wrapped his scarf around his head. With all of their supplies prepped, he went to say goodbye to his old comrade's family.

When Song Dong-nyo turned to him, he could already tell she had forgotten he was here.

Her brows raised. "Comrade Korea? When did you...?"

"He was just visiting, jeungjomo," Dan Hoon-jo said. "He's heading out again now."

"Oh... Oh right, I remember." Her words were unconvincing. She struggled to her feet, turning to him. "It's really true then? You've finally Liberated us?"

North could see the look Dan Hoon-jo gave him over her shoulder, his lips pressed flat.

'Please.'

He should tell her. He would hate to have the truth hidden from him, and she didn't deserve to be trapped in the past, no matter how happy that past was.

As joyous as those days after Liberation had been, they hadn't been flawless. Their nation had been in ruins, their factories razed, their economy ruined, their young men thousands of ri across the sea, drafted by Japan to fight in foreign climes, their women still imprisoned in brothels and illiteracy. And while shared joy made the class distinctions seem small, they had ran just as deep as ever. Even as the landlords held hands with their peasants, they still expected the taxes to be turned in on time, and for rent to be paid. Even as the capitalists waved the Taegeuki next to their workers, they still expected them to show up for work tomorrow, to break their backs for poverty sums. People had been starving and sick and dying, no matter how happy they had been. And if they had just stayed in the streets waving banners and celebrating forever, they always would have been. The only way to stop it was to move forward and take those golden days with them. Even if things got dark again, as they had now, they had to keep progressing, or they would never again grow bright.

It was repulsive, the idea of stagnating in time, completely oblivious to his people suffering around him, meaninglessly happy, at the expense of all else.

Song Dong-nyo was staring up at him with hope on her care-worn face. Hope she expected to be fulfilled. She expected him to have made her the master of her own destiny, she expected him to have brought Dan Hoon back safe, she expected him to have won because that was what he had promised a million times over, whether with actions or words or just what he was.

She was still expecting her grandson to come back home.

And maybe North didn't have a right to crush that hope. She wasn't him. She had no duty to bear the burden of knowing he had failed, in more ways than one. She was too old and feeble to rail against the injustices that had been wrought against them. What right did he have to make her feel the way he had when his guerrilla had brought the news about the Division to him? He had only heard it

once- he would be making her hear it for what might well be the twentieth time over. And it wasn't her that deserved to feel that pain.

She didn't need to know about the Division or the war or the stalled armistice. She didn't need to know about the biological warfare or that he had failed again. She didn't need to know how bad things really were.

He would tell her one day. When he won them the ceasefire, and when they were finally Reunified, he would come straight here and tell her everything, and apologize for not being able to keep the first person who had pledged himself to fight at their side safe. He would bear her grief and help her look forward because even if she wouldn't be walking the path for much longer, she deserved for her last steps to be light. But for now...

"Yes," he said to Song Dong-nyo. "I Liberated Korea."

He didn't let himself pretend the words were truth for even a moment. He didn't deserve it.

Dan Hoon-jo closed his eyes in relief, and the old woman laid a hand over her heart.

"Thank goodness," she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. "And- And Hoon, will he-"

"Dan Hoon will be home soon," North told her.

She stared up at him, and her lips wavered slightly. For a moment, her eyes looked clearer.

Then her mouth curved up again.

"Good," she said simply. "I've missed him."

"He missed you, too," North said, lifting his eye to Dan Hoon-jo. "But he loved his family too much to stay."

More than the man's words, it had been the look in his eyes that convinced North it was time to start recruiting. He had wanted to

do good and to protect his family. He had to do *something.* If North hadn't accepted him, he would have thrown himself at the Japanese without changing a single thing. Instead he had been the seed of Korea's Army, and played a pivotal role in their country's Liberation.

He would tell her that, too, someday.

"Dan Hoon became a good man," he told her now, the most he could say without using 'was.'

"So did you," Song Dong-nyo whispered, and her head dipped, her shoulders starting to shake. Dan Hoon-jo came to steady them.

"It's alright, great-grandmother," he soothed. "It's over. Dad'll be home soon."

North looked away from the stark grief on his face. Silently, he retreated into the room to get China, arranging Choe Jong-ok's bones and their packs in the podaegi again.

His hand reached for the photo inside, wanting to make sure it was safe, then retreated.

Just like after they had retaken Pyongyang, he knew he shouldn't look at it now.

He put the podaegi on, and slung their firearms over his shoulders again. Then he lifted China, careful not to disturb his wound. He was stable, not well.

He bore him across the room, and Dan Hoon-jo got the front door for him. The wind swirled in, rustling the mugwort hanging from the rafters.

"Thank you," North said. "And... I am sorry."

Not for taking his father away. It had been Dan Hoon's choice. Sorry that it had been necessary. That he had came so late.

"There's... nothing to be sorry about," the man replied, his lips turning in a bittersweet smile. "It's just the way things were in the

end."

"It's not the end," North promised. "Your child will grow up in a free Korea. I won't betray your father's dream either."

Dan Hoon-jo's mouth opened, then he swallowed thickly. He bowed low at the waist.

North looked away in discomfort, but didn't tell him not to. He knew what it meant. He didn't have to fear him or China being given away.

He turned to go, but looked back as Song Dong-nyo called, "Wait!"

She hustled past Dan Hoon-jo, shoving a small box wrapped in cloth towards North.

"I can't believe I almost forgot," she said. "I made a dosirak earlier, since I know you won't have brought anything else with you."

"I don't-"

"You'll be taking it, after an old woman put so much effort into it, of course." She fluttered with the box, eyeing 'North Gyeongsang' like she was considering placing it on top of him.

As she did, the fabric wrapping it caught North's eye.

He frowned at the multi-coloured patches. "Is that the kirogi-po you were working on?"

The woman pulled the box to her chest, looking lost for a moment. "I was making that for Dan Hoon... for..." Her gnarled knuckles bunched around the edges, and she held it out to him again.

"I want you to give it to him for me."

North's jaw tightened. "I can't-"

"Please," she said, and the eyes he looked into were more lucid than they had been since he arrived. "Take it. If you don't see him before I do, then you can keep it. Give it to Kim Hyang-rae or some

other woman if you ever take one." She smiled tremulously. "I'm not so old I can't make another."

North searched her face, then turned around before she could search his, offering her the podaegi. Dan Hoon-jo helped her open the sack, setting the dosirak on top. It added more weight, but it was a weight he deserved to carry.

North set off down the mountain road. As he went, he looked back at the two shapes standing in the stormy twilight. The shorter one raised her trembling fist.

"Long live Korea!" she called, her voice weathered, but not frail at all.

North couldn't put his fist up, but he echoed back, "Long live the Korean people!"

Then he left her behind, the same way he had left thousands of people behind, marching on.

One foot in front of the other. Like always.

Hehe. This is why in that one one-shot in the artbook, China says North carried him from the Raktong. You will notice that he says he carried him on his back though. This is because North refuses to ever tell him he bridal carried him.
An unfortunate seed has been planted in North. Well, the seed was already there. But it has been watered. And yes he does still have the kirogi-po in modern day. I like to think he gives it to Y/N (but in signature fashion doesn't tell her how he got it or what it means).

Takaichi Sanae had secret meeting with Peter Thiel. Yayyyyyyy dystopiaaaaaaa. Her face makes me feel violent.

Oh, also I added artwork to the end of the At Your Fingertips chapter because I forgot to add it when I posted. ^^

Homecoming

[image]

The journey north was far longer than the one south, and more torturous. North's two projected days for crossing the entire southern half of the Peninsula were turned into four just to cover distance he and China had crossed in under forty-eight hours.

His teeth itched in his skull as the talks circled in his mind. He knew he shouldn't be needed if all they did was exchange the lists- once they had them, only working out the final wording of the armistice draft would be left, and he had already agreed to the terms they'd discussed, as had 'China's leadership.'

But he still needed to be there, even if it was just to repeat proposals back to his comrades. He had been absent when the secret talks and abandoning the forty-four thousand had been decided on. He couldn't be absent now, or members of their government might start thinking he didn't want a ceasefire after all. And he knew all it would take to turn some of them openly against it was a slight waver from him.

And he didn't trust America. Talking those soldiers down had only reminded him what lengths the foreign country would go to to keep Korea at war, even when it was clear he couldn't win. The more North thought about it, the more sure he was that the Yankee had rolled over too easily when it came to repatriation. For the American, even three months of refusing to follow international law would be giving in too quickly.

It made him even more anxious to reach the front, but his legs wouldn't comply. He could only keep marching forward at a steady pace, forced to take breaks to regain his energy so he could run if he had to. China was a constant weight, even now that he could hold him better without the reed in his chest, but North only put him down to take a few minutes of restless sleep inside caves, twitching awake at every aberrant sound.

He only saw the enemy on the highways he had to cross, their convoys of foreign trucks speeding by on the way to the front, taking a shorter route than he could. The men must not have told their superiors who it was that had slaughtered their units, or the mountains would have been crawling with reactionaries. He didn't know if it was because he had completely convinced them that they didn't want to catch him, or if they just hadn't wanted to get in trouble for letting him escape. He hoped the boy wouldn't give the older two away.

Still, he kept to more difficult paths than they had on the way down, forcing himself to climb high into the Taebaeks, just below the upper peaks, to avoid anyone he could have ran into.

His legs burned like they were on fire, and his burns burst where the firearms were banging into him, only getting worse when the heavy overcast that had covered Korea for the past few days dispersed, and he could feel the planes hitting his land with renewed vengeance, even when it was *them* that had struck the first blow, and the right of vengeance should be Korea's alone.

North's wounded arm ached from holding China up, a deep throbbing pain that went into the bone. But every time he found himself thinking that it might be better to take breaks every hour instead of every two, he grit his teeth and pressed on, remembering the Arduous March. The whirling snow and cutting winds, the enemy's howls ringing over the mountainside, and the persistent weight of bodies in his arms, carrying them as far as he could before they bled out, or he had to trade them for a gun. His soldiers had been on it for the full hundred days, and they never rested unless they had to, so North couldn't either. And he couldn't now.

The weather was clear, the enemy didn't know where he was, and there was only one person he had to protect. The pain was nothing, the hunger was nothing. He didn't need to rest. He just had to get China to safety.

He pressed on over ri after rocky ri of mountains, every peak and pass blending together, the pressure inside him building and building until his skull swelled with it, and his teeth groaned.

He didn't feel any relief when he started to recognize the rolling hills of Mount Odae or the jagged peaks of Seorak Mountain, not even when he saw the faraway dot of Osaek-ri in the valley off to his left. He had lost this ground, it wasn't safe. They wouldn't be safe until he managed to sneak them through enemy lines. Somehow.

He didn't bother hoping that South Pyongan's merchant would be waiting where he had told him to. It had been too long. He almost avoided the area entirely, in case he was a turncoat and the extra time had allowed him to contact the enemy. But he did, just in case. If he *was* still waiting, North couldn't reward his loyalty by abandoning him.

It meant climbing Masan Hill in broad daylight, keeping low now that he was penetrating the enemy's rear, able to hear the rumble of truck engines not too far away. And the bombs.

It might have been easier to stuff China somewhere and climb on his own, but he refused to let go of him, in case some reactionary came sniffing around and he wasn't as quick as he'd been in the Sobaeks. He wasn't getting caught when he was so close.

From his vantage point, North blinked away the bleary splotches in his eye, squinting at the hillside. The slopes were almost bare, and the few trees that were left weren't thick enough to conceal troops, though he could see them farther out in the valley. He didn't see the merchant or the cart he had asked for in the gully he'd told him to wait at.

It didn't matter. He hadn't brought back the amount of bones he had thought he might. He could get China and Choe Jong-ok to the Third Corps' line by himself.

He stumbled down the hill, fighting his body's urge to cant forward.

When he'd descended a ridge and felt the prickling start in his shoulder blades, he almost groaned. But he didn't, and kept going, forcing his feet to move faster. A reactionary would have already either identified his flag and taken the shot, or seen his blood-

soaked uniform and called out to see if he was injured. It was likely just a curious refugee or herb gatherer that he had to get away from before they could report him.

Undergrowth rustled behind him, and he had to stop, unable to bear his instincts screaming to turn around, to stop running away and defend himself. He dropped China, planting himself protectively in front of him as he whirled around, raising his pistol with an arm that felt too light.

"Mr. Korea?"

The 'Mr.' shot through his skull like a dart, telling him he was in danger, and his finger squeezed on the trigger. He barely stopped it from calling down every soldier in the area on him.

A man crawled out of the bushes on his hands and knees. He was dressed in white peasant's clothes with a brown suit jacket on top, and he cringed back from the pistol pointed at his face.

"Who are you?" North demanded, keeping his voice quiet.

"C-Completely Reasonable Prices Kim," he whispered. "And a man who *really* doesn't want to be shot by the person he's been waiting for for almost a week."

North's arm fell to his side like dead weight. He almost couldn't lift it again to holster his firearm.

He didn't ask why he was scuttling around on the hill instead of down where he had told him to be. It was enough to know that he would have been exactly where he was expected to be if this was a trap.

"We need to get out of here," he said instead, his voice even raspier from days of disuse.

"I would have been happy to do that five days ago," Completely Reasonable- North wasn't calling him that- Kim hissed, already hustling off across the hill.

North hauled China up, adjusting his scarf and mask, and

followed. He kept on alert, but didn't sense any eyes watching them, and they reached the handcart sheltered in the ridges easily.

"In, in," the merchant gestured, eyes darting around fearfully. "Cover yourself with the tarp."

North's initial plan had been to walk alongside the cart while Kim pulled the remains, acting as a distraction in case the enemy came too close. But he knew if he wanted to be of any use if they were discovered now, he needed to get off his feet. So when he set China and Choe Jong-ok's bones in the cart, he crawled in with them. He tucked the other country's long legs in towards his body, and curled his own up with difficulty. Crammed together, there was just enough space for them. He maneuvered himself, putting his knees against China's side to put as much distance between them as possible, and twisting his upper half away so he didn't have to look at his unconscious face.

Reluctantly, he pulled the tarp over them, trapping himself in. It was already too hot, and China's quiet breaths and his own uneven ones grated in his 'ears.' But it was just a tarp. He could throw it off if he had to.

He was glad China hadn't woken up yet, even if it made his chest tight. He didn't want him to feel his body trembling as it was finally allowed to rest. This was worse than the aftermath of Seoul and Chorweon, if only because he'd managed to reach their lines again before his body started to shut down from exertion then.

He could hear the merchant arranging the tarp, then the handcart lifted, levelling them out, and they started to move.

"I don't suppose you have any food," the man whispered desperately. "I ran out days ago."

"No," North said. Song Dong-nyo's dosirak stuffed full of jumeokbap and kimchi had all been fed to China.

"I'll buy you a cow when we get back," he told the man.

He would be giving up his salary for the next few months, but that

was fine. It went towards helping his people anyway, and this merchant was one of them.

He sounded markedly less tired and frightened now. "How about a cow *and* a pig?" he asked slyly. "A new draught animal could help me with my work, and since I haven't been locked up yet, I take it you'd be approving of that."

"I approve of nothing," North said, fighting to keep his eye from closing. "And I have the right to enact the people's justice if I encounter criminals."

"Yessirofcoursesir," the merchant said swiftly.

North sighed. Giving in to someone's greed only made them hungrier, but he didn't want to get turned over the moment a reactionary offered the man a chicken. And Kim really did deserve to be rewarded for his hardship while waiting for him.

"I can't give gifts," he said wearily. "But I'll find you a seller and give you a loan I don't care about being paid back. On one condition."

The merchant muttered something about lurking in enemy territory for five days already being enough of a condition, but grudgingly asked, "What?"

"It's not 'sir' or 'Mr.' It's comrade."

Sounding bright again, the man said, "Yes, Comrade Korea." Then he made a sound that could be charitably described as an avaricious giggle, picking up his pace, eager for his livestock.

North could feel darkness dragging him down, his body wanting him to sleep again. He fought it off. He had to remain alert to defend them if they were spotted.

His stomach made a sound, and he managed to slip his hand into his pocket, careful not to crinkle the tarp resting against him too much. He put the rock between his lips, rolling it around. It clinked against his aching teeth, and saliva flooded his mouth as it was tricked into thinking he was finally eating.

He wondered if South still did this when he got hungry. He wondered if he *did* get hungry, or if he was always full, kept well-fed by his masters, plunging then further into debt with every meal, the way South Hamgyong had told him about.

The air under the tarp smelled scorched, like burning flesh, and this still wasn't the place to think about that.

North twisted his head over, gazing at the slice of China's face he could see past the tarp drooping between them. His eyes were closed, his long lashes resting on his cheeks. The Korean reached over, pulling his mask down to his chin. He would already be having enough trouble breathing with the damage to his lung and how they were being smothered by the tarp. He would just stay awake to make sure the merchant didn't see him. The man might be loyal, but North wasn't taking the chance that a hundred thousand US dollars would be worth more than a pig and a cow to him.

China's lips were parted. North didn't like that he was able to say it was strange to see him unsmiling for so long. Even when he'd been more serious, like after O-geun, his expression had always been covered by the mask. And his lips were usually curved even in sleep.

His eyes flickered under their dark lids, something they hadn't done since he went into the recuperative coma. A good sign. Hopefully.

North turned his head away again, staring at the dappled olive light cast by the canvas a few centimetres in front of his face, trying to empty his mind of everything but the sounds beyond the handcart and the fight to stay conscious.

The hours passed slowly, worse now that he wasn't walking. Instead of blurring together, each second crawled by individually. The sun set, leaving them walking through the dark, the wheels of the handcart rolling along. North pinned China against the side with his knees, not letting him be jostled around when their wheels went over stones or down slopes.

He couldn't see their surroundings or raise his voice to ask Kim

where they were, but he knew when they were nearing the front. The sounds of artillery and gunfire were close enough now that they had to be just a hill away, and he could feel the shudder of the earth as bombs detonated nearer than they had in over a week. And the buzz of planes, of course, settling into his skull with that familiar, tuneless buzzing.

They must not have taken the way he and China had on the way down, because they hadn't crossed the river, but North could still hear that the voices in the distance were no longer calling out the 'NDA's' Americanized lingo, but the KPA's own. 'Comrade Unit Commander, Comrade Nurse.'

Under the tarp, North wormed his way out of his reactionary jacket and pants with difficulty, careful to make sure his skin didn't brush China's, even if it meant twisting himself into positions that made his joints protest. He didn't need the disguise now, and he couldn't appear in front of his soldiers in an enemy uniform, especially soaked in so much blood.

He pulled China's mask back over his face, threw the tarp back, and sat up.

"Don't shoot," he called, his voice coming out less formidable than he would have liked. "It's Korea."

The merchant had startled, looking over his shoulder at him. He startled more as three soldiers emerged from the brush, yelping and almost dropping the cart's handles.

"Comrade Korea?" one of the men asked warily, his rifle half-hoisted.

North shifted more into the moonlight that made it past the tall ridges, letting them see his flag. Another soldier made a birdcall similar to the one that had let North know they were watching, notifying more hidden comrades that the situation was under control.

"I am returning from a mission across enemy lines," he said before they could ask questions. "I need transportation to Pyongyang."

The men jumped into action, one of them hustling off while the others stayed on guard. North wanted to stay in the cart, but now that they were back on their side of the line, he had no excuse. He grudgingly climbed out, his limbs cracking as he extended them, refusing to limp as they followed his soldier to the rear camp.

It wasn't long before a supply truck arrived to the dug-outs hidden among the Kangwon hills, and North was able to send the merchant off, thanking him for his efforts and promising again to get him the funds for a new draught animal and pig (and also 'hinting' that he shouldn't cross the Parallel again or tell anyone about the 'loan' if he didn't want his Countryhuman to come collect it someday).

When the truck was empty, he loaded China up in the back. Before he left, he turned to his soldiers.

"Comrades," he called, raising his voice loud enough to be heard. "Your country thanks you for all you hard work. Know that while you are here risking life and limb to hold the line against the Yankees and their puppets, I am fighting just as ardently for you."

He could see curiosity in their eyes, wondering why he had been in the south, and who the injured 'reactionary' with him was. It was fine if they thought he'd been on a top-secret mission against the enemy, instead of crossing thousands of ri and getting their ally shot just to retrieve a bag of bones. Either way, it was for their people.

"We have only managed to repel the Imperialist invaders and dash their hopes of making Korea their new colony because of you," he told them.

He should have stopped the words from falling from his mouth, but he was exhausted and could feel his legs about to give out again.

"And thanks to you, this war will be over soon." Pain pulsed though his burn gash. "Long live the Korean People's Army."

"Long live Korea!" they cried for him, thrusting their firearms in the air.

North scanned the crowd, searching for roan hair and a flat nose. This was the Second Corps, where Choe Kang-ok was stationed. But she must be at the frontline, as his reports said she almost always was.

He climbed into the back of the truck, nodding to his comrades as they pulled away.

He ached to just stop at Malhwi-ri now. But he needed to get China to a hospital.

The soldiers got out at the supply depot, and he promised to return their truck later. In the driver's seat now, he dug his fingers into his burnt thigh, letting the jolt of pain shock him awake, then put his foot to the gas.

The ride was far longer than he liked, as he had to stop the truck and wait for planes to pass on the edge of North Hwanghae province, and again when he was closer to Pyongyang.

The second time, it was only one plane. It swept low over Singye to the south, but he didn't hear any detonations.

North's hands wrapped around the wheel, picturing a mass of writhing black insects burrowing into the flesh of his country. But he kept going.

At the Pyongyang checkpoint, he told his soldiers to send a message to Singye, and to call a certain surgeon to Jonsung complex. He got there in the early hours of the morning, when the halls were dim and quiet, and took China to the room where North had stayed after Seoul and Chorweon, kept empty for this exact purpose.

He was never so relieved to set him down on the cot, knowing he wouldn't have to pick him up again. He had got him back. He had to be okay now.

His legs ached to sit, but there were no chairs, and he didn't want to sit on the bed with China. So he stood with his knees locked until the door swung open.

Kim Yong-hwan's brows arched as she saw him, a dry expression starting to twist her lips, before they fell as she caught sight of China on the bed, his mask and scarf off.

"Fix him," North ordered before she could say anything.

The woman shook her head tiredly. "What did you do now?"

"It's a lung puncture, lower right lobe," he clipped, then barged past her.

She was already moving, snapping on gloves from her aid kit. "Stay nearby," she said. "I need to look at you next."

North left without a response.

He wanted to go to Malhwi-ri right away, to get everything settled so he could throw himself back into work. But he couldn't show himself to Choe Jong-mi like this.

He stumbled down the hall, unable to feel anything below his waist but a dull throbbing.

The light was on in the office. Kim Il-sung looked up as he staggered in, closing the door and shedding the podaegi with fumbling fingers, carefully setting it behind his desk.

The man knew there was no point in asking if he was alright. "Did you accomplish your mission?"

"I'm not back yet," North rasped.

He was too tired to set up the cot. He dragged his chair over to the General's desk, collapsing into it, his cheek finding the cool wood.

"The lists," he managed to mumble. "What happened?"

"Nothing that can't wait for when my country returns for good."

His Premier's voice gave nothing away. North's neck wouldn't let him see his face.

"I got China shot," he muttered, his lids sliding shut, refusing to open again.

There was a pause. "I see. I hope he survived?"

"I wish he didn't."

The man gave a light chuckle, patting North him on the shoulder. "Get some rest, comrade."

North was rapidly losing his grip on consciousness. But he rallied his tongue to force the words out.

"I won't... do it again."

"I hope that's true," Kim Il-sung murmured.

But his Countryhuman was already gone.

The light was fading over Malhwi-ri when North returned. The sky was still clear, the sunset filling the clouds with orange and purple that reflected red off the river.

He climbed into the hills, his boots tracing the path with ease, even though he'd only visited once before. He followed the scent of smoke back to the dug-out in the beech copse.

Choe Jong-mi and her parents were gathered around a small flame, cooking something in a small dented pot. The young woman was already looking his way as he emerged from the trees, having heard his soft footsteps. She reached out for her mother's arm, and the older woman looked up.

"Comrade Korea," she said, quickly dusting off her skirts and standing to bow, her husband and daughter following.

North wordlessly held out the large wooden box he'd been carrying, and Kang Un-jin's gaze went to it.

"Is that...?"

He dipped his head, and she fell back to her knees, her hand covering her mouth as her eyes welled with tears.

Choe Jong-woo approached, his hands trembling as he took the box from North. The Countryhuman made himself relinquish it, and the man stepped back, a lost look flickering in his eyes as he stared down at the coffin that held his daughter. Mechanically, he walked over to his wife, kneeling with it between them, and tentatively opened the wooden lid, revealing the smooth white bones arranged with care inside.

A sob burst from Kang Un-jin's throat, and she threw herself down on top of them, wailing a funeral keen that sent birds flying from the trees. Her husband's eyes screwed shut as he wrapped an arm around her shaking body.

"What's happening?" Choe Jong-mi asked in confusion.

"Jong-ok!" her mother wailed, tearing at her hair. "Oh my little girl!"

Her daughter's eyes widened, and she stumbled towards her, dropping to the ground, her hands searching it until her father took her wrist, guiding her to the box. Her lips parted as her fingers caressed across her sister's breastbone.

She looked in North's direction, a painful hope on her scarred face. "You... You brought her home?"

"I promised I would." Even if it was far later than he should have.

"I- I didn't expect you to do it now," she said, voice trembling. "I'm s-so sorry for all the trouble. I-" Her sightless gaze went back to the box, guilt stark in her milky eyes. "I should have been the one to bring her home. She was my sister. My responsibility."

"You will bring her home," North told her, not letting the weight of the corpses he'd left behind weigh his words. "I only brought her to you. You will bring her home to Osaek-ri."

She stood on quivering legs and took a halting step towards him, then almost fell the rest of the way, throwing her arms around her

country, burying her face in his shoulder.

"Thank you," she whispered a sob. "Thank you thank you *thank you."*

Her mother keened behind her, holding her daughter's bones close as tears streamed down her cheeks, and blood seeped from Choe Jong-woo's clenched fist as he bit back his emotion.

That was good. As deep as their sorrow was, now that they had Choe Jong-ok's body, they could accept that she was dead, and start to move on. Their grief would never leave, but it would fade, become more manageable. They could perform their rites, put her in the ground, and stop her from haunting them.

It was harder when you didn't have a body to bury.

The smell of woodsmoke in his non-existent nose, North raised his left arm, feeling his bullet wound break open again as he wrapped it around Choe Jong-mi while she shook against him, her tears staining his collar.

Maybe there *was* a part of him that thought it would be nice to be able to forget. To forget the promises he had made and broken, the voices echoing in his mind, the people he had lost. The ones he'd left behind. Not to stagnate, but to move forward with a clear mind. A clear conscience. To carry only the golden moments with him.

But that wasn't how it worked. He had once told Hae that they needed to remember what had been done to them, so that they would remember why they fought. He had to remember the bad, to remember why it was worth things getting worse to get better, to remember why any pain was worth it, and because those days were only so golden because he had something to compare them to.

And he had to remember all those good moments, too. Even the ones that hurt. He had to remember Choe Bong-nam calling him 'Big Brother' when he was little, and he had to remember the look on his daughter's face as she told him he was dead. He had to remember O-geun's big brown eyes as he smiled up at him, and how his hand had felt in his as the life faded from his body. He had to

remember the weight of Choe Jong-ok's bones on his back, and that her favourite colour had been blue. Every one of those memories had equal meaning, meaning that couldn't exist the way it did without its counterbalance, dark to light and light to dark, like the taegeuk on Korea's old flag.

He had to remember that South had burned Seoul. And that he still loved him despite it.

North still couldn't answer China's question, if he would rather have never known O-geun and Choe Jong-ok and Dan Hoon and Roe Chul and everyone else he had lost at all. But he did know that since he *did* know them, he never wanted to forget them. He couldn't. They were his people, and they gave his entire existence meaning. And that meaning was more precious than anything.

He closed his eye, holding Choe Jong-mi tighter as her family mourned.

And he deserved to be haunted.

—

1924

Heavy breathing, heavier body, a bright room- ***'Couldn't he at least have turned the lights off?'*** *- rough hands* ***grasping-***

SH awoke with a pained gasp, chest heaving as she tried to orient herself.

She wasn't on a futon with soft sheets, but nestled in a drafty bedroll that had been stolen from the Japanese military a couple years prior. She wasn't dressed- or rather, being undressed- from a fine silk kimono, but in a threadbare jacket and man's undershirt. The harsh light of an electric bulb wasn't reflecting off a stranger's flushed face. Instead, soft moonlight filtered through the trees, illuminating the shadowy lumps of her cousins sleeping around her. Their soft breathing and Hwang's occasional snore surrounded her, calming her heart. She could hear the waterfall she had bathed under earlier in the distance, a soft whisper that told her she was

free.

'Free. I'm free. I'm safe.'

She swiped a hand across her face, trying to erase the tears that had betrayed her while she slept. They welled back up as she desperately tried to push the memory of fingers clutching at her out of her mind. Her chest shook with that sick hot feeling, and she let out an unwanted sob, stifling it too late.

"You can make them stop."

The sound of a male voice made SH shoot up, clutching at her jacket as terror surged through her. Halfway up, she realized it was only Korea, but it was too late to pretend she wasn't awake.

The fire had died down, and she could barely see him outside of its dim corona of light. He was only a dark shape sitting by the base of a nearby tree.

Unlike when some of the others stood guard, Korea had never acknowledged her late-night crying sessions before. Usually he stayed a silent sentinel while SH tried to sob as quietly as possible, only able to eventually still herself and return to sleep because of his vigil. It was an unspoken agreement between them, one that she was deeply grateful for.

Now that he had broken it, she didn't know what to say. She stared at his outline, straining her eyes to see the look on his face. She couldn't.

"If you work hard, they'll go away."

The woman had almost forgotten what he had first said. Her nightmares. *'You can make them stop.'*

"If you're exhausted enough, you won't dream."

Korea's rough voice was cold, revealing nothing. SH wanted to ask how he knew that, then thought of how he always took late-night watch, not closing his eyes until he had to. She closed her mouth, keeping their agreement intact.

She only nodded to him, then lay back down, turning her face away. She could feel him watching her, and it let her return to her slumber.

The next day, she awoke sooner than everyone but Korea, fetching water from the waterfall for Sang to make breakfast, then throwing herself into fighting practice with a passion, not stopping until she managed to put Chungbuk down and they were called to eat, and she was bruised and sweating. When they picked up the march for the next town to resupply, it was she that goaded the others into not stopping to rest, stealing the role from Korea. And when they stopped again for the night, she volunteered to gather firewood by herself, returning with enough to keep the flames going until dawn. Though she was literate now, she practiced her handwriting until her eyes blurred and she couldn't hold back a yawn. Then she volunteered to take first watch, not waking her replacement until her eyelids felt like they were being dragged down by weights.

And this time when she curled up in her bedroll with Korea keeping guard over her once more, her sleep was dreamless.

—

1952

The heavy steel door creaking open put SH on alert, her hand creeping for her pistol. The footsteps down the hall were uneven and soft, but not stalking, which was the only reason she remained seated. Chagang wasn't back from his province yet, and Kangwon was at the hospital. It could be either of them.

It was neither.

Relief blossomed in her breast as Korea opened the door next to her. The light from her flashlight illuminated the bloody bandages peeking out of his uniform, and the shadow under and in his eye. He didn't seem surprised to see her sitting on the floor of his room in full uniform with the dented brass tea kettle from their chosonjip.

He didn't say anything, leaving SH to prompt, "You're back."

"Yes."

"Korea-"

"Don't start," he sighed more than said.

She echoed it. "You know we're going to have something to say tomorrow."

"There's no need."

There really was. But at least he was back. And mostly healthy-looking. Or on his feet anyway.

SH knew asking where he had been was pointless, so she instead asked, "Where's China?"

"The hospital."

Her brows lifted in alarm. "Is he alright?"

"He's fine. He just got himself shot." Korea made a face.

SH- against her better judgement- had actually found herself becoming a bit fond of China. That wasn't to say that she trusted him entirely, definitely not. But...

Well, Korea did need more comrades. And the Chinese man's intentions seemed pure enough, even if they were still suspect. Anyway, she was sure her country at least *tolerated* the other nation. If China was seriously injured, he probably wouldn't look so irritated right now.

So she dropped the subject.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked, gesturing to the kettle and tin cups on the floor with her.

The tea was the last of the batch South Pyongan had bought from her 'mystery supplier' (SH knew full well she had a merchant smuggling for her- she'd asked Chagang). She had grabbed too many cups in her rush to get inside before Hwang's shift was over

and North Hamgyong came to take his post. He knew what her being up in the middle of the night meant, and she didn't want to hear any jabs about it. She hadn't worked hard enough today, only jetting back to the capital after receiving the message this morning that 'the parcel has arrived.' The wall felt thin.

"No."

Knowing him, she sighed. "Korea, this is the third pot I've made from one sachet. And it was low-grade pine needles to start with. You wouldn't be depriving anyone of anything."

She raised her cup to her lips, face scrunching at the watery taste. "You would actually be helping me drink less of it."

Korea hesitated, and she thought he might turn her down and kick her out of his room.

But, grudgingly, he entered, shutting the door and stiffly lowering himself to the ground to sit against the wall next to her. SH could tell each movement pained him. He should probably be in the hospital with China, not here.

'Honestly.'

She went for the kettle, but he slapped her hand away, snatching it. She managed to get her hands on a cup first, but he tugged it from her grasp, ignoring her own efforts to bat him off.

Victorious, he poured his own cup of tea, tossing it back.

"It's tea, not soju," SH said dryly. "And table manners apply to you, too."

She was younger, physically (he insisted anyway), not to mention he was her Countryhuman. She should pour. He never let her.

He ignored her, squinting at the light-coloured liquid, just barely darker than water.

"You were right. This *is* weak."

SH huffed. "Judging my tea-making skills, now?"

It was true she wasn't as good at it as North Pyongan. Another task her male cousins had stolen from her.

"Did you boil the water thoroughly?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

He glared at her salute. "Then your tea-making is fine." He took another sip, less like he was taking a shot.

Still, SH could see how the swallow pained him, even of this low-quality, overused tea that no one else would drink, and even when he probably hadn't been eating much wherever he was.

She wanted him to eat better, she really did. But she could never convince herself that him starving himself was worse than if he were to overindulge. A behaviour like that would make her think of America, or even South. So she didn't scold him, this time around.

"Did the General fill you in on the peace talks?" she asked eventually.

She could tell by the way his jaw feathered that he had.

America had handed over his list four days ago now. He had been supposed to remove sixteen thousand POWs that were civilians from the south from his list, and add those that had been captured since November. They had had eleven thousand, and he had had a hundred and thirty two thousand. After their lists were revised, they had twelve thousand. The Yankee list should have been somewhere between one hundred and sixteen and one hundred and thirty-two thousand.

And America had only given them seventy thousand.

"I'll deal with it," Korea clipped.

SH didn't ask how.

They sat quietly, her wondering if he would volunteer any

information about what sort of mission he and China had been on. It was a vain hope, she knew. But she wouldn't ask, just like he gave her the grace of not asking why she was awake so late, drinking watery tea in his room by her lonesome.

"That soldier from your province. Bang Eul-sik," Korea said suddenly, staring into his tea. "Did he ever find his fiancée?"

Even as a nail of grief hammered SH's heart, it glowed at him remembering a single report she had made over a year ago. He was always like that, though, when it came to their people.

"No," she softly informed him. She had been keeping in touch with the young man, helping him with his efforts to find his lover while he was busy guarding their coasts. "She was either taken to Busan or..."

She trailed off, hand tight on the cup as she painted a burning ship on her wall, trying to quell the surge of emotion she felt at remembering the destruction of Hungnam.

'Anger. It has a name.'

Korea nodded. "If she still hasn't been found once the war is over, I want you to introduce him to someone."

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, sliding it across the table to her. SH unfolded it, brows furrowed as she read the characters there. It was a name and directions.

"Choe Jong-mi?" she asked. The name was familiar. "Isn't that... our comrade from the Democratic Women's Union?"

All the way back at the Raktong, on that first Liberation Day during war time.

Grief clutched at her. It should have been the only one. There shouldn't have been one at all.

'Damn America, and damn his miguk-nom.'

Her country nodded. "She plans to join the Worker's Party to carry

on her sister's dream. And she's going to need a good husband."

SH shoved aside her sorrow, mustering a smile. "What, are you a matchmaker now?"

Korea stared at her seriously. "She is loyal without a doubt to her country. You say that he is, too."

She nodded, not a doubt in her heart. She had heard about how ardently he'd fought to Liberate Hamhung to free her from the Commands. "Bang Eul-sik has never wavered. He's a good man."

Korea continued to stare at her.

She thought for a moment, realization dawning.

"So their children will be even more loyal."

He took another drink of his tea.

SH hesitated, pondered on that. "Should I... keep an eye out for more opportunities like that?"

"Yes." Korea set his cup down. "Even once we have won, this won't be over. So long as America exists, he will keep trying to destroy us, just like he does to CCCP and the other Socialists. We are going to need to safeguard the Revolution, at all costs."

Trying to stay light, SH replied, "A bit of matchmaking seems like an easy price to pay."

The look in Korea's eye was not light.

"And if the price grows higher?" he asked, voice low as he gazed intensely into her eyes. "Will you pay it?"

SH's smile fell as she straightened up, putting her tea cup down.

"Korea, I will pay any price for our people, and for you," she told him, matching his solemnity. "We all will. Body and mind, you know that."

He might not like it when she said that, but she had to. She meant it.

Her country stared at her, giving her that same piercing look he had when they first met, peeling off her skin and viscera to scrutinize whatever was inside her.

Unlike back then, she didn't squirm. There was nothing inside of her he didn't already know about, and nothing that mattered that he would find wanting.

He nodded after a long moment of this intense observation, leaning away from her.

"Good," was all he said before finishing his tea.

SH allowed her smile to return. "But you could be less menacing when you're talking about good things, you know."

He *'tch'*ed, then failed to repel her attempt to refill his cup with the lacklustre, lukewarm tea.

SH hid her smirk with her own tin cup as he glared at her, and they finished their drinks in silence.

Her Countryhuman might be the most aggravating person she knew (aside from certain individuals who would not be named), who would make all her hair fall out if she had any every time he ran headfirst into danger without telling them. But it was always worth it when he came back. He reinforced the wall just by being at her side.

Despite the talks collapsing around them again, promising at least another long month of war, at least, she didn't think she would have any more bad dreams tonight.

The reason North says he can't give out gifts despite giving his rations away and leaving money or using it to buy supplies for people is because a pig and cow are much more expensive. The other things can pass as little donations, but giving away an entire draught animal and feed animal makes it seem like he's paying Completely Reasonable Prices Kim off or favouring him.

Whereas giving him a 'loan' is more of an official state thing, and they *are* giving peasants seed and animal loans. So North can just pay off his own loan in the future. It's still vaguely sketchy financially, but it's a special case.

Pyongyang Marathon cancelled. ㅠㅠ From the vague reason they gave, I can't help but think it might have something to do with the current state of the world.

Also the US is pulling their defensive systems out of South Korea for the Middle East, the ones that made SK take an economic hit as well as exacerbated tensions because China was threatened by them (missiles that could easily not be just 'defensive,' making the regional situation more precarious). I bet they'll start with us next (some of our systems actually were already removed, but it was for a different thing). Join us as our ruling classes realize that no matter how good they play puppet, we will always be lesser to America. Taiwan may be the Israel of East Asia, but it isn't Israel. And we may be the best US army bases in the whole world, but we aren't white. And then join us as they still don't get the message and purposefully continue to antagonize our neighbours with an 'if America won't protect us, we have to protect ourselves!' mindset, not understanding that if we just broke from the US and our current imperialistic line, we wouldn't *need* to defend ourselves. Alas, Americans are not the only people who see others as lesser. The irony is that last year, I didn't think the DPRK, China, or anyone else would have ever struck first against America or its puppets (Japan, SK, Taiwan as big tension points). But America is literally showing that destruction can come at any point, without a declaration of war, without UN approval, without warning. In the middle of a joint military exercise, they can blow up a ship and leave the crew to drown, in the middle of negotiations, they can decide that they need to take a pre-emptive strike for something you *might* be doing, and no one will move to stop them. What message does that send, but that if you want to survive then *you* need to strike first?
I still don't think the DPRK would, at least (even though at this point I wouldn't blame them). Their defense pacts with China

and Russia depend on them being attacked first, and it would already be a task for either of those nations to get involved since it would be directly and objectively World War III (not that we aren't already basically in it), and would open a new front for Russia. Plus with Venezuela taken over and Iran in tough straits, while China can single-handedly shut down almost the entire American supply line, they don't have consistent access to oil for their own. Though the US is showing it's not as effective as it pretends to be, and is burning through supplies in Iran. I know they would come back SK up no matter what because they can't afford to lose such a convenient base, but... Anyway. One day I hope we all get what we deserve, good or bad.

Just imagine SH's face is covered in burns.

Hold It Close

“We have given our warning.” Korea’s words were clipped. “America has twenty-four hours to hand over the full list of living soldiers. If he does not, we call off the secret sessions and publish their contents to the world.”

The words hung heavy in the cool air of the bunker hall. So did the fog of colour.

“Is that alright?” North Pyongan asked eventually. Olive flickered around him. “Won’t exposing them make other countries cautious about negotiating with us in the future?”

Secret sessions were supposed to remain secret, often even after their conclusion. Just like Chagang’s war table sessions.

“America’s the untrustworthy one.” Dark red bristled around SH. It hadn't been constrained to veins in months. It was a splash of rotten blood that made Chagang’s mouth taste like copper. “He’s the one that lied.”

“If he didn’t want us telling the other nations about what he has done, then he should have kept his word,” Korea agreed. The same maroon wrapped his chest and fists.

The Americans had only been supposed to revise their lists. To count new prisoners and delete duplications or escapes. Instead they said they had individually screened every single prisoner, asking if they wanted to be repatriated. According to them, fifty-five thousand had said they would ‘rather die.’

Chagang did not believe this number. After all, the forty-four thousand ‘reclassified civilians’ had been supposed to be just that. But seven thousand of the seventy thousand names that had been turned over had been from them. And they had been their soldiers after all.

The Americans said the screening had been agreed on. It hadn't. The negotiations weren't a secret from the provinces. Chagang had read the account. It hadn't been discussed at all.

It shouldn't matter. They had agreed to repatriate all POWs, even if force had to be used. But it did matter.

"I did fear something like this," Hwang sighed, resignation colouring his words. "It was why I brought up being cautious about that line that was added to the draft armistice- 'Release and repatriation shall be affected on basis of the lists.'

It meant that if the enemy refused to add prisoners to the list, then they didn't have to be repatriated. And they *were* refusing. Even since the 19th, their representative and the Chinese had been demanding a full record of every soldier in their possession, the way they had been promised.

And the Americans weren't budging.

"We *were* cautious," Korea growled, blue-red frustration striking out at Hwang and the low ceiling. "If they hadn't agreed to repatriate all prisoners or had brought up screening, I would have rejected it."

They hadn't because the possibility of the lists being a safeguard had been worth it. Even just knowing exactly who America had in his possession could keep those prisoners safe. And if they were on the list, they had hoped it would mean he wouldn't be able to suddenly say he wouldn't be returning them. But instead he had just omitted them in the first place.

It was all wordplay, the kind Chagang wasn't good with.

"And if we did reject it, it would've just made us seem unreasonable," Kangwon pointed out. He was crouched by Chagang's feet. Heavy exhaustion hung over him like a purple-tinted grey cloak. "They could've just said it was an innocent throw-away line, and we were getting stuck on details on purpose."

"They already act like we're unreasonable," North Hamgyong

growled, red-blue like Korea. “Somehow they’re going to make up another bullshit reason to make *us* look like the ones in the wrong for spilling their guts. And no one’s going to fucking care anyways.”

The rage around SH grew, ballooning out as it tried to devour her brother. But she stood still. Chagang couldn’t see her face anymore since her emotions had broken through his guard.

“So what?” South Pyongan asked, leaning against the wall. “You think we should just keep chatting? That hasn’t helped so far.”

“And it isn’t *going* to help.” North Hamgyong’s words were angry. But black smothered the red in them.

“We need to do something,” Chagang forced out. “Threatening to go public could-“ Pain stabbed behind his eyes. “Force them to hand over the full list.”

The black deepened. "It won’t.”

“What do we do if it doesn’t, Korea?” Now that their Countryhuman was back, so was Hae’s cloud of pink. It couldn’t be dimmed by bad news. She quivered inside of it, holding herself back from throwing herself at him again.

“We handle it.”

Chagang was working at winding the colours away again, but he caught the flicker of determined azure and indigo inside of Korea’s miasma.

“How?” North Hamgyong demanded.

“How we have been.”

Korea turned for the door, a clear sign they were done.

“A*hem,”* SH said. Her tapping foot echoed off the walls.

Hwang cleared his throat pointedly. Kangwon crossed his arms over his knees. Chagang stared blankly at the wall, temples pounding.

He didn't need to look at Korea to know his reluctance would be visible as he turned around.

“What?”

Hwang scoffed. “’What,’ he says.”

“If you want to take a bet on it, it’s proooobably something to do with you taking off onto enemy territory like, a week after giving Kangwon shit for the same thing,” South Pyongan said. “Something that I think we can all agree that I have absolutely *zero* responsibility for.”

The guilt that had been clinging to her since North Pyongan had told them all Korea was gone had disappeared. Teal draped her instead. It could have been because Korea was back safe. It also could have been because her life wasn’t in danger from SH anymore.

“All of Korea is our territory,” Korea said stiffly. “It was enemy-*held* territory.”

“That you took off into alone without even telling most of us.” SH sounded peeved, but Chagang could see that none of her maroon was directed at Korea. Just olive.

“I had a mission to complete.”

North Hamgyong snorted. “Yeah. And I’m sure you just *had* to do it. Just like every other time, right?”

He was unimpressed by Korea’s glare and SH’s anger trying to throttle him.

Even though it hurt, Chagang let himself peek at Korea’s aura, wanting at least a hint on what he had been up to.

Immediately it was like someone had taken a hammer to his skull. The maroon, chartreuse, purple-grey, and ochre swirled around him, tinted by flax and mahogany that he sucked back inside himself, and deep, deep olive.

And ash. So much ash. Some of it was twined in with the dark red, like smoke and fire. Chagang didn't think that came from the talks. They should only make him angry.

But besides that, he had no clue. The colours were all his usual ones, just intensified to the point that they made Chagang's skull feel like it was cracking open.

"I did." Korea's guilt didn't swell when he said it, so it seemed like that was true.

"And what *was* it you did?" Hwang asked, pushing his glasses up.

Their Countryhuman didn't answer. The shame and guilt eddied around him.

Hae was glued to his side now that they were out of military mode. She pouted at the rest of them.

"Don't be nosy," she scolded. "If Korea had to do it, then ah bet it was real important."

"It was," Korea confirmed.

Hae looked up at him, batting her big eyes. "How important?"

He glowered at her, shoving her away. Her pink cloud immediately reattached to him.

"It was a classified mission for the war effort," Korea said gruffly. "It can't be shared."

Chagang cracked an eye to look at him again. If he was lying, he didn't see any more ochre at it. Then he shut it before the colours could stab him.

"We aren't asking you to," he heard SH say, likely shooting Hwang and Hae a look. "We just don't like it when you take off and leave us worrying."

"Yeah," Kangwon said from the floor. "You know how worried you were for me and Gangwon."

His voice was easy. But Chagang doubted the grey he had been leaking since the beginning of the month was gone.

"We feel that way when you're gone," he said to Korea.

"I wasn't 'worried,'" Korea snapped, suddenly aggressive. "I was pissed that two of my provinces were willing to compromise our country because they were too stupid to realize the other countries aren't our friends, and went gallivanting off straight into a trap."

North Hamgyong grunted.

"What?" Korea's voice could have melted through the concrete walls.

"Shit and chaff."

Chagang could almost feel the red that spiked off his country. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter. But he made himself keep listening.

"Do you think I do these things just because I feel like it?" Korea hissed. "I only ever undertake a mission like this when I *have* to. Kangwon and Gangwon did it because they're fucking idiots!"

Chagang didn't look at Kangwon.

"Korea," SH said disapprovingly.

Chagang heard him take a breath. His next words were calmer.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "The General and I have agreed that I won't be leaving for anything like this again unless it is something he agrees is absolutely necessary."

Chagang had cracked an eye to see Korea's colours. If he had seen just guilt, he might have thought he was lying. But the shame was brighter.

"We'll see how long *that* lasts," North Hamgyong scorned.

SH's refusal to bite back at him hurt Chagang's head. So did the chartreuse and maroon from her brother. And that other more

unpleasant colour from both of them.

Korea glared at the Northern Hamgyong. “If you’re all done with your useless commentary, I have work to get to.”

Hae squeezed onto him, preventing him from leaving. “Aren’t you goin’ to sleep here tonight?”

“No.” More guilt tinted in his aura. “I have work to catch up on.”

She pouted. “But ah wanted to sleep in your room.”

A new colour shot from him. The sunset of embarrassment.

“I never let you sleep in my room in the first place,” he hissed, shaking her off and straightening his tunic.

Disappointment bloomed from Hae for a second, but the grey-washed orange was quickly swallowed up by the pink again. She knew just as well as the rest of them that she would get her chance to strike.

Chagang unlocked his jaw before his Countryhuman could walk away. “Korea. China?”

Ochre spiked from his shoulders.

“Oh yeah,” South Pyongan said, like she had forgotten their ally had been shot. “What do we do if he ‘dies?’ Do we hold him up behind a wall and use him like a deolmi puppet to try and trick Mao and them to think he’s alive?”

She went behind her brother, grabbing one of his arms and making him wave, while she used her other hand to open and close his jaw. North Pyongan made no effort to stop the manhandling.

“I’m China,” she said. Chagang could describe her voice as ‘flamboyant.’ He could not describe it as sounding like China. “And I’m perfectly fine and won’t blame Korea for me getting my lung blown out. Also I’m *way* less attractive than South Pyongan.”

“Your Chinese accent is offensively atrocious,” Hwang noted.

“Please tell me you haven’t been speaking to our Chinese comrades like that.”

“No,” South Pyongan made her brother say, still in her awful accent. “Definitely not.”

“I already told Peng Dehuai's replacement about his condition,” Korea cut in irritably. “He said it was regrettable. But he doesn’t seem to blame us.”

Chagang couldn’t tell if he had misunderstood him on purpose. “But what about him?”

“Mm. Is he alright?” SH asked, olive fizzling around her.

Korea’s colours didn’t change. But they twisted, wrapping together in tangled skeins that made Chagang’s teeth ache.

“Ask Kangwon, not me.”

With that, he left, slamming the bunker door.

Chagang breathed a sigh of relief. He was much better at holding back the colours now, even if it caused his migraines to get worse. But Korea still managed to shatter his defenses without fail.

The provinces all looked at Kangwon. Chagang saw his heavy exhaustion before he tried to push it away again.

“China will be fine,” his cousin said, getting to his feet slowly. “Me and Kim Yong-hwan both checked him over. He was a little dehydrated, and he took a pretty severe shot, but Korea fixed him up okay. It’ll be a few weeks before he’s combat-ready again, but he should wake up any day now.”

“That’s good,” North Pyongan sighed at the same time as North Hamgyong said, “Damn.”

SH’s rage broke through Chagang’s concentration. But she just smiled. “Well, *I’m* glad he’s awake at least.”

Hae nodded vigorously. “Me too. He said he was goin’ to get more

stuff for us soon. Ah mean, just to put around the bunker for anyone to use. Not gifts or nothin'. Anythin'."

"Hae, Korea said you could accept gifts from him so long as you asked for them," Hwang pointed out.

She hung her head. "Ah know. But he doesn't *want* me to."

"I'm sort of glad he's okay because I don't want a comrade dying in our country," Kangwon said.

"Oh, ayuh. That too," Hae said quickly. "Ah'm really glad Comrade Mao Zhilong is okay 'cuz he's nice an' doesn't deserve to die."

"Who cares if he's okay?" North Hamgyong grunted. "It was *his* decision to flounce off with Korea. And we all agreed he had something to do with that Chorweon shit, didn't we?"

"Oh." SH turned directly to him for the first time since they had returned to the bunker. "You're still here?"

Chagang winced as maroon and tan flared from her brother.

"Yeah, I am," he growled. "Unless you want to do something about that."

"Mm, no," SH said pleasantly, turning away again. "I don't care enough to."

The hallway filled with the grey-yellow fog of discomfort.

"Anyway!" SH crushed it between her hands before anyone could say anything. "Comrade China is okay. That's all that matters."

Chagang had only been semi-tuned in after he heard China was alright. That was all that mattered. And it wasn't why he had asked Korea about him.

South Pyongan glanced at the women's bedroom door. She lowered her voice. "The Liaos aren't in right now, right?"

"They went to do laundry," North Pyongan said. Chagang enjoyed the little flutter of red and gold as Liaoxi crossed his mind. "Why?"

"I'm just throwing this out there," South Pyongan said. "Completely random thought, just throwing tteok at the wall, but…" She glanced around, even though there was nowhere in the hallway to hide. "How sure are we Korea didn't shoot him?"

SH gaped, horrified. Chagang could see her dismay. "South Pyongan!"

"What?" she asked. "Come on, Korea's had it out for him from day one."

"I like to think Korea is more strategic than shooting our only ally on the ground," Hwang said delicately.

North Pyongan raised an eyebrow. *"I* like to think he wouldn't do that because Comrade China is a comrade who has helped us out immensely."

"Ahem. Yes, that too."

"Ayuh." Hae defiantly put her hands on her hips. "Korea wouldn't shoot Comrade Mao Zhilong. Not unless he did somethin' to really deserve it. And then Korea wouldn't screw up an' leave him alive."

"Hey, I'm not saying he did it on purpose," South Pyongan stressed. "But how many times has Korea pointed a gun at him? Like twenty?"

"Exaggeration is a tool of the reactionaries," SH said primly. "It's more like eight, I'm sure."

"Okay, yeah, same diff," their cousin dismissed. "Picture it- in enemy territory, emotions running high, Korea's paranoia paranoia-ing. Then China does that slinky disappearing-reappearing trick of his and *'bang!'* no more pretty boy." She crossed her arms. "You can't tell me it wouldn't be just like Korea to slink back with him and refuse to tell us that's what happened."

Chagang wished he could deny that. Unfortunately Korea had

been radiating enough ochre that it would make sense for him to have shot their comrade. He didn't think he had, but he couldn't tell for sure. All he could tell was that if their Countryhuman *had* done it, he felt guilty about it. Which probably wouldn't be comforting to Peng Dehuai, Chen Geng, Zhou Enlai, or Mao Zedong. Or possibly China.

"I hope he did shoot him," North Hamgyong said.

"No you don't," North Pyongan scolded.

Chagang nodded. "That would break our alliance. We would lose the PVA."

"So?" his cousin growled. "They aren't doing shit anyways. They've been throwing themselves at the enemy with us for nine damn months and we still don't have a ceasefire."

Chagang had his private doubts about the war ending anytime soon. But he could only speak of victory.

"We will soon."

"Well," SH said before her brother could snap back. "Ceasefire or not, we all need to get some sleep. I think we can all agree that Korea didn't shoot China, *wouldn't* shoot China, and that he'll be able to handle the Yankees tomorrow. And anyone that doesn't, doesn't really matter."

"I'm not saying he'd *enjoy* it," South Pyongan griped, following SH into the bedroom. "I'm just saying if he did it on accident, he'd never fess up."

"Ah'll ask him tomorrow," Hae chirped, skipping after them. "He'll tell me for sure."

"Whatever," North Hamgyong grumbled, storming into the men's room.

He slammed the door in Hwang's face, as usual. He had to open it again, sighing.

It was just Chagang, North Pyongan, and Kangwon in the hall now. The latter sank to his haunches again, rubbing his face.

His cobalt-skinned cousin opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Don't take Korea's words to heart," he said instead. "He didn't mean it."

"Yeah, I know." Kangwon rubbed his eyes. "I'm just tired."

Ever since he had returned from Norway, discomfort always crawled across the Pyongans' skins when they were around him. North Pyongan turned yellow-grey now.

"Goodnight," he said after a moment, heading into the room.

The purple-grey exhaustion had already grown heavier over Kangwon, pressing down on his shoulders. Darker grey threaded through it.

"Are you sleeping here?" Chagang asked.

"No," his cousin said. I've got a patient I need to be on call for. Possible anthrax."

"Do you want me to drive you?"

"I'm good." Kangwon climbed to his feet. Flax and mahogany pain crackled off of him. "I've got my guards to walk me."

He had new ones now. His and Gangwon's had been dismissed. They were being kept somewhere. Chagang thought it might be in his province, as far from the 38th Parallel and the coast as possible.

First watch was his tonight, so he walked his cousin outside.

"So what do you think?" Kangwon asked, stretching for the walk. "Did Korea shoot China?"

Chagang didn't think so. He felt a lot of things towards their comrade, but none of them were the inky blue-black that seeped out of South and North Hamgyong even more heavily than before.

But he had been hoping he would see something nicer than all the darker colours. He liked watching people make friends almost as much as he liked watching them fall in love. Children had it come faster. They would meet at a park, and the moment one asked if another wanted to play the mugung flower bloomed or hunt-the-Japanese, pink would explode out of them. Adults were more hesitant. They wouldn't feel anything strong when they met, but the more time they spent together in the People's Committee or working together in a factory, the more spurts of azure and amusement there would be, until they would glow with the emerald of high spirits the moment they set eyes on each other. And pink, though more subdued than in children.

The few times China's emotions had been strong enough for him to see, he hadn't seen pink. But he had decided the colours he had seen at the Foundation Day speech meant he had some sort of affection for his country. Even if some of them were still unnerving. It could be foolish, but Chagang had been hoping to see Korea start to see China the same way. He hadn't been able to witness his Countryhuman making a friend before. He wanted to. As painful as his negative emotions were, his positive ones were just as beautiful.

But out of all the colours that had writhed around him when they brought China up, pink hadn't been one of them.

Still, that didn't mean he thought Korea would shoot him. He at least had better discipline than that.

"No," he said to Kangwon.

His cousin nodded, relief blossoming around him. "Yeah, me neither. I'll see you tomorrow for your blood. Donation. Your blood donation."

Chagang nodded, and his cousin set off, trudging away under his cloud of exhaustion.

He could try and tell him to get more rest. But he knew he wouldn't. Kangwon had a duty to fulfill.

Chagang didn't have as much of one right now. He wasn't needed

as often in their military complexes when they were limited to probing and repulsing actions. And despite he and Korea's silent agreement, he was sure his Countryhuman had returned to subtly trying to keep him away from more classified information.

He didn't like that. It felt woven in with Korea taking off for the south again. He had agreed with Chagang that the provinces were more expendable than him, even if he had refused to say it out loud. If he had something that needed to be done, he should have sent Chagang. Because of their agreement from the tactical withdrawal, he knew there was no danger in him being Commanded even if his province was occupied again. And Kanggye becoming occupied again was highly unlikely.

He didn't think it was because Korea still didn't have faith in him. The violet that had bloomed around him when Chagang had all their operations reports organized and ready for him when he had woken up after the fever denied that.

Which meant the problem lay with Korea. That worried his province.

But at least he had said he wouldn't take off like that again. And his colors had said he did seem to have been telling the truth.

At least for now.

—

The door to China's room creaked open. Liaoxi poked her head in, and her sister poked hers over top.

Their Countryhuman was lying on a cot against the far wall, his feet facing them and an IV attached to his left arm. His face was serene in slumber(?).

"Not smiling," Liaotung whispered, more for the benefit of those in the hall than China. If he was awake, he would hear.

"En." Liaoxi slipped into the sterile room, her sister following.

They removed their masks, staring down at the man on the bed.

“We could get rid of him,” Liaotung muttered under her breath. “It would be easy to blame it on the Koreans.”

Liaoxi nodded her head, crossing her arms thoughtfully. “No longer would we have to put up with his folly. We could go home and be jolly.”

Liaotung stepped closer to the bed, her face darkening. “New China should have a new China, don’t you think?”

Liaoxi watched their Countryhuman’s face with bated breath as her sister reached her hands for his throat, wrapping them around it. His eyelids flickered, naturally, she would say.

After a moment, Liaotung straightened up. “I think he really is asleep.”

Liaoxi sighed, resting her cheek on her hand. “’Tis a shame. I was looking forward to telling him North Pyongan and I shared a kiss.”

China didn’t stir, and she dropped her arms.

“Definitely asleep,” she decided. “Gossip he would not miss.”

“Definitely not.”

Liaotung already knew about her kiss with the Korean province. Liaoxi had woken her up to tell her about it the second they returned to the bunker. She’d felt giddy being able to share a story like that with her sister under the covers, whispering so as not to wake up the Korean women.

Even if her sister wasn’t as much a romantic as she, she thought she’d enjoyed it, too. For so long, Fengtian had been surrounded by men- Jilin, Heilongjiang, Manchukuo, China (though he barely counted). And the only romance they’d ever experienced was reciting their poems with other poets before being locked away. It felt novel to be able to tease her sister over a man, just like it was novel for Liaoxi to be teased.

Liaotung leaned back, abandoning her whisper. “Want to investigate him?”

Liaoxi shook her head. “He’ll let us do it when he wakes. Advantage of him we should not take.”

“He’d do it to us,” her sister pointed out. “How about a compromise? Kangwon said he got shot in the lung. We just look at that.”

Liaoxi sighed. “If you knew where he was shot, then why an investigation did you want to plot?”

“Curiosity.”

China was in a hospital gown and pants, an outfit it was strange to see him in. Liaoxi was glad it was striped with pale blue, at least. She knew the Koreans loved their white clothes not just for funerals, but for their everyday for the purity they represented, but white for them was the colour of the grave. Purity was for the dead, not the living.

Liaotung pulled his gown up over his chest, and peeled back the medical tape, revealing the thick scab on the right side, just opposite his heart. Neat surgical stitches stuck out of the red skin.

“Definitely shot,” her sister appraised.

Liaoxi gave China the grace of not touching him while he was asleep (even though she knew he probably wouldn’t actually mind; if anything, he would chide her for not taking advantage of his vulnerability to discover what little story-telling marks the doctors wouldn’t have paid any mind to in their write-ups). She traced the impact crater with her eyes, pretending she didn’t see her sister clearly prodding at their Countryhuman’s sides anyway.

“There couldn’t be another thought.” Liaoxi tilted her head at his injury, observing that he was lying flat with no added bandage bulk on his back. “No exit. A frontal wound for him isn’t a fit.”

China’s hearing verged on supernatural, and his other senses matched. He was still ‘human,’ and it wasn’t like they hadn’t been successfully ambushed before. But it was rare, usually when they were in the middle of a storm or by a particularly loud waterfall.

And never from the front. Even looking at his bare torso showed light pink scars on his sides where bullets had grazed him, and unavoidable shrapnel marks from open combat, but no other bullet holes.

Liaoxi’s gaze dropped to a long, pale scar that curved over his left hip.

And those marks he had came back with from that city, of course. He'd never confirmed their guesses from that examination, just smiled at them, leaving the scene he'd taken all the grievous wounds in a mystery.

“Do you think he did something he shouldn’t?” Liaotung asked.

“Even if I wanted to say no, I couldn’t.” Liaoxi patted the medical tape flat and pulled his gown back down.

Her sister sighed. “What are we going to do with him?”

“Likely continue to tolerate his whims,” Liaoxi replied, perching on the edge of the bed.

China didn’t stir.

Her sister sat on the other side of him. “What did Comrade Chen say?”

Chen Geng had temporarily replaced Peng Dehuai as the commander of the PVA until someone could take the post more permanently. Their Comrade Peng was suffering from a tumour in his head and had to go home for treatment. They didn't know what the prognosis would be yet, but... China would be just as displeased as him that he wasn't able to say goodbye.

Their new comrade was an experienced and steady military man, but hadn't been excited to hear that the China back in Beijing wasn't the real China. He wasn't happy about their Countryhuman being at war, especially not when the first thing he heard about it was that he had gotten shot.

“He wants him to be sent back to Beijing until he’s better.”

“Or permanently, perhaps.”

Liaoxi dipped her head. “I doubt the idea would be much of a fetter.”

Not to him, anyway.

“And?”

Liaoxi arched a brow.

Liaotung shook her head. “He has orders not to send him back if he gets injured, doesn’t he?”

“’Tis the way it be.”

Liaoxi might have preferred that he did go home. She wanted to stay here and fight for the Koreans, and for their people that had been cut down by the Yankees. Her and her sister weren’t as needed as their Countryhuman, and it would be easier to say they’d gone rogue if they were discovered. But China…

Well, he should probably be in China. Though she knew what he ‘should’ do had never been much of a lure for him.

“Do you think he was always like this?” Liaotung voiced a thought they’d often wondered about as one person.

“Who knows?”

Not them. None of the provinces did, she didn’t think. His past was the one thing China dissuaded them from looking into, and meant it. He wouldn’t reward them for figuring it out, unlike most of his secrets and lies. She’d been able to tell that from his sharp smile the first and only time Fengtian had asked. She knew what his old flag had looked like, she was sure it hadn’t been a constant disguise. But she didn’t know if it was his *only* old flag.

“I doubt he’ll ever disclose,” she murmured.

“En.” Liaotung tugged lightly on his cheek. “Bad gege. Though I guess we know he’s been like this for as long as we’ve known him.”

“Mm.”

‘Like this’ meant a multitude of things, especially with China’s many roles. But when he was lying on a hospital bed in a foreign country with a wound he by all rights shouldn’t have, Liaoxi was thinking of that long march, and him hanging between Comrade Mao and Heilongjiang, his head lolling as songs spilled from his lips, blood stained the bandages on his wrists like plum blossoms, and their soldiers marched on, their pain and exhaustion forgotten.

Or of 1937. Coming back to find him gone, only to see him two and a half months later, like nothing had happened. Alone and carrying new scars.

“Do you think we should try and convince him to go?”

Liaoxi saw no need to deliberate. “Even if we did, ‘twould not be so. He’d just take some of our points away.”

And she was *not* losing the favourite province competition to Shaanxi again. Agreeing to stay on Korea’s last Foundation Day had scored them major accolades. She knew as long as she wrote an epic ballad about this war, she could take first place once they returned.

Though she wondered if ‘she’ would be around for that.

“Mm.” Liaotung nodded sagely. “So he stays to get shot another day.”

Liaoxi sighed, patting their Countryhuman’s hand. The sleeves on his gown were too short. She could see the pale scar across his wrist.

It really was difficult to care about someone whose greatest priority wasn't themself. Even though she was certain North Pyongan and his cousins were worse off than she, the Chinese provinces did share the same burden. Though it was sometimes difficult for some of her comrades to see past the mask to figure out if China actually *did* care for things more than himself, or if he was just so prideful that he never actually believed he was in any danger. After all, he was the man that had waltzed straight into

Manchukuo's- and thus Japan's- grasp to perform in women's clothing just because he'd decided he wanted his northeastern provinces. There really shouldn't have been any escape from that. If it wasn't China, Liaoxi didn't think they would have been able to. That was either great love for them, or great arrogance.

Liaoxi hadn't been sure herself which it was at first. Fengtian had only been with China for less than a year when the Long March began, and so hadn't been able to get her fingers under the mask's edge yet. If she hadn't been on it, she might never have.

'China's people have given their blood for China. Why shouldn't China do the same for them?'

Liaoxi knew which it was now. And she knew it was that willingness to drain himself dry for their people and their cause that made her realize he was more than another China-contender, albeit one she was incredibly grateful for. Seeing how committed he was to helping people who weren't even theirs only told her they'd made the right decision in choosing him to be the People's China. In the end, no matter how he could make her worry, it was the fact that he *wasn't* the most important person to himself that made her care for him. That was why she would accept him staying in Korea.

And that was why she would accept whatever fate he had written for her and her sister.

Liaotung was tipping a bit of water from the tin carafe down China's throat, humming one of her jaunty er ren zhuan tunes.

Not for the first time, Liaoxi wondered if she should tell her sister what China had planned.

Her thumb ran across the pink ribbon around his closest wrist. The scar tissue wasn't rippled, he hadn't cut deep enough for that. Just enough to get the blood flowing like poetry.

But even she didn't know exactly what he was scheming up. If she told Liaotung, China would only be disappointed. He had only told her so she could decide whether or not to take the chance for improv he'd given her.

And Liaotung liked surprises. She liked to have her lines sprung on her last minute, or to have to change her role on a sudden whim. As she'd said, she found the idea of settling into one boring. She enjoyed wearing masks.

Liaoxi could remember how it felt to enjoy it as Fengtian. Maybe one day she could again.

Liaotung looked over at her, sensing her stare. Liaoxi smiled, pulling China's sleeve over his scar, reaching over to tuck the blanket over his other one, too, since the IV wouldn't let his sleeve come down.

Regardless, she was just an actor. She would do as the Director directed.

The door opened, and they both looked over, hands darting for their masks before they realized who it was.

Korea stood in the doorway, looking at them with a wide eye, like they'd suddenly ambushed him. Without a word, he turned on a heel like he was about to leave, then swung back.

"I was looking for Comrade Kim Yong-hwan."

Liaoxi blinked at his aggressive tone, and Liaotung said, "The… nurse?"

"Yes."

Liaoxi restrained herself from shooting a look at her sister as she glanced around the tiny room with exaggerated motions before reporting, "She's not here."

"I can see that," Korea snapped, then spun around and actually walked away this time, slamming the door with force.

The two Chinese women exchanged glances.

Liaotung shrugged, miming taking a bite out of a fruit, only to wince as the spines stabbed her mouth.

Liaoxi didn't encourage her by smiling, even if her lips did twitch.

They left the underground complex together, their masks and scarves disguising them once more.

"Are you going to go help North Pyongan?" Liaotung asked in a teasing tone as they descended the hill, revelling in the spring breeze.

Liaoxi flushed under her mask, but shook her head. "Comrade Peng doesn't have time to visit China yet. I told him a report on his condition I would get."

"Mm, well I'm sure you can get lots of cuddling in when you leave for his province next," Liaotung said, ducking as she flicked at her with a gloved finger.

Liaoxi laughed, smiling.

That was another reason she didn't really want to tell her sister about China's plans. She couldn't know if the same lesson about love had been imprinted on her in all their years of fighting at their country's side for their people, or if she just acted like it had. She couldn't know if she would understand her relationship with North Pyongan in that light. If she couldn't understand, she didn't want to lose this.

She wanted to enjoy being sisters for as long as they could, just like she wanted to enjoy being in love for as long as *she* could.

Hmmmmm. Very scary dream about an endless basement, a creature with empty eyes, and father.

If you want a clear view on 'who' Liaoxi and Liaotung have been, from what I can find it is something like this:
1907- Current Fengtian formed as Fengtian
1929- name changed to Liaoning or Mukden
1932- changed back to Fengtian
1934- the area was split into Fengtian (Liaoxi), Antung (Liaotung), and Jinzhou
1939- Antung further split into Antung and Tonghua

1945-1949- back to just Liaoxi and Liaotung (though Nationalists still called her Antung)
1950- fully officially Liaoxi and Liaotung
1954- …
Also they weren't under real Chinese control in 1934 as they were still under Manchukuo. So basically Fengtian was living life with China as a revolutionary, then split into three people all of a sudden with no choice in the matter. And since I can't find the exact month it happened, there's a 3/12 chance it was on the Long March. Being a Provincehuman is about accepting at any moment that a clerical decision might fundamentally remake who you are as a person. I think that's the core of why old countries didn't get as attached to their provinces, since borders were very fluid back then. Even modern day, that's probably the basis for why most countries have a more coworker relationship with theirs. It would suck to have someone you thought of as a sibling/child/close friend, just to have them suddenly split into two different people or combine with someone else to become another person entirely just because it makes administration easier.

Unscreened

The Americans never handed over the lists. Of course they didn't. Hickman, the staff officer that had been their representative in this stage of the talks, protested against North and China pulling away from and exposing the secret sessions, but made no concessions that would have stopped them.

The officer hadn't wanted to return to open sessions. He hadn't wanted to return to the sessions at all, demanding an indefinite recess, though America was conspicuously silent when it came to the decision that came off as a temper tantrum to the rest of the world. It was repealed only a day later, when Admiral Joy stepped in to call for a full meeting of all their chief delegates on the 27th.

North and China's men went to Panmunjom, reporters from all sides swarmed, more than had gathered in one place yet, each one wanting to capture the moment that could make or break the talks.

And an hour before they began, America cancelled them.

North didn't know if it was because their reporters had made sure the UN pressmen had received the accounts of the secret sessions that exposed his plotting, and he'd had to deal with the blowback, or if the Yankee was just enjoying toying with them.

The next day, Joy asked for secret sessions again. Both North and Nam Il had been reluctant, now that they knew how they could go. But in the end, neither they nor China's negotiators cared *how* the talks were held, so long as they were held with sincerity.

North didn't expect that. He hadn't expected it two or seven years ago, and he certainly didn't expect it now.

He was starting to hate being right.

Joy came in swinging with America's bat, claiming his country would accept airfields being built in the north during the armistice

if they dropped their nomination of CCCP as one of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Committee, the committee that would oversee the POW exchanges and peacekeep during the ceasefire.

Even though it rankled that they thought North had to be 'allowed' to construct anything in his own country, that wasn't a deal-breaker for him. In fact, it was a fair trade. Since one of America's nominations- Norway- had to be eliminated due to him officially joining the war, if that had been the only issue, North would have immediately dropped CCCP, leaving them with two appointments each- Poland and Czechoslovakia for them, and Sweden and Switzerland for America. Both hard-core capitalists, and one a Nazi collaborator. But better than some options he could have chosen.

And the airfields were important. Not only did they need them to bring in aid and supplies quicker, but if they were left in ruins, America could use a ceasefire to fly in more weapons and soldiers and bolster his own air force over the south, leaving him refreshed, and them in the same situation if he called the peace off. The larger and more prepared their own air force was, the less of a chance there was that he could do that.

And there was the principle of it. The Yankee had no right to dictate what could or could not be built in Korea.

So it was a fair deal. Remove CCCP, get their airfields.

Or it should have been. Because there was a price for it- both North and China would have to accept the seventy thousand prisoners whose names they had been given, leaving the other hundred thousand in America's hands.

More than that. North couldn't even shave the number down by reminding himself they had agreed to give up on the forty-four thousand. After the news that just came out of Geoje Island…

He knew a large chunk of those forty-four thousand- 'thirty-eight thousand' now- hadn't been screened the first time. And with the air drops and escapes, and the seven thousand, he had proof that at least a few thousand of them *were* he and China's soldiers. He knew

the others were, too.

And Admiral Charles Turner Joy- his Countryhuman speaking through him- said that if they wanted their other condition, then they had to be abandoned. The deal had to be accepted in full or not at all. He had said outright that they'd only been refusing the airfields and CCCP for bargaining purposes.

But if North and China didn't take the deal, they would make it principle, another thing to block the armistice with.

North had refused to accept it, obviously. They would take the CCCP-for-airfields deal, but he wasn't leaving his soldiers behind. Chen Geng and his negotiators had felt the same way. So had China. Their prisoners weren't bargaining chips and it was the *law* that every single one of them should be returned. The Yankees had agreed to do it, they'd just used their stupid fucking double-talk to pretend they hadn't.

'Joy' had tried to call for an indefinite recess again a few days ago, on May 7th. North had Nam Il expose the secret sessions again. He didn't care if it made them seem unreliable or unreasonable or untrustworthy or un*anything*. America had damn near admitted outright with his mouthpiece that everything he did had nothing to do with principle and everything to do with drawing the war out and keeping as many of North and China's people as possible to torture them in their camps. It was unfair and the world deserved to *know*.

They didn't care. Of course. Acheson, Ridgway, Van Fleet, even 'keep the war in Korea' Truman, the British and Canadians and all of America's other United Nations puppets and fucking *Japan* got together the next day with a speed that said they had already known what was going to happen to announce that they supported the ultimatum, that it was right and just to violate the laws that *they* had created, that North and China were the unreasonable ones for wanting the rules they hadn't even had a *say* in to be upheld. They would continue to say it was right even once the Geoje news spread because they *wanted* his people to die.

They wanted the war to go on, every single one of them. Even as

the warhawks cawed for it to be extended to China, even the ones that didn't would risk it just to see Korea destroyed, to see him *bow,* to see him-

The office door opened, and someone walked into the room.

"Comrade China," Kim Il-sung greeted cordially, looking up from his reports. "I'm glad to see you on your feet again."

"Thank you," China responded, probably dipping his head. "But I'm afraid if you were hoping to get your spare room back, it won't happen quite yet. My Comrade Chen has politely requested that I stay here until I can run the hall without losing breath. And I might have to stay even longer than that, if other accommodation plans don't work out."

There was an insinuation to his voice that the Premier didn't address.

"Anything for an ally," he said instead. "I'm sorry you came to such grievous harm in our country."

"What's a war without a little grievous harm?" China replied airily. "I've been getting off too easily if you ask me."

The Premier didn't confirm or deny that. "Can I assist our comrade in any way? Has Comrade Chen Geng been able to keep you informed on the talks?"

"Oh, don't worry, he has," China said. "Every single unfortunate little detail. I was actually looking to see if your Comrade Korea was in. I'm afraid I haven't had the chance to discuss them with him yet."

Kim Il-sung didn't look down. "I'm afraid he isn't here right now."

"Hm. He seems to be out quite a lot recently."

"There's much to deal with, with the negotiations, military logistics, and attending to the daily affairs of our country."

There wasn't even a hint of judgement in his voice, no implication

that China should know that, and be at home doing those exact same things or recovering since he had almost fucking *died.*

"Mm," China said. "Shame. I wonder how he feels about the news out of Geoje?"

"The heart of every patriotic Korean bristles in outage over what has been done to our comrades, both our countrymen and the brave Chinese sons and daughters that have dedicated their lives to helping us Liberate our country," the man artfully dodged.

"As does the heart of every patriotic Chinese," the other country responded knowingly. "Very well. If you see him, tell him I'd like to have a conversation about the negotiations. Completely professional, of course."

The Premier dipped his head. "If I see him before you, I will."

"Oh, I'm sure you will."

There was a rustle as China inclined himself, then left, the door shutting quietly.

Kim Il-sung sat still for a few moments, then when the Countryhuman had to be far enough away (and Hyon Chol-hae hadn't said anything from the hall about him loitering), he leaned back slightly from the desk, looking down between his feet.

North glowered up at him from the leg well, where he'd dove for as soon as China had knocked and asked if he could come in.

"Not a word," he muttered.

"I would never dream of judging my country's actions," the Premier assured gravely, scooting his chair back so he could climb out.

North brushed his pants off, returning to the seat across from him.

China had definitely known he was in there. If he hadn't heard his scramble to hide, then he had to have heard him breathing, as quiet as North had tried to be. The smile in his voice when he'd said he

was sure the Premier would see him first had been too obvious. And mocking.

Whatever. As embarrassing as that was, at least North hadn't had to speak to him.

"Chagang has been asking to attend the negotiations." He hadn't been planning on bringing it up, but he needed to use something to clear the unspoken question out of the air.

The Premier scanned across the reports on the budding cooperative farms. "He has been instrumental in discovering a few of those used by the reactionaries, and guiding them to voluntary surrender. He might have some success in gauging whether or not our enemy's future agreements can be trusted."

"I said no."

Chagang *had* been useful, just like with the men he'd helped expose after Pyongyang was Liberated. Despite the crippling migraine he had all the time now, he seemed to have a good judge of character. North didn't know what exactly he'd done to himself to go from barely being able to hear his name being called from two feet away to uncannily observant, but it had served them well. He could be of use to Nam Il at Panmunjom.

But the idea of sending him to a location the enemy knew he was going to be, at times they expected, when there were only so many roads that could take him there…

North knew those silent agreements they had made were logical. But that didn't mean he wanted to chance them coming about. Chagang was too valuable in other fields to risk him just to confirm what North already knew- the Yankees were insincere and didn't want peace.

His General didn't ask for his reasoning. He just nodded.

"He can serve just as well in Kanggye, finding volunteers for the cooperative farm," he appraised. "They'll be especially important in the mountainous regions."

North dipped his head, returning to his own work- going through the list of seventy thousand prisoners one by one, searching for names he knew and ones that had been on the last list, but were now missing. Too many were, including a few soldiers he knew personally, men and women he *knew* wouldn't have chosen to remain in the south, no matter how much they were threatened. Escaped, one of those air-dropped into the north that hadn't gotten lucky when it came to weather, being kept behind for 'screening' until they said what the enemy wanted, or dead- that was the question.

He knew he had to find the answer because no other country would care. They all agreed with America that him wanting an accounting for what exactly had happened on Geoje was 'propaganda,' just like they agreed that he was unreasonable for not wanting he and China's people to be kept by the enemy when they had just admitted to torturing them.

He didn't care. He had expected this. It was what foreigners *did.* The only people that cared about Korea were… in Korea.

He had to wonder what South thought about Geoje Island. If he'd heard. If he-

It didn't matter. North wasn't relinquishing his soldiers. Not if he had to fight another hundred days or hundred years.

Not after what they said had been done to them.

—

"Tea?" Hwang offered the steaming cup to the man across the table from him.

There was a bit of a nip in the air, even now that it was the last month of spring. And this particular subject- SH had said not to call them that, even in his head- had been through enough conversations with him to overcome his fear of being poisoned. He pulled the tin cup over, blowing on the hot liquid.

"What now?" he asked wearily.

Hwang didn't sip his own tea yet, not wanting to scald his tongue.

"We don't need to get straight to business," he said. *"Tell me how you're faring first, Mr. Williams."*

He'd always done well with languages, attaining Russian fluency in just a year of self-study, and the months had allowed him to refine his English. He would say he was fluent in it now, too, if he hadn't been before. He *might* even say he was more fluent than some of the Americans (with absolutely zero classism involved, of course).

"If I have to eat sorghum slurry again, I might kill myself," the man grumbled.

"I understand," Hwang said, semi-empathetically. *"And we're working on procuring more livestock for you."*

He'd gotten used to having more variety in his diet before the war. Now that they mostly had watery juk every day, with occasional plain rice in between, it did start to wear on his palate. Sometimes he couldn't think too much about the paste-like texture or his mouth would try to reject it. The burdock and other spring namul in SH and Hae's garden were a welcome addition.

"Though I would ask you to consider how it feels for the men that work at this camp to hear you complain," he added. *"When they go home, they have to witness their neighbours and, in some cases, their own family and friends consume the same bland food, or even starve. Then come to work to see that the soldiers of the enemy that caused those conditions eat no matter what."*

Some of them didn't. They had better provisions now, but in the period right after the tactical retreat, and whenever the supply lines got interrupted, a few had taken to refusing the sorghum, claiming it made them depressed. The younger, more middle-class ones, of course, those who had never had to suffer any kind of hardship before Korea. The kind of entitlement Hwang could never share, even in those early days after joining Korea, when some of their rustic meals could make him want to turn his nares up. Sometimes he was tempted to bring in a bowl of SH's soup to show them what

truly awful fare they could be facing.

Luckily, once the American prisoners got hungry enough, they would accept their meals again. Their hunger strike had no personal conviction behind it, only privilege.

Private Robert Williams wasn't one of these. Tall, formerly broad, and brunet, the man had been raised in Oklahoma by farmers who had never quite recovered from the Great Depression, as Hwang had learned in their sessions since he'd been captured at the front in February. He at least had the good grace to look slightly ashamed of his complaint.

"I am sorry about the lack of variety in your meals," Hwang apologized. *"We're doing the best we can, given the circumstances."* With a casual segue, he added, *"Unlike your own leadership."*

Williams hand tightened around the cup. "So it is somethin'?"

"We're at war," Hwang said, finally taking a drink of the tea, stronger than that at their headquarters. *"It always is."*

His job was simple- to educate the American and reactionary POWs on the crimes of the enemy, and make them come to terms with who they'd been fighting for. In their camps, they didn't demand blood petitions or that the enemy fight against repatriation. All they wanted was an apology. For the soldiers to accept what they had been a part of, and write a short essay or give a public apology for it.

It wasn't simply courtesy. There was a pragmatic slant to it, of course- every American soldier that apologized for their grievous crimes was one that was admitting that those crimes *had* been committed, by their own army's hands. Even if they themselves were only doing it out of a belief they would be treated the same way Korean and Chinese prisoners were if they refused, it was one more body testifying against their own country, one more that would hopefully get them closer to justice someday.

Robert Williams had been refusing to apologize. Not out of any malice or even entirely disbelief, as he'd also been refusing to join

the gangs made up of more hardline Americans and rightists, those that had taken to beating up their brothers-in-arms that wrote the essays or attended the classes. The man was simply ignorant. Which was why Hwang was allowed to speak with him, so long as his bodyguards were stationed outside, and one outside observer was inside the small meeting room with them, the camera in the corner keeping a watchful eye at all times.

And that was why Hwang was even more determined to make him crack.

Ahem. In the least threatening way possible, of course.

He'd already informed the man that his allied pilots had come forward to make a broadcast in Beijing confessing to being sent to Korea to conduct biological warfare at the beginning of the month. He wasn't denying it anymore. So Hwang led with something even more topical.

"Your army has been abusing our prisoners on Geoje Island."

"Not exactly a new story," the man replied. He'd also been informed about the earlier mass shootings.

"It is when that abuse is directly tied to extending the war." Hwang pushed his tea slightly away so he could focus on the facts. *"You'll recall that your Command asked for an extension of two weeks to get their list to us, the one they didn't end up delivering. Would you like to know what they* ***actually*** *used those two weeks for?"*

Robert Williams' square jaw feathered. "I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Quite right." Hwang steeped his fingers on the table. *"On April 4th, when the talks were recessed so we could all conduct our revisions, on the Geoje Island camp, your Command unleashed Syngman Rhee and Kuomintang soldiers on our prisoners, alongside the traitors in our armies' ranks."*

The Kuomintang soldiers had been brought over from Taiwan for 'translation purposes,' but the real motive was evident- convincing more Chinese soldiers to defect. Chang Kai-shek needed a larger

army if he was to have any hope of retaking the mainland, after all, though Hwang would still say the odds were low, no matter how many bodies he recruited.

"Your Brigadier-General Francis Dodd intended to produce the lowest number he could to satisfy your country's claim that the majority of our soldiers wished to defect," Hwang continued, with the slightest emphasis on every 'your.' *"He attempted to use these violent elements- akin to your compatriots roaming the camps meting out punishments to the repentant here- to forcibly screen every single one of our soldiers, and coerce from them the claim that they wished to remain in the south, or be sent to Taiwan province. He intended to ship these 'defectors' to mainland camps under the claim that only those on Geoje wished to return.*

The camera whirred in the corner as it consumed its film. Robert Williams sulkily nursed his tea.

"What would you do?" Hwang asked, tipping his head at the man. *"If I announced tomorrow that you were being made to denounce your country, and that you would be shipped to China, never to see your home again?"*

"Fight," Robert Williams muttered, his knuckles tight around his cup.

"Exactly," Hwang said. *"Our soldiers fought. They refused to be screened, and they attempted to refuse to be shipped off. Though many were still forcibly loaded into trucks and sent to the mainland, a few of them managed to escape during the transfers, making their way back here."*

They'd escaped near the beginning of May, and had been trickling in over the past few days. He'd interviewed Privates Ri Hun-si and Yung Chang-il on their treatment in the camps, and they were set to make a press statement soon. Corporal Choi Song-ok had also spoken to him about his escape, along with a few others.

Hwang pulled several photographs from his bag, laying them on the table. Portraits of the men after they'd returned, hollow-cheeked and ragged, giving the American faces to put to the abuse.

“These men fought their way across enemy-held territory to return to the north, starving and exhausted,” Hwang told the man before him. *"Do these sound like the actions of anti-Communists who wish to resist repatriation to you?”*

“No,” Robert Williams admitted.

“So why did your country send them to the mainland camps?” the Korean asked. *“And why were their names not on the list we received?”*

“Just keep talking.”

Dissatisfied, Hwang did. *“Because America was lying. They didn’t wish to defect. He couldn’t get the numbers he wanted from our soldiers, so he turned to simply sending them off anyways. Or getting their answer through violence.”*

He adjusted his glasses. *"I want you to know that what I’m about to tell you came from the testimonies of those escaped prisoners, as well as Chinese POWs that were sent to our coasts as agents- a war crime, if you didn’t know- and were captured or turned themselves in. I interviewed many of them personally. You can believe I’m lying, if you wish. But I don’t believe they were lying to me.”*

They’d been too shaken and furious, and some had still borne the bruises and scars.

“Over those two weeks, when our prisoners resisted the unfair screening and reregistering, they were punished for it,” Hwang said gravely. *“Kuomintang soldiers would surround their brothers with clubs and blades given to them by your army, and demand to know where they wished to go. And if they answered ‘mainland China,’ they were beaten for it, slashed with daggers and deprived of food until they changed their minds. And if they didn’t, they were murdered.”*

He could see that the man believed it. Of course he did. He expected violence and brutality from people ‘like them.’ He just couldn’t see that his country giving them the tools and the chance was just as violent. Or rather, he wouldn’t.

“A corporal I spoke with was kept in a dark compound with nowhere

to sleep," Hwang continued, his hands gripping each other tighter. *"From his location, he could hear men screaming in other buildings, and had witnessed them being crowded into small cages and scalded with steam. Gibbets hung nearby."*

He leaned forward. *"Those gaols were not built without permission. Your Command gave the reactionaries the materials, your Command mobilized the prisoners to build the buildings, and your Command permitted it to happen."*

"You don't know that," Robert Williams shot back.

"Your General Dodd attempted to get the prisoners to sign more petitions to refuse to be repatriated," the province continued, unruffled. *"And when our men refused and rallied against it, your guards opened fire and cut them down. Eighteen more people dead, along with the massacre on April 10th that the International Commission of the Red Cross has confirmed and is investigating right now. When that report is released, I'll make sure to update you on the casualty count."*

Robert Williams' jaw clenched.

"I don't think you entirely understand what it is to be a prisoner of war," Hwang observed. *"Despite your circumstances."* He gestured to the plain, windowless interview room and the village camp beyond it. *"Your walls don't have barbed wire, your hunger comes from lack of resources, not lack of care, and you have an international community that cares about you."*

He kept his tone clinical. *"But you are one. And I could make you disappear."*

The man stiffened, and Hwang's observer cocked his head, intrigued.

"I'm not threatening you," the province assured him. The recorder had no audio function, so there was no need to mince his words. *"But it's the truth. You are deep in enemy territory, surrounded by people whose homes you've destroyed and lives you've upended."*

“I din’t do any of that,” Robert Williams said tightly.

“You did,” Hwang calmly replied. *“You helped your country do it. And regardless of how you feel, if I or one of the camp guards saw it that way, we could eliminate you. It would be easy to claim you escaped, or were even murdered by one of your fellow prisoners for being too cooperative. Your life is completely under our control right now. We decide when you eat and how much, we decide when you get medicine, and we decide whether or not you’re inside when your army comes to drop their bombs. And deciding to* ***stop*** *doing any one of those things would be easy.”*

Hwang sat silently, letting him absorb how helpless he truly was.

“We of course wouldn’t do that,” he acknowledged. *“And in the end, we wouldn’t get away with claiming you escaped. You have an international community that has a vested interest in accusing us of humanitarian crimes, organizations that are paid millions to find or invent proof for those crimes. And you have an incredibly wealthy and influential country that, even though he doesn’t care about you,* ***does*** *care about slandering us.”*

The man's eyes flashed at the idea that America didn’t care for him. Hwang didn’t much care.

“Our soldiers don’t have that,” he said. *“They are just as vulnerable as you, even more so when their translators are the Japanese and men who want them dead. They have barbed wire and an island to trap them. And* ***you*** *have a list.”*

Hwang pulled the copy from his bag, the roughly twelve thousand names of enemy prisoners.

“Your name is on this,” he told one of them, pointing it out halfway down the fifth page. *“Indelible proof that you are in our possession, or were. America has this. If this war were to end, and you were no longer with us, he would demand to know why. The* ***world*** *would."*

He pulled his hands back, clasping them again. *“One hundred thousand of my own people don’t have that.”*

One hundred and thirty-two thousand of their confirmed prisoners and the thirty-eight thousand 'reclassified civilians,' a number whose sharp decrease worried Hwang, subtract the seventy thousand America had said did want to go home. One hundred thousand who may as well be ghosts in international record.

"Whether or not they're our soldiers, or the Chinese, or captured civilians, there are one hundred thousand people whose names, ranks, and hometowns are missing," Hwang said, keeping his tone composed. *"One hundred thousand people that could disappear for whatever reason, and we would never be able to seek an answer for. How many small massacres are committed every week, how many individual tortures and killings take place every day in your camps that aren't reported? You may think that's-"*

For a moment, his tongue almost faltered, the English word evading his grasp as his chest tightened.

"Infeasible," he found, filing the emotion away. *"But the press haven't been allowed on Geoje in months for a reason, and the block only became tighter in April. The truth is that any single one of those prisoners could be eliminated, and we would never even* ***know.*** *And even if we did, we wouldn't be able to prove it."*

The American's brown eyes dipped.

"Our soldiers resisted being erased," Hwang said. *"And they were brutalized for it. Beaten, burned, scalded with hot water, stripped naked and whipped. And this is only the experience of one man. Every single one of my comrades has returned with a report like this, even if it didn't happen to them personally. And your Command lies and says they willingly chose to defect, that a screening was fair and non-coercive.*

"But many weren't even screened at all."

Hwang didn't wait for his answer, slapping another report down in front of him, that of what had taken place on Geoje Island last week. The man's eyes reluctantly skimmed the English words.

"Seventeen compounds on Geoje Island were unable to be screened," Hwang told him. *"Over eighty thousand POWs, near half of our*

combined prisoners and most of Korea's, were unable to be screened."

The Chinese had been moved to Jeju Island camps at that point, and the other Koreans sent to the mainland.

"They refused it," he said firmly. *"They united against your army and refused to be used as political pawns. This number alone is larger than the seventy thousand your negotiators claim are the only ones that want to return north. These are* ***our soldiers,*** *men and women who have endured abuses and want to go back to their homes, yet* ***your*** *army denies that solely to extend this war."*

He was stopping himself from growing heated, but Robert Williams still hunched.

"Every day America lets your countrymen starve in our camps and die at the frontline entirely to ensure that soldiers who want to go home ***can't,"*** the province stressed. *"Do you truly think he's doing that because he fears our prisoners will be in danger when they return here? You've seen how well we try to treat you and your compatriots, even with the blood on your hands. Do you think we would harm our own? Do you think America would care if we did when he allows and orchestrates their murder every day?"*

The man's large, pale hands clenched. "Just because your traitors were doin' that shit doesn't mean it was America's fault."

Hwang reached over, patting the document. *"Read this. All of it."*

It was long, but Hwang was full of patience. He sat still, sipping his cooling tea, as the American grudgingly read through every single page.

He did still wish Korea would come to at least one of these. His passion was a much better device than cold words on a page or Hwang's more restrained explanations. He knew he could at least sway a fair number of Rhee's soldiers from the propaganda they'd been taught.

But his Countryhuman had refused, saying that he shouldn't be around the American prisoners with a dark implication in his eye

that Hwang had chosen not to dissect.

Eventually, Robert Williams set the Geoje report and its newspaper clippings down, his expression stony.

"Just so we're on the same page," Hwang began, pulling the paper back. *"May 7th, our soldiers in one compound took your Brigadier-General Dodd hostage, not to harm him or even to demand better treatment, but to put him on trial for the treatment they'd already received, and the deaths he was directly responsible for. And despite him being in fact responsible, they still dropped the charges, and simply wanted an assurance that none of it would happen again."*

Hwang's chest warmed at the thought. He truly wished he could've seen the sight. Prisoners of war from compounds that hadn't been able to communicate with each other coming together to organize and demand change, even when behind bars (or rather, barbed wire), holding out in the face of overwhelming force for three whole days. He was sure it wouldn't be possible for a less ideologically-awakened army. The Americans had dealt with Nazis and the Japanese fascists, but had never dealt with Communists.

"And despite your army threatening to storm the island and break the prisoners up violently, regardless of what happened to Mr. Dodd because of it- under a complete press blackout, I may add- he gave them that insurance, as did his replacement." Hwang held up three fingers, one by one, to represent the prisoners' accepted demands. The fourth- ending voluntary repatriation- the American camp commanders had no control over. *"To recognize and cooperate with their representatives, put a stop to the forcible screening, and cease the rearming of reactionary elements, as well as the insults, torture, mass shootings, forced blood petitions, and biological weapons tests."*

This last item worried him most of all. There was an obligation to allow POWs to receive and send mail- Hwang himself had been responsible for vetting some letters to send to Panmunjom from the prisoners in their own camps. But he had no reason to believe the Americans would uphold that part of the Geneva Convention when they'd broken so many of its other articles. And even if they did, he found it unlikely their own censors would let news about the biological warfare in when they were denying it so ardently. There

would be new arrivals to the camp that had experienced it, but for seventeen different compounds full of tens of thousands of prisoners to be convinced weapons testing was happening… Hwang didn't think it was likely that it was just paranoia speaking.

"Your commanders pledged to stop these occurrences."

They had tried to deny their crimes wholesale, but Dodd's replacement had ended up confessing to the shootings, at least, as well as to the forced repatriation and rearming of POWs to be used to terrorize other prisoners or sent to fight for America. And they hadn't doubled-down on denying the biological warfare accusations, which, in the eyes of an official agreement, was damning. The same wordplay that had allowed them to say prisoners not on the list wouldn't be repatriated had came back to bite them in the hindquarters.

"Four American army generals, including General James Van Fleet, the commander of your entire Eighth Army, signed off on the agreement," he said. *"Your top leadership admitted that they've been slaughtering unarmed prisoners and sending them to the frontline, and that they hadn't screened them in entirety the way they've been claiming. They admitted that those who* ***were*** *screened had been done so under force, which is only a polite way of saying threats and violence. They as good as confessed to torture and murder."*

Hwang leaned over the table, meeting Robert Williams' eyes. *"So why can't* ***you?"***

"Because I din't do it!" the man burst out, thumping his fist on the table and making Hwang's observer shift closer. "So what if the bigwigs are torturin' and murderin' your gooks? They're always doin' crap like that. *I* din't do *nothin'."*

"You fought for them."

"I don't even want to *be* here," the man snapped.

"Yet you are."

"I din't have a choice! Damn Truman had me conscripted."

SH's words echoed in his head, the ones she'd screamed at that man in Hungnam. *'You're fighting for **nothing** and that was **your choice.**"*

"You did have a choice," Hwang said calmly. *"You could have refused. You wouldn't have received the death penalty, only a prison sentence and a fine. And you still chose to come to Korea. And you chose to kill. You put your own comfort over the lives of the people here."*

Robert Williams was going red in the face. "Look, I din't start this war. The guys up top did. I'm just here to fight it."

*"The men up top couldn't wage it without **you,"*** Hwang said, hands still folded, tighter than before. *"Your bourgeois have started this war for their own purposes, to line their pockets with money you will never see a cent of, and America sent you here to die so he can claim another colony to line his own. And you can curse and shake your fist at the politicians who spend winter in Miami and whose children lounge on beaches while you starve in a prison camp, you can slander and hate them as much as you wish, but that doesn't change the fact that **you** are **letting them do it.**"*

He stood up, leaning over the table with his palms pressed against it.

"They couldn't imprison my people without you," he said, a note of fierceness entering his voice. *"They couldn't arm our traitors or bomb our civilians or murder our prisoners without **you.**"*

Robert Williams opened his mouth, but Hwang spoke over him.

*"You can say that it's not you personally, but that doesn't matter. It is people **like** you, people that, when you return home, you will see on the street, in grocery stores, at the cinema. And if you weren't in this camp right now, it could be **you.**"* Hwang's nails met the rough wood. *"Can you honestly tell me that if you were on Geoje Island that you would have no hand in what happened to the prisoners there, that you would protest or walk away? Or would you pull the trigger and tell yourself you had no choice?"*

The man looked down, the fabric of his thin pants bunching between his fingers.

*“You are responsible for **everything** that happens on Geoje, on Jeju, in the mainland camps,”* Hwang mercilessly delivered. *“Because **your** country couldn’t be here without **you.**”*

Robert Williams wouldn’t meet his eyes. “I want to go back to the compound now.”

Hwang’s teeth clenched, but he leaned back. *“Very well. But remember that that’s something you can do. My people in your camps don’t have the same luxury. Former Generals Francis Dodd and Charles Colson were demoted for admitting to your crimes, and all their agreements were dissolved. Your compatriots stormed their compound and murdered dozens of my comrades. By Dodd’s own admission, they treated him well. And they were broken up violently for it.”*

And returned to the forced screening, no doubt.

Robert Williams headed for the door, opening it.

“I don’t want you to apologize for some sense of personal satisfaction, or because I think you’re single-handedly responsible for every crime your army commits," Hwang said after him, remaining by the chair. *"I want you to take responsibility for your choices. And to understand that you and every other prisoner within these fences has chosen to fight the wrong foe."*

The American closed the door, and his escort took him away, back to the village.

Hwang sighed, seating himself on the chair again, removing his glasses to rub his face.

“You have an admirable temper, comrade,” his observer- Ri Chul-un- said, heading over to end the recording.

“I try.”

Admittedly, he did find himself getting more heated than he’d used to when first assigned to this task. It wasn’t like he wasn’t used

to push-back on education- the Japanese and rich Korean students had enjoyed tormenting him over even simple math questions, trying to convince him his calculations were wrong when they weren't, and there was lots of discussion and debate whenever he discussed Marxism and Socialism with their people, as there should be.

But there was a difference between mean-spirited teasing from children who knew they were wrong, those who were recalcitrant when it came to understanding why capitalism wasn't the pinnacle of societal evolution or why they couldn't simply 'advance Communism faster,' and the Americans in their camps. There was a certain despair that came with trying to make a man understand that other humans were also people, and he should at least feel some remorse for the lives he'd taken, and the war machine he was part of. Or that his own country was part of those 'bigwigs' he hated.

When he'd been employed at the Seoul school, Hwang had often entertained a fantasy (usually while fuming over being told that he had the square root of a sum wrong) that one day he would stand up in front of the Japanese students and implore them to realize that what their parents were doing was wrong, and so was their country. He'd deliver a simple and succinct speech, and they would all cheer and become upstanding members of society that would demand an end to the Occupation. He'd thought the problem was that the they simply didn't know enough to understand how unjust it all was, and if he could just explain it to them, they would.

He supposed it was a good thing that had always remained a fantasy, because now he doubted that he'd even be able to get them to understand that their Korean desk neighbours were fellow humans deserving of rights, let alone that they weren't in any way lesser to them. All he would've gotten was fired. Or worse.

"I don't think I could be a guard here," Ri Chul-un said, the camera safely packed away. "I think it might be a little too tempting to knock some sense into their heads."

Hwang understood the sentiment, but couldn't encourage it. "Then it's a good thing you aren't. We can't treat them the same way,

whether considering moral or political reasons."

This was actually why he had an outside observer who wasn't fluent in English. He hadn't judged it safe for one of the men who held the prisoners' lives in their hands to have to hear constantly that those same prisoners would likely kill him and his entire family, and call it just doing their duty for their country, or that Korea meant as little to them as pencil shavings. The amount of American soldiers that, when confronted with the photographs of the state they'd left Pyongyang in, or the accounts of the massacres they'd committed, had pride tilt the corners of their lips…

It was demoralizing. And demoralized was not a great state for the guard of a prison camp to be in.

"That was our last session today," he said, straightening his glasses. "Would you like a cup of tea before we head out?"

Ri Chul-un rubbed his hands together gladly, and Hwang poured him some from the kettle on the side table.

SH had actually suggested this tactic to him. He'd been bringing boiled water for his interviewees, mindful of the saying that a liar would take drinks more often than needed, but his cousin had said he should bring tea instead. The only beverage the prisoners usually got to drink was water, so by bringing tea, he would give them something to look forward to, and get them to associate the talks with him as a welcome break from routine and a novel comfort. He'd started having some on hand at the lectures now, too.

Hm. SH finally being able to take her communications class and receive media training was going to turn her into a persuasive terror. Hwang was looking forward to it. And with South Gyeongsang…

His hand wrapped tighter around his cup, and he downed the last of his own cold tea as Ri Chul-un sat across from him.

He hoped her and the others were doing well. As well as they could be, anyway.

A knock on the door turned the two men's heads to it, and Hwang called, "Come in."

A camp guard with close-cropped hair peered in. "Comrade General Hwang. One of the Yankee prisoners wants to speak to you. Permission?"

Hwang raised his brows. "Did he say what for?"

"He said he wanted to apologize."

'Hm.' The apologies were usually done in front of other prisoners, but it was possible he wanted to attempt to curry some sort of favour by apologizing directly to Hwang. Or was worried about doing it publicly when the rightist gang might punish him for it.

"Go get him, please," Hwang decided. "Just make sure to check him thoroughly."

The man saluted, slipping out, leaving Hwang to mull over the gang.

They'd taken to calling themselves the 'Circle,' a name with unfortunate and intentional roots. It harkened to the American Kyklos Klan, or Ku Klux Klan, a racist organization from across the ocean. Understandably, most of their members were white and targeted the black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican soldiers. In an interesting twist, they'd also welcomed the Korean reactionaries, giving them an honorary status as 'white.'

Hwang could never entirely fathom the minds of those that willingly joined organizations that saw them as lesser. With women it was understandable, as they'd mostly been conditioned to believe they *were* lesser, and that being dominated was their position in life. And for Americans of non-white ethnicities, he supposed they'd been raised to see white as the ideal, and would naturally want some of that privilege for themselves. But he still couldn't understand attempting to find that privilege from men who would never see them as equals.

It had to be a sort of exceptionalism, viewing oneself as the

exception, the one who would finally transcend the body they'd been born in to become of the oppressing class. Sad, really.

The Rhee soldiers puzzled Hwang more. Korea was monoethnic on a whole, and while it could be said that those who were hardline Rhee supporters would've also been collaborators and idolized the Japanese in the same way the minority Americans idolized the whites, it was frightening if they'd already developed that same mindset towards the Westerners in less than a decade.

Or maybe it was simply that even under the Japanese, they'd still been the norm, and so didn't fully comprehend being seen the same way as the races they also saw as minorities.

Hwang would ask, but even if he was allowed to speak to the unrepentant enemy soldiers, he doubted that line of questioning would be welcome.

He'd also like to ask the Americans what made them decide to see the reactionary Koreans as at least worthy of allying with when their own countrymen weren't good enough. It was still evident that they didn't see them as equals, calling them 'gooks' and 'zipperheads' (a term whose origin made Hwang grit his teeth), but they did allow them to join in their persecution.

Hmmm. Perhaps it was simply that on a whole, the non-white Americans and Puerto Ricans were willing to apologize and behave, just like many of the conscripted 'NDA' soldiers. And since that was enough for them to be considered hardline Communists by the right-wing zealots, perhaps that hatred of Communism simply crossed racial lines.

'Hatred, the unifying force of humankind.'

It was a grim thought, one he didn't entirely believe. But it did sound suitably dramatic.

Soon, the door opened and a prisoner stepped in. Hwang stood, ready to greet him, and froze.

The man was of middling years, his straw-coloured hair shaved

almost flat to his skull, and he looked up from under his deep-set lids with weary blue eyes. He wasn't short or tall, but he was thin, with gaunt cheeks. If Hwang had been told to picture the average American POW, he would have pictured him in his thin cotton pants and white workshirt. The man was exceedingly average.

But Hwang recognized him. It was the soldier from Hungnam, the one SH had almost killed. The one he'd been trying *very* hard to avoid whenever he came to this camp on the Raktong.

He found his voice after a moment, clearing his throat. *"Hello. Take a seat."*

Ri Chul-un got up, reaching for the camera case. Hwang gave a small shake of his head.

There was a good chance this could be an encounter he wanted no proof of, even without audio. He actually considered sending the man away altogether, but decided not to raise suspicions.

The American prisoner silently came in, sitting at the vacated chair. Hwang sat back down, biting his tongue on offering tea. Best not to draw this out.

"Can I get your name?" he asked, even though he already knew.

"Private John Davis," the man replied, subdued.

'2nd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division,' Hwang finished in his head.

"What did you want to discuss, Mr. Davis?"

The man was quiet, looking down at his lap. Hwang shifted slightly, prepared to loudly interrupt if he tried to say anything about SH. He tensed as he spoke.

"Boys in Compound 2 are planning on beating up the man who apologized yesterday." He didn't meet his eyes as he said it. "The negro, Edwards. They're planning on getting him when they go on honey-bucket detail."

Hwang blinked, momentarily taken aback. *“Do you have names?”* he managed after a second.

John Davis gave them- eight men from the Circle- and the Korean quickly wrote them down on the backside of a telegraph paper from his bag.

“I’ll make sure they’re not put on any details with non-white prisoners or those who have apologized,” he said when he was finished, then awkwardly added, *“Thank you for informing me of this.”*

The man nodded, but didn't immediately get up. Hwang side-eyed Ri Chul-un, drinking his tea in the corner.

Should he say something? He felt like he should take responsibility for his cousin, but he knew he shouldn’t apologize for her when she didn’t regret it. In truth, the man didn’t entirely *deserve* an apology.

‘I wasn’t one of the bombers! I was just following orders!’

He’d wished to deny his own responsibility, just as Robert Williams had, even with the wreckage of Hungnam staring him in the face. He had apologized, yes, once with tears streaming down his face, and apparently again in front of his fellow prisoners. But would he have if he hadn’t had SH in front of him, threatening to execute him, or if he hadn’t been afraid that Hwang might one day try to silence him? Would he have ever looked at what the army he was part of had wrought on their city and truly felt sorry for it? Would he ever have understood that the people throwing rocks and screaming at him in the streets were people who had every right and more to do that?

Would Hwang have stopped SH from killing him if it hadn’t been for publicity considerations?

He wasn’t going to apologize. Regardless of his motivations, he *had* taken responsibility for his cousin by stopping her. Those only retaliating weren’t those who had the burden of feeling sorry.

So he kept his hands clasped on the table. *“Was there anything else?”*

The man's brow lowered as he looked down at his lap. "That woman, the Statehuman."

Hwang stiffened, mouth too dry to correct him. *"Yes?"*

He looked up from under his pale eyelashes, his blue eyes ashamed. Haunted, one could say. "Can you tell her I'm sorry?"

Hwang paused. He'd forgotten that was what the guard had said, that a prisoner wanted to apologize.

After a moment, he nodded wordlessly.

John Davis got to his feet, turning and trudging out, his back bent as if under a great weight.

Hwang stared after him, relieved.

"What was that about?" Ri Chul-un asked.

"He was giving me a tip," he answered, picking up his case. "Come, I need to get some names to the guards."

He didn't entirely know how to feel about the man's apology. It did warm his heart that the working-class Americans were capable of change, and realizing that they were wrong. He was sure Robert Williams would soon learn his lesson as well.

But there was still a more cynical part of him that asked why being able to see his people as equals, and that destroying them and their home was wrong, had to be a lesson at all.

—

"A moment, if you please, SH."

SH reluctantly turned around to face Hwang before she could escape into the shelter for the night.

"Do you need help going through the names?" she beat him to saying.

Her cousin had the December, January, and April prisoner lists spread over the log seats around him, trying to cross-reference them with their operations reports and the names Chagang had brought tonight to see if they'd been cut out of the first one, or if they might be one of the missing forty-four thousand. Or just someone captured since the December list had been made.

America had been dropping prisoners from the camps over the north from helicopters, and bringing them in from the sea on boats, trying to use them as secret agents, like he had with the reactionaries from the youth groups. Unfortunately for him, people who had been trapped in camps and treated like animals weren't as loyal as ones who had made the choice to betray their nation. Dozens of them had defected, turning themselves in to the closest friendly unit.

And because of that, they were fully aware that some of those 'missing names' no longer on the April list were actually the men sent in as agents. Which just made it even more likely that some of the forty-four thousand had been, and could explain why the number had shrank.

'Along with the massacres.'

SH's nails dug into her palms as Hwang said, "No, I've got it handled." He opened his mouth, but again, SH struck faster.

"Anyone we know?" She snatched the telegram strip from his hand.

She'd only been trying to stall him, but as her eyes flicked over the five individuals the Yankees had air-dropped in this time, her eyes flew open.

"Yun Jin-tae?"

"SH, please, I'm not-"

"Hwang, I'm being serious." She read his rank and hometown information again, matching them. "These people were caught alive?"

“They turned themselves in,” Hwang corrected, leaning over the paper like he was trying to see what she did.

“Where are they?”

“Being held for questioning and interviewed on their experiences.” Not finding what had gotten her pulse up, he leaned back, brows furrowed. “Can I ask what this is about?”

SH excitedly told him, and his shoulders relaxed.

“Ah,” he said, rubbing his thin chest. “Some good news for once.”

“Very good news.” SH pressed the telegram to her breast.

She couldn’t do anything right now. If the soldiers were anything like the others, they’d be being held until they were sure they weren’t double-agents and were recovered from the Yankees' abuse. But once they were…

She smiled, smoothing the paper out and handing it back to Hwang.

“In celebration of this good news, can I perhaps get a word out?” he ventured.

SH sighed, but felt light enough to give in. “If it’s nothing to do with North Hamgyong, then yes.”

She had it down to an art. She only had to ignore one or two jabs before he’d go stomping off inside the bunker with his supper. Which really just proved her point that the only reason he tolerated being around her was to try and hurt her.

Anyway! She was done listening to Kangwon or anyone else that tried to bring him up. She’d let him lodge like a loose paintbrush bristle in her mind for too long. She was done worrying about how he was feeling or what he thought about her. If he was out of sight, then she preferred he be out of mind, too. Her life was *much* more peaceful that way.

Hwang didn’t look entirely happy about that, but he still said, “It

isn't about him. It's some more good news, I hope. It's at least neutral news."

"Go ahead then."

"I was at one of the POW camps earlier," he began. "The one with the man… from Hungnam."

SH ran her brush over the wall. "Oh?"

"He spoke to me. He took the initiative," he added. "He wanted me to tell you he was sorry."

Shattered pottery, a soot-stained elementary school placard, the Hungnam People's Factory with its stone and steel entails strewn across the city's edge, the place her people had sweated and laughed and invented ways to feed their country reduced to a hollow-eyed corpse. Rows upon rows of white corpse cloths, a sea of them, and filthy, starving hands grasping hers with desperation, begging her to pull them out of it all, even though she was just as helpless as them.

Her lips thinned. "'Sorry' doesn't fix anything."

The Yank's words didn't rebuild her city or bring her people back to life, just like South's hadn't given Korea two eyes again.

Even if North Hamgyong had apologized to her, or if she'd apologized to him, it wouldn't have fixed anything. It never could have.

"I know," Hwang said quietly. "But at least it shows they can change."

"I don't care if they change." SH realized her fingers were digging into the scar on her chest, and pinned her nails to her palm instead. "That doesn't fix anything either."

"No," her cousin admitted. "But it can make things better in the future."

For who? The Yankee women that served their husbands a last meal before they sent them off to rape and murder Korean women,

and who would accept them back into their lives and bodies after? The Yankee workers whose salaries got to go up as the factory owners grew fat over bombing SH's own workers, content to slave away pumping out the bombs and ammunition used to kill her people so long as they had their breads and circuses? The subjugated Yankee races who were so desperate to be like their masters that they would slaughter other oppressed people's across the sea just to try and get a scrap of favour from them?

SH didn't *want* life to get better for them. Not after what they'd done. She wanted them to die.

"Mm," she said to Hwang, smiling. "I guess."

At least it meant the Yankee man might keep his mouth shut about her.

She thought her cousin might push back at her noncommittal response. He just dipped his head, pushing his glasses up. There was a sad dimple to his lips.

"You work on the lists," SH decided. "I'll take your watch."

Hwang's pencil-stroke brows crinkled. "Are you sure? You'll have to stand two in a row then."

Chagang had insisted on getting a slot tonight, so it still wouldn't be that long. And she'd been planning on staying awake to paint the wall anyway.

"That's better than us getting invaded because you held up a finger and said 'One more page,' to invading Yankees," she joked, and her cousin coughed lightly.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

SH took up her place by the door, gazing out into the midnight blue forest, trying to focus on the good news she'd discovered.

She had to make it special. Like Hwang had said, they had good news 'for once.' And for civilians there was even less. Someone from Hamhung didn't celebrate hearing a county in Hwanghae had

gotten planting done on time as much as she did when their own bowl was empty at night. Just like she used posters and speeches to turn that far-away victory into a personal one for them, she needed to turn this pearl of good news into medicine.

But as she thought about the person she was going to deliver it to, and what she'd had to go through, her thoughts curdled again.

She hoped that Yank didn't feel better. She didn't like to think that by apologizing to Hwang in her place, he'd absolved himself of any guilt she'd managed to force into him. He *deserved* to feel guilty, he deserved to see what he'd done to Korea every time he closed his eyes, the tears running down the faces of the women as they mourned their husbands, the burning eyes of the orphaned children as he was paraded before them, and the hatred in their voices as they called for his death. He deserved to remember what it felt like to be small and helpless with his life completely in her control, the way all of her people's lives were under his country's. She hoped her funeral keen would echo in his hollow skull forever, and that even when he returned to his degenerate country and his slavish wife, he would find no rest.

She hoped it *hurt*.

Title inspired by Geoje Unscreened by Alan Winnington. I know he was kicking his heels when he came up with that.

For a refresher on the full Geoje Island event, it's in the note at the end of Bird On A Tether in the first book. If you recall it, and how one America guy didn't get captured with Dodd because he clung to the post and refused to let go, the reason he was on guard was because he'd been captured before. The KPA prisoners had taken him, demanded he drink a bowl of the bean soup they were getting, and he hated it so much he couldn't. He was released because he promised to bring the rice rations back. That is so funny to me. Guy clinging to a gate with his nails dug in 'I'M NOT GOING TO DRINK THE SOUP AGAIN, YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!' But not funnily, the prisoner grabbing him seems to have been killed.
Also on the subject of the air-dropped agents, one of them (Chinese) refused to jump out of the plane first, so he jumped

last instead. And before he jumped, he threw a grenade back into the helicopter, making it crash. Him and the American handler parachuted down, and he immediately grabbed him and turned them in to the nearest PVA unit. Icon.

ALSO I FINALLY FOUND IT. Okay, listen to this. Read this. You get it.

'After about an hour, the guards came and took me to the commandant's office. The commandant was rather a handsome man, wearing North Korean Army blue breeches and black boots, but a white shirt and a civilian coat. He needed a shave badly, and had the only green eyes I've ever seen in a Korean. Somehow they reminded me of a tiger's eyes. He was friendly and apologetic for having put me in a cell.'

Intervening paragraphs, etcetera.

'He said, 'Well, now you can see how your forces have been driven back. So if you were released, would you continue to fight us?' I said, 'Yes, that's what I want to do. That's why I've been trying to get back, so I could fight again. I know I can do better next time, and kill more of you for the men we lose.' He didn't care for that. Finally he said, 'General, you're a brave man, but you're very ignorant politically.'

That ended the political part of the discussion, but he couldn't resist a little something personal. He said, 'I've seen you before, general, even if you don't remember me. I was a political prisoner right in this same prison when you inspected it as military governor. But I'm going to treat you better than you treated me.''

What do you think this is? Fanfiction I have written where a heavy-handedly written American soldier has an enemies-to-lovers relationship with a KPA army general? Wrong. This is General William F. Dean's personal account of his time in KPA captivity. He was taken in Taejon in 1950 and stayed until the end of the war. Putting aside his 'I want to kill more of you because you killed us,' (despite the US literally starting this and not having to be there) WHY DID HE DESCRIBE THE KPA

COMMANDANT LIKE THAT. I am not insane, right?? You see it???? Even in the intervening paragraphs, he describes another guy and he doesn't do it the same way. It's more offhanded 'He needed a shave even more badly.' This is exactly what I would write if it was doing an enemies-to-lovers tale where the Yankee eventually learned the propaganda he'd been fed was false, and through the power of love became an anti-Imperialist and defected to the DPRK to be with his gay lover.

Comrades, when this is over should I rewrite the entire story from William F. Dean's point of view as he falls in love with the KPA commandant and unlearns his wicked ways? Can I be sued for that by his descendants??

A Woman Is A Gardener

"So, do we get to know where we're going yet?"

"Nope!" SH said cheerily. "But isn't it lovely out today?"

The air was fresh and- out here in South Pyongan's countryside- almost clean, only occasionally tainting her 'nose' with the smell of smoke when the wind shifted. Aside from that, the breeze was refreshing, a real taste of pure spring, finally. The sky above was clear, the same shade of blue as the delicate petals of a dayflower, and had been since the sun rose. The scuds of white clouds didn't mar it, instead picturesquely drifting across the surface like soap suds on water, fitting for what she had planned.

It was so nice she could almost ignore the circling specks of the dogfight over the Chongchon River to the north, even if the burning in her skin was more difficult to.

"It is," Ru Chun-yeon said, puffing a little as she strove to keep up with the more fit soldier women. "But I'd like to know what I'm missing a work day for."

"You're not," SH said confidently. "Your shift at the factory is fully-staffed."

By Chagang. Was it entirely legal? Technically, yes- SH had heavy involvement with light industry and her old friend from the KPRA was a manager at the clothing factory near Hamhung. The Provincehuman had every right to take her aside for a consultation. She'd just have to make sure they talked about clothing production at some point.

"I'd like to know what I'm missing blowing traitors up for," Pak Gyuri grumbled. Even though she was on leave, she was still dressed in her uniform.

SH hadn't kidnapped her, even if she was acting like it. She'd tried

to recruit Choe Kang-ok from the Second Corps for this ‘operation,’ since Kangwon had asked her to look after their old comrade's daughter where she could, but the woman had been stubborn about remaining at the front, even though her unit had earned a fifteen-day leave from shooting down three enemy planes in three months. SH couldn’t fault that commitment, so she hadn’t pushed too hard.

But her commander- Ryang Myeong-ae- had recommended someone who had taken the leave. So SH had picked Pak Gyuri up from Icheon in Kangwon province in the middle of last night. That wasn’t kidnapping. She just hadn’t told her where she was taking her. Still.

Her other guests were Hae and South Pyongan, obviously, the Liaos, Pak Yun-hui (who SH had thought might explode when she’d invited her), Kim Sun-ja- one of the young women China would entertain at the river, who’d tagged along with the Chinese women, possibly because of him- and Yun Jin-suk, who was the reason she’d put this together in the first place. No guards, with express permission from Korea and a lot of convincing of the men. Just women who could use a break, though really she could say that about anyone in Korea right now.

She’d asked Kim Yong-hwan and An Il-rae if they wanted to come, but they were understandably busy in the hospitals. She had also considered bringing Zhao Jingjing, since this was the last full month she would be in Korea, but…

She wanted to have a nice day, not spend time wondering about what the woman might or might not know.

“One thing about SH- if she doesn’t want to talk about something, we’re not talking about it,” South Pyongan said, strolling along with her hands in her uniform pockets.

SH had tried to get her to wear casual clothes, until she remembered that they didn’t actually have any right now. That had dashed her hopes, too. It didn’t feel right to borrow a choson-ot or any nice clothing from the theatre, a call that had been the right one, since everyone was covered in dust from the ride halfway to their destination. Only Yun-hui and Sun-ja were in dresses, a blue

and white choson-ot with red and gold ribbons in her long braid for the Song and Dance Ensemble woman, and a simple white jeogori and black skirts for the young civilian.

But at least she had managed to sway South Pyongan out of wearing her protective gear. She'd gotten her to stick with just the face mask and emergency gloves.

"We don't need to talk about it," she said to her cousin. "We're almost there."

"But ah want to know *now,"* Hae whined, shifting Jin-suk on her back. SH hadn't wanted to wear the girl out, so her and her cousins had been taking turns carrying her from the highway.

"Me too," Jin-suk piped up, tilting her head around at the fields around them, trying to see anything that looked interesting. There was only the river running beside them, and Kangso Town far across it.

"Patience is a virtue," Chun-yeon said dryly.

"Why don't we talk to pass the time?" SH suggested, forging on down the riverbank.

The Korean provinces knew Ru Chun-yeon from their Occupation days, South Pyongan and Hae knew Pak Gyuri and Yun-hui from the POW camp breakout, and Liaoxi and Liaotung had met the latter before at the theatre, but aside from the two that had been in the camp together, none of the human women were familiar. They'd figured out how to address each other in the truck, but some of them had been too awkward to talk, crammed in with all the soldier men. SH could tell they made Jin-suk nervous, even if they were theirs.

"Did you hear they ditched that Yankee guy?" Gyuri- who had given the women near her age permission to use her first name- asked. "Ridge-whatever got fired."

"Yeah, they've got some new guy in," South Pyongan said. "Our briefing said he sucked when he went up against the Germans. And

get this- his name's Mark Clark. Mark. Clark."

"I think it's a fine name," Liaoxi said in Korean. "I approve of his parents' game."

"It's like those parents that name their sons 'Go-hwan.'"

The Chinese women tilted their heads, hearing the name as just a name, and Sun-ja did, too.

"Are those like… actually the same at all?"

"Totally are," South Pyongan dismissed.

"The Yankees got a new negotiatin' guy, too," Hae chirped, skipping as much as she could with Jin-suk on her back. "That stupid awful yellow-belly quit yesterday. Now they've got a new one."

Her face darkened, just enough that SH caught it.

Turner Joy had spent his last days screaming that they had to accept his ultimatum about the prisoners, and that wanting to know the full story about what happened on Geoje and get justice for it was propaganda, then quit. The new man was named Harrison. The same last name Hae had said Yankees were using in Sincheon. The Yanks were insisting he hadn't been there, but even if it hadn't been him, the name felt like an intentional slight.

Ridgway getting replaced felt intentional, too, like America was getting rid of everyone he could say had been 'in charge' when the camp massacres had taken place. Korea had said he was saying he would let correspondents in soon, and invite foreigners to visit. SH just knew he was 'prettying the place up' right now to pretend he'd never done anything, wiping the slate clean without even a useless apology, like all the men that had carried out the crimes weren't still 'guarding' the camps, like the root of the corruption had been burned out when it hadn't because *he* was still *here*.

"Comrade SH?" Yun-hui said from behind her, and the province realized she'd outpaced them all.

She slowed herself, taking a deep breath, painting clear blue water over the wall. Today was for relaxation, for getting away from stress and forgetting America and her brother existed. And for helping the others relax, too.

"No more war talk," she said cheerfully. "We're on vacation."

"Aw." Gyuri pouted. "I was still hoping we were going to take out reactionaries or something."

"With a sixteen-year old?" Chun-yeon asked skeptically.

"Jin-suk is fourteen," SH corrected. The year turning had changed her traditional age from fifteen to sixteen, but her physical appearance hadn't changed at all. "I don't think we should count years the old way."

"I'll be fifteen in two days," the girl said shyly.

Sun-ja perked up. "Eh? This is like a celebration then."

It made a good excuse, anyway, when SH had told her father she wanted to take her for the day.

"Happy birthday, meimei," Liaotung said, nudging her side.

The girl flushed at the attention, hiding her head behind Hae's.

"Fourteen is definitely still old enough to hunt reactionaries," Gyuri pointed out. "Never too young to learn how to kill."

"I've literally always said that," South Pyongan said, snapping her fingers. "I *knew* I liked this chick."

Gyuri flashed her a sharp-toothed grin, then said to Chun-yeon, "Comrade Ru should know that."

The older woman sighed. "Children had to fight against Japan, yes. And they still have to fight in the occupied regions. But that's not really the ideal. Any chance for a child to live in peace should be taken."

SH nodded. “Children should only fight when they have to.”

“Comrade SH has been teaching me how to shoot a gun,” Jin-suk volunteered, peering over Hae. “And how to use a knife.”

SH saw Chun-yeon give her a side-eye.

“But they need to know how to fight so they *can* if they have to,” she clarified.

If Jin-suk had the training some of the children that had fought against the Japanese or the Yankees and their puppets did, she might not have been- What had happened to her might not have happened. And she still couldn’t live in peace, not with the planes and the reactionaries. At least now she had a very large knife to keep her safe when her father was working.

The women chatted as they passed through the farmlands. South Pyongan took Jin-suk, jogging in circles around them just to show off. SH was relieved to see that they were all getting along well, including the Liaos.

She’d been a little worried about bringing them, both for security concerns and because they wouldn’t be able to join in, since they couldn’t take off their clothes. They were actually the only ones who knew where they were going, because she had wanted them to be able to choose not to, in case they would feel left out.

But they’d accepted her invitation, and China had apparently decided it was safe enough. And their full-body coverage wasn’t stopping the other women from getting comfortable with them.

“Hey, SH?” South Pyongan asked as they left the river, marching across the fields. “Just a question- why does this ‘vacation’ feel like we’re hiking across Korea to get away from the Japs again?”

“I really did think I’d put my walking days behind me,” Chun-yeon huffed.

“We’re almost there,” SH promised.

She felt giddy. The place they were headed didn’t stick out from

the land at all, so it got to stay a surprise until they were almost right on top of it. When they were, Sun-ja let out a gasp.

"No way!"

A pool lay in the middle of the Kangso plains, surrounded by a few scraggly poplars. It was a pure, beautiful blue. But instead of being the colour of dayflowers, it was that of polished turquoise, actually only a few tints off from the skin under Liaotung's mask. The waters bubbled peacefully, unbothered by the craters in the nearby fields.

"Jja-jan!" SH spread her arms, beaming. "Mineral spring!"

South Pyongan smacked the heel of her hand into her forehead. "Duh. What else is out here?"

Hae bounced excitedly. "Oh, it's this place!"

SH smiled proudly, glad to have surprised her cousins, even though they'd visited before during the Occupation.

Chun-yeon placed a hand over her heart, like she didn't dare hope. "Does this mean…?"

SH nodded, opening the pack she'd brought with her up, coming out with two items. She held them up to the sky triumphantly- a jar of ointment and a bar of soap.

"A bath," Chun-yeon moaned, tilting her head back.

SH had known she'd appreciate this. The two of them had been bath comrades during the Secret Camp days, and the woman would always complain when they couldn't bathe in the river when it was too cold (for her, not SH) or the camp was on alert. It had been her dream to visit a bathhouse.

They had bathhouses now, but they couldn't waste supplies to build too many, and most of them were for the schools and army units. Factories had them, too, but they usually couldn't be built underground as easily. And buildings near Hamhung never lasted very long.

“Eh? Soap?” Sun-ja’s honey-coloured eyes widened. “Really?”

They were trying to get household goods out to keep people’s living standards up, but they were more focused on things like salt and soy sauce, and a lot of the soap was low-quality. Plus it wasn’t really a *necessity,* especially when disinfecting chemicals were readily provided, so most families would save their money for something else.

Yun-hui’s eyes were even wider. “A bath? Together? I mean, all of us?” she quickly added.

“SH strikes again!” South Pyongan threw her arms around her. “Sorry Hae, she’s my favourite cousin now.”

“Mine too!” Hae joined the hug.

Jin-suk peered curiously at the pale ivory bar. “I’ve never used soap before.”

“It makes you smell nice,” Liaotung said.

“If you’re not using the kind that’s mostly fat,” Liaoxi added. “Avoid that.”

“This is jasmine and osmanthus,” SH said, holding it out for Jin-suk.

She sniffed it like a wary cat, and blinked. “This one smells good,” she declared.

“I would assume so.” Liaoxi arched a brow at SH from under her scarf. “From whom you got this, I think I know.”

“Oh, is this the stuff-? Ah mean, never mind.” Hae pursed her lips, turning her head away from Chun-yeon’s curious look.

SH nodded to both of the province women. The soap and ointment were both part of China’s latest care package. She knew he’d been bringing in soap for himself ever since the bathing tub was built (he usually smelled faintly floral), but he’d got extra this time. He must have heard one of South Pyongan’s many complaints about not

having it.

That was… a little thoughtful, actually.

"I don't really care about that stuff, but what are we waiting for?" Gyuri demanded. "Water!"

"Oi! Wait!"

They all spun to South Pyongan.

"Yes?" SH asked.

Her cousin thrust a finger in the air. "Health and safety check!"

SH sighed. "I came here yesterday to make sure the spring was clean."

"Don't care, Yanks strike at night. You heard about those clams."

"Clams?" Chun-yeon asked, brows furrowing.

Hae wrapped her arms around her stomach.

It was her job to spread the news of the crimes America and his puppets had committed, so while South Pyongan prowled around the spring, looking around rocks and in the water for bugs or anything else, SH explained.

On the 16th, a woman in Taedong County, just a few ri northwest of here, had found clams on a hillside. She'd brought them home to make a meal for her husband, and by the next day, they were both dead. Kangwon had been sent to investigate, and he said it looked like cholera. The lab results had confirmed it.

More clams had been found in the area, saltwater ones found ri inland. It seemed strange to SH that the Yankees would commit so heavily to hoping that people would eat raw clams they found in the wild, but Kangwon had said they were near a pumping station that took water from reservoirs and springs like this for the locals. They'd been aiming for these.

As the infected saltwater clams died, they would breed more bacteria. And when they went, it would be released into the water, drawn up through the station, and distributed to their people.

“That’s awful,” Yun-hui murmured with a shudder.

It was. And it wasn't the only try. Kangwon had told them that dead fish infected with cholera had been found in Pyongwon County back in February, scattered in the mountains by the reservoir, likely on accident.

He hadn't told them that before. It made SH wonder how much her cousin had to deal with that they never even heard about.

“Does that mean we can’t drink water anymore?” Jin-suk asked, eyeing the spring fearfully.

“Just keep boiling it well,” SH soothed, painting a pot of simmering stew on the wall. A pale hand stuck out of it.

“The Yankees are bastards, but what idiot eats a raw clam they found on a random hill?” Gyuri complained.

SH went to scold her, but Hae beat her to it.

“People get hungry,” she said, squeezing herself tighter. “It makes ‘em do stupid stuff.”

“Mm, you’re getting fed fairly well at the front,” Chun-yeon said grimly. “Don’t forget that.”

Gyuri sobered a bit. “Right. Sorry.”

SH rubbed Hae’s shoulder comfortingly.

She wondered if the clams her cousin had eaten had been a test. Had America somehow learned she’d died from them? No one should have known she was in the hospital, but even her absence would be reported by any spies.

The dark thing stirred as she heard the Yankee calling Hae ‘the little one’ in her head, asking what she’d do to keep him from her.

She would do anything to see Korea smash *him* like a clam.

"Okay, clean," South Pyongan announced, dusting her hands off as she walked over. "But I found a beetle under a rock."

"Likely place for it to be," Liaotung noted.

"Killed it anyway. Now- what are we waiting for? Bathtime!"

With a speed SH couldn't hope to fend off, her cousin snatched the soap out of her hand, dropped her guns, stripped naked, and threw herself into the spring, wailing a battle cry.

Sun-ja yelped as water plumed up in her wake, then again as Gyuri shouted, *"Ura!"* and threw herself in after.

The other women quickly took their clothes off before they could any more wet, rightfully sensing South Pyongan's evil intentions. They were already soaked when they got in, courtesy of her deadly accurate splashes.

"Fuck yeah!" her cousin cheered, hitting Hae with a wave of crystal-clear water.

"Language," SH called, putting her hands over Jin-suk's ears. "There's a child here."

"I don't mind," the girl said. "My brother used to swear all the time."

She looked down, and SH moved her hand to her shoulder.

"I'm sure you'll see him again soon."

Jin-suk nodded. But she didn't look like she believed it.

SH bit her tongue. "Come on, let's get in."

The girl clasped her hands, anxiety filling her face. "Do I… have to take my clothes off?"

SH's heart panged. "Not if you don't want to."

Jin-suk's knuckles whitened. "It left… stripes on me."

The thing growled, remembering the way her stomach had unnaturally distended, splitting the pale skin. Now that the girl had more colour, the scars would be even more noticeable.

"How about we both wear our shifts?" SH suggested, painting tiny bones and ashes over the wall. "That way you won't be the odd one out."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not."

SH had been planning on it anyways. She'd gotten permission from Korea for this, since he didn't want their people seeing too much of their burns, but even though he had said the morale the women would get from this was an acceptable trade, she still felt… uneasy.

Truthfully, as much as she liked Ru Chun-yeon, she'd never felt comfortable disrobing entirely for their baths, usually staying in her underclothes, then bathing properly alone. And she tried to keep them on when changing at the theatre. It wasn't a problem around her female cousins, but with their people…

SH didn't like showing them her body. She didn't like the idea that anyone in a crowd, even someone she was friends with, could look up at her as she vowed to defend their country and implored them to keep fighting or rebuild, or to take their future in their own hands, and know what she looked like under her uniform.

So she stayed in her white shift and grey military briefs (the one thing she'd admit she loved about Western fashion coming to Korea- the underwear). She took a peek at Jin-suk as she took off her blouse.

Her hands were steady on the buttons.

SH relaxed, smiling at the girl as she turned around, now in her shift and cloth underwear. The province held out her hand, and led her carefully into the spring.

The girl gasped as it hit her legs. Even in the warm spring sun, the water that came bubbling up from the depths of the earth was frigid. SH sighed as she settled down into it, her legs numbing.

She had always wanted to bathe here, but they could never stop in the plains too long during the Occupation. And she'd been too busy these last few years to take the time. The water felt just as good as expected, far more cleansing than the boiled river water in their tub.

It wasn't too deep. On the rocky edge where SH was sitting, it only came up to her chest. She arranged her shift around her, making sure it didn't float up from her stomach in the bubbling water.

Jin-suk's teeth chattered as she wrapped her arms around herself.

"Cold?" Chun-yeon asked sympathetically, and she nodded.

"Cold water makes you feel cleaner," Hae declared. "It's more pure."

She beamed at SH, who dipped her head.

"This one *would* agree with that," Chun-yeon giggled. "I remember that one time you went swimming in Chon Lake in winter. Comrade Kim Yong-hwan almost had a fit."

Kangwon had, too. But SH had needed to be clean.

She had actually paid for that one. There was a blizzard on the way down the mountain, and she'd almost frozen. She had spent the night huddled in Kim Jong-suk's cabin while the woman rubbed her shoulders.

SH's heart squeezed in her chest. There was almost nothing she wouldn't give to have been able to invite her today.

'No sad thoughts.' She brushed them away.

Sun-ja was happily rubbing water over her arms. "Aren't the eonnis coming in?" she asked, looking over at Liaoxi and Liaotung on the edge of the pool.

“I’m afraid of water,” the teal woman said with a mock shudder. She actually sounded like she meant it, even though SH knew she had no problem in the washing tub.

“And I don’t want my sister to feel alone in her fright,” Liaoxi said. “Rest assured, it was enough to receive an invite.”

She turned her head to give SH a friendly squint that the others couldn’t see past her scarf.

“You’ve shared enough bitters with us,” she said, squinting back. “You should get to share the sweets, too.”

“Are eonni and eonni bodyguards like Comrade Mao?” Sun-ja asked curiously.

Liaoxi gave an embarrassed laugh as SH’s look turned dry, though she couldn’t deny ‘Comrade Mao’ being Korea’s bodyguard when that was the cover story he liked to tell people.

“We’re Comrade Mao’s bodyguards,” Liaotung said. “To keep him safe from threats.”

Her and her sister exchanged glances. SH couldn’t help but think they might be implying to each other that *Korea* was the threat. She also couldn’t help but agree with them a tiny bit, even though she knew he hadn’t shot him. China was awake now, so surely he would have complained if he had. Surely.

Yun-hui floated over to SH’s side, looking down at the water in surprise as she ran a hand through it. “Does this feel like it’s tingling to you, too?”

“Ayuh!” Hae said excitedly. “It’s bubbly water!”

“It’s carbonated,” SH explained more clearly. “It’s something about how the water reacts with the minerals and gases in it.”

Hwang had explained it all, but she wasn’t confident enough to repeat it in more detail. At some point he’d started talking about how all of the minerals were discovered in the first place, and Korea had made him shut up.

“It’s special healin’ water,” Hae proclaimed. “The Gen’ral said so when he came to visit.”

Yun-hui perked up. “The General visited here?”

Hae nodded so fast she sent water spraying. “He got Pyo, Pyobu, and a bunch’a comrades to find more springs an’ build rest houses around here. He says we’re goin’ to start sellin’ the water someday so everyone can drink it.”

“Yeah, he basically said South Pyongan province has the best water ever,” South Pyongan said casually, smoothing a hand across her shiny azure head. “No big deal.”

Jin-suk looked alarmed. “Are we going to get in trouble for swimming in it?”

“It’s fine,” SH soothed. “Spring water is always moving, so it’s always fresh. You can even try a sip now, if you want.”

“Before we get it too soupy,” South Pyongan added, mischievously flicking water at Liaotung, who started looking for rocks.

Jin-suk was cautious, but she half-floated over to the side of the spring where no one was to scoop some of the water up, sipping it from her cupped hands.

Her pine nut-coloured eyes flew open. “It’s fizzy!” Her nose wrinkled. “And… sort of salty? It’s weird, but it tastes good. I think.”

“I want to try.” Gyuri plunged her head underwater, then came up with her cheeks bulging, swallowing. “Oh yeah. Those’re minerals. It’s sort of like the water from the Kumgang springs, but if it was trying to stop you from swallowing it.”

The other human women tried some, and SH had a sip, too. She enjoyed the dense mineral taste, and how cold it felt on her to tongue.

Hae looked longingly at the water, but there wasn’t any assurance that could convince her it was okay to drink when Korea had told

her to never drink unboiled water. South Pyongan, too, gazed wistfully at it, her germ issues stopping her.

SH caught Liaoxi and Liaotung looking at the blue water curiously, but they couldn't even take off their masks to try some. But the Korean province didn't feel bad about that- she'd made sure to think ahead for later.

"Okay, water tasting done," South Pyongan proclaimed. "Time to get soapy."

She grabbed the bar she'd set on the rocks by the edge of the pool, but SH darted over to grab it from her.

"Ah ah," she chided. "Jin-suk's birthday is coming up. She gets to use it first."

"My birthday's soon, too?" her cousin tried.

"We don't even *have* birthdays. And if we did, they'd be in August." SH floated over to Jin-suk, handing her the bar.

"Is it really okay?" the girl asked, peering past her at South Pyongan.

"Yeah," she sighed dramatically. "I guess."

"She just likes being annoying," SH assured, and Jin-suk started to rub the soap between her hands like Yun-hui showed her. "Her and Hae go last."

"But SH," South Pyongan mock-whined.

"No 'buts.' No one wants to use the soap after you. You're disgusting."

She turned, eyeing her cousins' scorched bodies pointedly. They'd taken off their bandages, exposing all of the damage they'd taken.

Provincehumans couldn't crack the same way Countryhumans could (except for in very specific circumstances involving separatist insurrection, according to Hwang), but the deep red lines across

their bodies still didn't look natural. Even though napalm could do the same thing to a human, someone's skin blackening and bursting, peeling away from their flesh, could never look like something that was supposed to happen. Even as she watched, SH could spot one of the burns on South Pyongan's stomach shifting, the scabs splitting open as the air battle at the Chongchon ate away at her.

If one of them rubbed the soap across their skin, their blisters would burst, leaving pus, blood, and scraps of flesh stuck to the bar that other people would have to use after. SH wanted to avoid that, thank you.

"Ouch," South Pyongan said, leaning back to sling an arm over the edge of the pool. "But fair."

The other women had been trying to avoid looking at their burns, but now that SH had acknowledged them, they all turned to lock eyes onto South Pyongan and Hae.

"Is that all from just your provinces?" Chun-yeon asked, her eyes sorrowed as they shifted to SH.

She was from the Hungnam area. She knew how the towns and cities there looked.

"They're kind of really gross-looking," Sun-ja said, torn between disgust and sympathy.

Gyuri's finger hovered an inch away from South Pyongan. "Can I touch?"

Jin-suk looked up at SH, her brows crinkling. "Do they hurt?"

"No," South Pyongan said immediately as Gyuri poked her arm.

"Ayuh," Hae confirmed.

"They aren't too bad," SH said, not wanting to give an obvious lie, but also not wanting to garner pity. "What's happening to our people is far worse."

"Ayuh," Hae said again, more subdued as she drew her knees up

to her chest.

There was an awkward silence. Yun-hui had looked strangely disappointed when she'd seen SH was wearing a shift, but now she was looking at it with new eyes, like she understood.

She didn't, but that was fine. SH would rather she just think she didn't want to show off her unappealing burns than start to question why she had changed facing the wall during their costume changes on International Worker's Day.

SH moved to sweep the sudden quiet away.

"Why are you suddenly so into soap now anyways?" she asked South Pyongan, keeping her voice light. "Didn't Sang and I used to have to drag you into the river if we wanted to get you clean?"

"Ayuh," Hae said, poking South Pyongan on a less burned part of her cheek. "Pyo hated baths."

Their cousin crossed her muscular arms. "Did I hate *baths,* or did I hate that that was the one time North Pyongan couldn't be with me, which meant I'd have to keep an eye out for Japs *and* worry about whether or not he was off getting bayoneted while I washed my pits?"

"You definitely hated baths," SH said. "And don't say 'pits,' it sounds gross."

South Pyongan was unbothered. "Okay, and now I've experienced soap and nice bath oils. And I don't want to catch some weird disease."

"You really don't realize how much you hated being dirty until you get clean for the first time," Chun-yeon agreed, scrubbing at her arms as Jin-suk handed the soap to her.

SH had a flash, dirt ground into her knees, her clothes heavy with filth, grime smearing her cheeks every time she rubbed at one. And the stench of fish soaked into her very being.

She'd never felt dirty back then. Not until that first hot bath.

“Comrade Ru was with the Anti-Japanese Army, too, right?” Yun-hui asked curiously.

“I didn’t fight,” Chun-yeon demurred. “I was just a washerwoman.”

“No ‘just,’” SH chided, banishing the memory behind the wall. “If it wasn’t for you, our soldiers would have been going into battle with holes in their pants.”

“Yeah, it’s not like SH could’ve fixed them.” South Pyongan stretched out a leg to nudge her.

She shot her a look. “I could sew by then.”

Just not the same way Ru Chun-yeon could.

“But you always made those little cross-stitches,” she said, keeping her twinge of jealousy out of her voice. “Our comrades really appreciated them.”

Chun-yeon gave a small smile. “When my father would come home, he’d always say it was the luck trapped in the thread that kept him alive. He said he liked knowing his clothes hadn’t just been fixed, but that his daughter had fixed them.”

The edges of her full lips sorrowed. “There wasn’t any luck in them, in the end. But once I joined, I wanted to make the other men feel the same way. Someone wasn’t just fixing their clothes to send them back out to fight- Ru Chun-yeon was, hoping they’d make it home so she could fix them again.”

“That’s so romantic,” Sun-ja breathed, her eyes wide. “Did it ever get you a husband?”

Chun-yeon laughed, scaring off the heavy quiet that had tried to fall again. “I didn’t chase men back then. Not when there was a chance they wouldn’t make it back. But I am married now.”

“How is Comrade-“ SH took a deep breath. “Yong-gol Antonovich Zaitsev?”

“Oo, Russian?” San-ja tilted her head.

“Half,” Chun-yeon corrected. “And you know you can just use ‘Comrade Zaitsev.’ He also wouldn’t mind if you just used his given name.”

“I like to be polite.” There was also maybe a part of her that enjoyed saying the full thing. It wasn’t her fault he hadn’t even made things easier by choosing a one-syllable Korean name.

Chun-yeon shook her head. “He’s well, anyways. Hard at work making ammunition.”

“That’s good.” SH knew that already. She had done a bit of sleuthing before she'd sent for her last night so she would be ready to steer the conversation away from him if he was dead.

“How’d you meet?” San-ja asked excitedly.

“In the Soviet Union,” Chun-yeon said. “He was from a village near the unit I was working for. I saw his jacket had a bad tear, so I offered to mend it. I told him he didn’t have to pay, but the next time I came back, he brought me some syrniki- Ah, sort of… cheese jeon?- Anyway, this was when the Nazis were invading the west, so food was tight. It sort of became a habit for me to go fix his clothes, and him to pay me back with whatever he made. Then when Liberation came and I said I was heading back to Korea, he asked if he could come with me.”

Sun-ja leaned forward, half in the older woman’s lap. “What did you say?”

Chun-yeon smiled. “I told him that would be entirely improper since we weren’t married. So he grabbed my hands right there by the Aldan River and asked me to marry him.”

“Waaaaa, that’s like a love story,” Sun-ja breathed, eyes shining.

“It hasn’t been that perfect,” Chun-yeon said, taking her bun out and combing her fingers through her long black hair. “We’ve had our struggles. But I love him.”

Sun-ja paddled the water with her hands, looking at Gyuri and Yun-hui. “Are these eonnis married?”

“I’m going to be a spinster,” Yun-hui said proudly, the soap in her hands now. “I only like drawing men.”

“I had my claws in a boy,” Gyuri said, then her gaze fell to the water rippling over her legs. “He was in my unit. We both got taken to the Seoul holding camp. His compound wasn’t able to fight the transfer.”

Even the civilian Jin-suk and Sun-ja knew what that meant.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” SH said, trying to force it into existence. “We’ll get him back with our other prisoners.”

“We better.” Gyuri’s nails dig into her legs. “I’ll shred that Yankee bastard myself if we don’t.”

‘Get in line.’

“What about everyone else?” Sun-ja asked, looking around the spring. “Married?”

“Depends how much of a loser the brother you’re trying to pawn off is,” South Pyongan said, splashing water in her direction.

“I haven’t seen my brothers in… years,” the woman said, then shook her head. “I’m just interested.”

“I’m married to the cause,” Liaotung said, leaning back on her palms.

Liaoxi fiddled with the end of the scarlet headscarf that draped over her shoulder. “I perhaps… have a lover. But I can’t discuss him with another.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.” South Pyongan smirked. “Forbidden romance?”

Liaoxi ducked her head away from her, and SH gave her cousin a warning look. Even if the other women didn’t know the Chinese

women were Provincehumans, she didn't want them to know one of their provinces was courting a foreign woman. Or even *think* he was courting a human woman.

'No state secrets,' she said with narrowed eyes.

South Pyongan winked.

"One little thing about him?" Sun-ja asked Liaoxi hopefully.

"He's… very kind," she said, avoiding South Pyongan's waggling eyebrows. "And a poet, of my same mind."

"Ah, you're a poet." Chun-yeon nodded sagely. "That explains the way you talk. I should have known. I grew up in Manchuria, and you can't spit in China without hitting a poet."

"We do love our words," Liaotung said with pride.

Satisfied with her hint, Sun-ja turned to the Korean provinces. "What about you? Is Comrade SH on the market?"

The phrasing made SH tense.

"We should refrain from using words like that," she said lightly. "Women aren't commodities."

Yun-hui nodded. "Our futures aren't for sale anymore, thanks to Comrade Korea and the General." Leaning towards SH, she boldly asked, "Is Comrade SH on the hunt?"

SH folded her arms across her chest. "I don't think it's proper for Provincehumans to have relationships with our people. It would be an abuse of station."

Yun-hui sat back, frowning. "That's a shame. Comrade SH is very pretty."

Sun-ja nodded vigorously. "Even with all the burns, it's still really clear. I bet Comrade SH could have any man she wanted."

South Pyongan cut it. "Yeah, but no men are good enough for her.

And even less of them are good enough for me."

SH gave her cousin a grateful look as the attention switched to her.

"None of them?" Sun-ja asked skeptically, rubbing soap suds across her chest.

"Hey, it's not my fault," South Pyongan said. "Obviously like, a hundred men have asked if I'm available. I told them all that if they could beat me in an arm-wrestle, we could get married. How many do you think won?"

She lifted her arm out of the water, flexing her biceps. SH winced as the sky-blue skin cracked open more.

"None?" Jin-suk guessed, and South Pyongan grinned at her.

"Birthday girl wins!"

Chun-yeon sighed. "I'd really like to assume you're joking, but now I'm remembering all the arm-wrestling competitions and ssireum matches you got into, and I'm worried."

"Eh?" Sun-ja tipped her head. "Women never fought in ssireum matches in my village. I thought we weren't allowed."

South Pyongan held up her other arm, flexing them both, making the muscles on her chest and stomach ripple. "Who's gonna stop me?"

Gyuri leaned forward, her eyes gleaming. "Can we have a match?"

SH floated between them. "Wrestling matches can wait until after the war is over, I think. Or at least until we have clothes on."

Gyuri huffed, leaning back. "Yeah, I guess."

"Ah'm not married either," Hae told Sun-ja proudly. "The only man ah like is Korea. And the Gen'ral. And all my cousins an' my brother. And Comrade Kim Tu-bong. And-"

“Basically she likes every guy in Korea that isn’t a traitor, but not in that way,” South Pyongan cut in, and Hae gave a firm nod.

“Ah *also* like Comrade Mao Zhilong,” she added, reassuring the Chinese women.

“That makes one of us,” Liaotung quipped, and her sister flicked her in the head.

“I take it Jin-suk isn’t married?” Sun-ja asked.

Jin-suk shook her head, and SH felt her hand grab the side of her shift under the water.

“Jin-suk’s much too young,” she said firmly.

“Almost everyone else here is boring when it comes to love,” Sun-ja sighed. “Do you want to get married someday?”

“I don’t… know,” Jin-suk said quietly. “Maybe if I really liked someone.”

SH squeezed her hand comfortingly. She wasn’t sure how the girl could even consider that after what she’d been through. But if she did want to get married one day, then once she was old enough, SH would make sure to find her a good man. Loyalty didn’t have to be the only thing she considered when match-making.

“What about Sun-ja?” SH asked, stopping her from pushing Jin-suk more. “Are you married?”

She sighed. “I was.”

“A widow so young?” Chun-yeon asked. “I’m sorry.”

The woman shook her head. “No, I was married before Liberation. The law on Sex Equality dissolved it.”

SH bit her lip. For her marriage to have been dissolved…

Yun-hui said it for her. “You must have been sixteen at most then, right?”

"Mm." Sun-ju looked down, running her the soap over her legs. "I was married for three years. When my dad died, we lost our land, and mom was too sick to keep us. She pretty much sold me and my sister off. I don't really know what happened to my brothers."

'She probably kept them,' SH thought bitterly.

The yangban almost always married younger than the peasantry, and that proclivity had never left the landlords and bourgeois. Sun-ja's mother had likely sold her young daughters off to some old degenerate in exchange for enough money to buy more land, or at least a house in the city. Enough money to buy more women for her sons without losing them.

Gyuri wrinkled her nose. "Was he at least a kid?"

Sun-ja confirmed SH's dark thoughts, shaking her head. "No, he was a landlord, and old. I think thirty."

The Kangwon woman wrinkled her nose. "That must've been weird."

Sun-ja nodded. "But he wasn't the worst. I was his third wife, so I didn't really even see him that much. I mostly did chores for the older girls. His first wife had it out for me, though." She pouted. "She'd always make me clean the agungi twice. She said I never got it right the first time."

The note of distaste in her voice made SH frown.

"You shouldn't blame her," she said. "How would you feel if the man you were married to kept taking other wives, and you couldn't stop him?"

"She didn't have to take it out on *me,"* Sun-ja muttered.

No. But there was no one else *to* take it out on. With two other wives, her husband could easily decide to get rid of her if she protested in any way. She would either be a 'used' woman with nowhere to go, or dead.

"It's not fair that happened to you," SH told the woman gently.

“But she isn’t the one you should save your resentment for. He’s the one that put you both in that position. She was a victim, too.”

A bit of guilt flickered in her honey eyes. “I guess.”

“You seem to value love a lot,” Liaoxi noted. “Can you imagine if you found a man to love, then another woman he bought? You might still love him too much to fight, so you would turn to the other women out of spite.”

“I… didn’t really think about it like that before,” Sun-ja murmured.

“She was in the wrong, too,” SH assured you. Especially since she couldn’t fathom that someone could still love someone that did something that despicable and clearly didn’t love *them*. “But men like to create systems to make women fight each other so we never fight them. The real problem wasn’t either of you- it was him.”

South Pyongan nodded. “You should’ve all teamed up and beat him to death with the laundry.” She mimed smacking someone with a paddle.

“Too nice,” Gyuri criticized. “Each get a knife, stand over his bed at night, stab stab stab.”

“Hell yeah. Then pour soy sauce on him.”

“Food waste,” Hae declared disapprovingly.

There was another natural question to follow up with. Sun-ja had been married for three years, and ‘didn’t see him that much’ didn’t mean ‘didn’t see him at all.’ And you didn’t seek out a child for deep conversation.

Jin-suk had her hands clasped on her drawn-up knees, looking tense. SH spoke before anyone could ask it.

“At least no one has to do that now,” she said brightly. “We can thank the Law on Sex Equality.”

They all nodded in relief, including Sun-ja.

"I'm really glad," she said sincerely. "I didn't love him at all, and I didn't want to be someone's spare wife. Now I get the chance to find the other side of my red string."

She wiggled her smallest finger. Then her face fell.

"But it's hard." She passed the soap to South Pyongan's grasping fingers, resting her chin on her knees. "I don't have a family, so I don't have anyone to market me. And when men find out I used to be married…"

"Well, if a man rejects you for that, then you don't want to be with him anyways," SH said, relieved that a child wasn't one of the reasons she couldn't find a husband after all.

"That's what Comrade Mao says." She sighed. "But there's a lot of men that I *would* want to be with, if it wasn't for that."

It didn't matter if the landlord had visited her at all. Even taking her as his wife, a simple, selfish choice from him that had probably only cost around the price of a cow, had stolen Kim Sun-ja's future choices.

"I could help you find someone after the war is over," SH volunteered.

Though if she went around asking all the men she thought were good if they would accept a wife who had been married before, and they told her 'no,' she might have to remove them from the 'good' list.

Sun-ja brightened. "Really?" Before SH could say anything, she eagerly asked, "Could you put in a word for me with Comrade Mao, maybe?"

"No," SH said immediately.

"You do *not* want him," Liaotung told her. "And if you do want love, you probably shouldn't choose the man who is going to have to leave someday."

She turned her head suddenly. SH couldn't see her features, but

she thought she seemed awkward.

Liaoxi didn't wince. "I'm afraid being of age won't be a saving grace, for you have a baby face."

Sun-ja frowned, touching her cheek, plump despite her slim frame. "I thought men liked round faces."

"Comrade Mao has…" Laioxi lingered, searching for a word.

"Cute aggression," her sister deadpanned.

Liaoxi nodded. "Over these weeks, I'm sure it's been a struggle not to pinch your cheeks."

SH had visited a dug-out recently with China (before he'd gotten shot) to give her approval to a child's mother to let the man watch her daughter when she was busy. He had almost made her change her mind by squishing the girl's face in his hands and rubbing them really fast across her cheeks. The child had enjoyed it, but 'cute aggression' was a good term for it.

Sun-ja pouted. "So basically he sees me as a kid?"

The Chinese women nodded.

"That fact you shouldn't hate," Liaoxi told her. "There are definitely worse fates."

"What about our Comrade Provinces' cousins?" Sun-ja said, batting her eyes as she moved on with speed. "Are they available?"

"None of us should be-"

"Wait wait." South Pyongan held up a hand to SH. "Don't scare her off. Comrade, if you can cook, I would be willing to sell my brother to you to get you into the family."

Liaoxi cleared her throat.

"Wait, crap, right." South Pyongan whipped around to her. "Wait. Random totally unrelated question- can you cook?"

The Chinese woman turned up her chin. “Perhaps.”

“No,” Liaotung said, earning a look. “We know the basics- rice, plain soup, roast meat. But our comrades seem covered on that front.”

Chun-yeon bit her lip. “Comrade SH, I hate to ask, but have you not learned to cook yet?”

Yun-hui looked startled. “Comrade SH can’t cook?”

SH pursed her lips. “I’m improving.”

Her oldest comrade put a hand over her mouth. “I thought those hotteok you brought to the Women’s Union conference were just a bad batch.”

SH gaped in dismay. “So you actually didn’t like them?”

“That’s okay!” Sun-ja lunged across the pool to grab SH’s hands. “Comrade SH, I’ll do the rest of the household cooking forever if you introduce me to one of our provinces! It doesn’t have to be Comrade North Pyongan.”

“I don’t know about that,” Chun-yeon mused. “I know all of them fairly well, and I would say he’d make the best husband.”

“North Pyongan is taken,” Hae protested for Liaoxi.

“Oh? By who?”

Hae froze. “Ummmm.”

“The Lord,” South Pyongan cut in. “He’s married to Jesus Christ our saviour, or however that goes. Amen.”

“Then I’ll settle for someone else,” Sun-ja said, not letting SH get a word out.

“Comrade Kangwon’s great,” Gyuri suggested. “But if you want someone bigger, I’d go with Comrade Chagang or Comrade North Hamgyong.”

SH stiffened.

"Isn't Comrade North Chungcheong tall and broad, too?" Yun-hui asked. "Comrade SH talks about him a lot, and he sounds nice."

"Chungbuk's the best," Hae enthused, scrubbing herself vigorously with the soap.

"But Comrade North Hamgyong led the defense of Chongjin, didn't he?" Sun-ja's eyes were sparkling as she leaned in to SH. "And he's head of heavy industry. That's so cool! Can I marry your brother?"

South Pyongan snorted. "Trust me, comrade, you want that even less than you want Mao."

"Then what about Comrade Korea?"

"Headhunter!" Gyuri accused.

"No one's marrying anyone!" SH cried, her voice echoing over the spring as she pulled her hands free. "Do power imbalances mean nothing to you?!"

There was a soft noise from beside her, and she whipped over, worried that all the talk about men might have upset Jin-suk. Her chest tightened as she saw her with her face buried in her chest, her shoulders shaking.

But then her sounds got louder, and she realized the girl was holding back giggles.

Sun-ja giggled, too, sitting back. "Well, if anyone ever *does* want to get married, let them know I'm an option."

"I'll find you a husband," SH promised, calming. "Just not a Provincehuman."

*'And definitely **not** North Hamgyong.'*

"I could introduce eonni to my brother," Jin-suk offered shyly. "I don't think he'd mind that you used to be married."

“You have a brother?” Sun-ja asked.

The girl lowered her head. “I… do. He’s just missing right now.”

“He’s going to come back.” SH tilted her chin up to smile at her, biting her tongue again. “I promise.”

Jin-suk nodded, cuddling closer, warm in the cold water.

Sun-ja tilted her head. “Now that I think about it, you said your dug-out was near Pyongyang earlier, right? But I’ve never seen you at the middle school when me and Chang-i pick up her little sister.”

Jin-suk looked away, knotting her hands in her lap. “I got… sick. A teacher comes and visits me now.”

“Eh, does that mean you don’t get out much?”

Jin-suk shook her head. “I have Father, and Comrade SH sends people to visit me.”

Yun-hui frowned. “That’s no good. You should be spending time with more people. I know the planes are scary, but you can’t be underground all the time.”

SH had been trying to get her to socialize more, and reunite with her old schoolmates. But…

Jin-suk’s shoulders hunched. “Father works hard all day to get firewood and gather herbs. And I… don’t like walking alone.”

SH took her hand under the water, and she gripped it tight.

“What if you came with me?”

Jin-suk looked up at Sun-ja, startled. “Where?”

“I work at the Synthetic Fibre Factory, but I volunteer at the rest house to help wash soldiers’ clothes and stuff-“

Gyuri nodded sagely. “Trying to get them to hit on you.”

“-so I go to the river a lot,” Sun-ja finished primly. “There’s always

a lot of girls there to talk to. I could bring you, then walk you back home."

Jin-suk's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yeah, it wouldn't be any trouble." She smiled kindly at the girl, and she tentatively smiled back.

SH revised her opinion of Kim Sun-ja, and felt a weight on her shoulders lessen.

"Y'know, factory worker wasn't the vibe I was getting from you," South Pyongan pointed out.

"Hmph." Sun-ja crossed her arms. "What man would want me if I wasn't doing everything I could for our country?"

"Whatever gets you to clock in in the morning," Chun-yeon sighed.

The women bantered and laughed as they soaked in the spring. There wasn't any cover around them, but they were far out in the fields, and Liaoxi and Liaotung were keeping watch, so no one was worried about anyone trying to peep, though SH made sure to keep an eye open, too. She brought out the dosirak she'd packed eventually, and everyone got to eat one jumeokbap, seasoned simply with sesame seeds and shoyu. She'd been planning on using plausible deniability to pretend she made them, but now had to admit that 'a comrade' (Kim Song-ae) had.

There was kkakdugi, too. SH smiled at Jin-suk as she offered her the spicy cubes of radish. The girl hesitated, but ate some, closing her eyes in bliss as the flavourful vegetables crunched under her teeth.

Hae brought out her scissors at some point and eagerly persuaded everyone with hair into letting her cut it, while the rest of them passed around the jar of ointment.

"Is this whitening cream?" Sun-ja asked, squinting at the porcelain container.

"Just softener," SH said. "And you shouldn't care about being

lighter."

"Easy for *you* to say." She eyed the province's unnatural snowy skin enviously.

"Careful, if you're too white, someone might think you're a Yank and… *shoot ya!"* Gyuri pounced like a tiger, making the other woman shriek as she wrestled her under the water, Yun-hui saving the ointment at the last moment.

Jin-suk laughed, not hiding it anymore, and the clear bell of her joy made SH's heart swell.

She'd been wrong earlier. Yun Jin-suk's appearance *had* changed. Her face was fuller now, her cheeks rosy, and even with how little they had to eat, it was clear that under her shift, her body looked like a body again, instead of a host for something to feed off of. Her brown hair wasn't stringy anymore, but glossy, the shoulder-length haircut Hae had given her slicked back behind her ears and out of her face. The little green flecks in the depths of her eyes shone like emeralds.

SH blinked hard, unable to resist sliding an arm around her shoulders and resting her cheek on her head. Jin-suk beamed, leaning into her.

"Comrade SH, here's the ointment." Yun-hui tried to hand it to her.

SH made sure her smile didn't die. "That's okay. I don't want any."

Her comrade tipped her head, puzzled. "You didn't use the soap, either."

"SH doesn't like smelly stuff," Hae piped up. She was artfully cutting the ends off of Chun-yeon's hair, trying to convince her to go shorter.

Yun-hui looked scandalized. "Does that mean the perfume I've been wearing at the theatre's been bothering you?"

SH hurriedly shook her head. "No. I like them on other people. They're just not for me."

No matter what temperature the water was, the sickly floral scents would always make her lungs feel too big for her chest. They clung to her skin like oil.

"You sure?" South Pyongan asked. "I think there might be burn-relief crap in this."

Hae nodded. "Ah feel all tingly now. Even more tingly."

Another thing she'd have to thank China for. But SH would choose the pain.

"I'm alright," she said, and Yun-hui shrugged, using some more on herself.

SH pried her nails out of her leg.

A reminder. She could help these women forget about the war raging around them, and help her cousins forget about their responsibilities for a day. But she would never be able to forget.

They stayed longer than she had planned, long enough that the walk back to Pyongyang would be completely in the dark. But she didn't make any effort to keep to the schedule. He would be sent for no matter what time she got back to the Pyongyang checkpoint.

They spoke about random things, SH steering them away from the war where she could. Talking about their jobs (SH fulfilling her 'discuss light industry' requirement with Chun-yeon) led to Liaotung revealing she was an er ren zhuan performer and pulling out her silk squares to toss around for them, gracefully spinning them on her fingertips and sweeping low to the ground to catch them, though she couldn't do her comedy act without her partner.

"What do *you* want to be when you grow up, Jin-suk?" Hae asked when the woman flopped down next to her sister again, after taking a grandiose bow.

Jin-suk puffed out a cheek. "I don't really know. I never thought I'd get to go to school."

In her announcer's voice South Pyongan declared, "Thanks to the

Worker's Party, women in the People's Korea can now be anything they want! Except for married to a Provincehuman," she finished normally, making Sun-ja pout.

"I think…" Jin-suk went to fiddle with her bangs, but didn't have them anymore. "Machines are cool. I always liked watching the tractors. And- And my sister took me to her factory once. All the stuff in there looked really interesting."

"You could be an engineer," South Pyongan suggested. "We need more women engineers so someone can put the males in their place when I'm not there."

Hae chirped, "Ayuh, and the Gen'ral says we've got to get more women into science stuff."

Jin-suk shook her head, cheeks dusting red. "I'm not smart enough for that."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short," Yun-hui protested. "You don't know unless you try. I thought I'd never be a good artist, but Comrade SH encouraged me to try."

SH blinked. She hadn't met Yun-hui until recently, and she'd already been making art by then. "I did?"

She bobbed her head so fast her trimmed hair flew. "I felt like I was never going to get better at drawing, but then I saw one of Comrade SH's posters. It was the one for the Law on Sex Equality actually, with the worker, peasant, and intellectual women holding the hammer, sickle, and inkbrush."

"The one that said 'Korean women's futures are in their hands?'" SH asked.

"Mm." Yun-hui clasped her hands together at her chest. "When I saw it on the newsboard, I felt my heart beat faster. For a moment I really felt like my future *was* in my hands, and I could be anything I wanted."

SH hadn't been so sure about that poster. She hadn't finished honing her craft yet, and felt like her art wasn't up to the task of

promoting something as important as women's rights. But Korea had told her to make designs anyway.

"And I realized I didn't just want to draw," Yun-hui continued, her pretty brown eyes sparkling. "I wanted to make art that would make people feel the same way Comrade SH did."

"Passion is required in art," Liaoxi murmured. "You found the passion in your heart."

Yun-hui nodded. "If I messed up after that, I'd just remind myself that my future was in my hands. If I set the brush down, I'd never get better. And now I get to make portraits of Korea and the General themselves."

She turned to Jin-suk. "So even if you aren't good with machines at first, if you're passionate about them, keep trying. And if you're not, find something you *are* passionate about."

"I want to be like Comrade SH, too," the girl said, glancing shyly at her. "I want to make the country better."

SH's heart was full to bursting. "You will," she predicted.

"Mushy talk," South Pyongan muttered.

"Yuck," Gyuri agreed. "Everyone knows a soldier is the best thing to be."

South Pyongan leaned back, staring up at the sunset. "It's the easiest, anyway."

They stayed a little longer, all of them reluctant to leave. Even with the explosions echoing from the north, the little spring felt peaceful, secreted away from the war. SH watched the riot of crimson and tangerine painting the sky fade into a pallet of soft violets and lavenders, like the Chungcheongs' flags.

She wished their other female cousins could be here. Even South Chungcheong.

"You know, I was kind of thinking about not agreeing to go on

this," Gyuri said, floating on her back in the middle of the water. "And I was regretting it when I found out we were just taking a bath. But I'm actually glad Chief Gunner Ryang made you get me. This was nice."

"You didn't want to come?" Yun-hui asked, yawning.

"I wanted to get back the front." Gyuri gazed up at the stars as they began to bloom in the veil of night. "I didn't know why I'd taken the leave at all. I didn't really think about it when Command offered. But once I got back to my hometown…" She let out a humourless laugh. "I realized I took a leave to see family when I don't have any left."

"Bombs?" Chun-yeon asked quietly.

"For my uncle, when the Yanks first came," Gyuri said. "The rest of them…" The water rippled as she shrugged. "The Second Corps kept a big part of Kangwon Liberated during the tactical retreat. But we couldn't hold all of it. And I'm a loud commie," she said after a moment. "There were a lot of reactionaries in my town that wanted to get even once Rhee's guys let 'em out of prison."

"I'm sorry," Yun-hui murmured.

The woman shrugged again. "It's how it is. I was gonna end my leave early. Still am. But thanks for making my last day a good one."

She sat up, giving SH a grin with her sharp canines.

"You're welcome," the province said, smiling back. "I'm glad you said yes."

She was glad she had thought of this.

Eventually they had to leave. They all climbed quietly and reluctantly out of the water, getting dressed in their uniforms and workshirts and choson-ot, not caring that they soaked through. The air carried the sharp tang of minerals and damp earth.

"My fingers are all pruney." Hae laughed quietly, running them

along South Pyongan's arm.

"Ewww, you know I hate that."

SH snagged Liaoxi and Liaotung's canteens, jogging away.

"Okay. We die of dehydration, I suppose," the latter remarked.

SH followed the quieter bubbling sound to the smaller spring she'd found yesterday, another place the water welled up from the earth. She dumped the regular water out, filling the canteens with the clean mineral kind.

"So you can try some when we're alone," she explained to the Chinese women, handing them back.

"Thank you," Liaotung said, sounding touched.

"Comrade North Pyongan spoke forsooth," Liaoxi lilted. "You really are kind in truth."

SH ducked her head, pleased that her cousin had been talking about her that way to their comrades.

When they were all ready, she did one last check to make sure they had everything and to admire the spring one last time, and the way the stars caught in the dark water. One day soon, there would be a factory on top of it, siphoning the bottomless wellspring so people across the country could try the healing water. She was glad she'd got the chance to sneak in a little personal use, and make her comrades feel better.

She took a headcount, then looked over, finding Jin-suk standing off to the side with her head down.

"Did you have fun, Jin-suk?" she asked gently, padding over.

"I did," she whispered. Her shoulders were shaking. She wasn't laughing this time. "But I miss my sister."

She turned suddenly, grabbing onto SH's uniform and burying her face in her chest as sobs started to wrack her small body.

"I had a lot of fun and I really like everyone and I- I *really* miss my sister!"

Her legs gave out, and SH let her drag her down to the ground. She stroked the girl's back, holding her the way she always did when she cried, the way Jong-suk had held her in that blizzard. South Pyongan looked away, but the other women crowded in, even Gyuri.

Hae hugged Jin-suk in distress. "Don't cry! Today's supposed to be happy!"

"Let her cry," Chun-yeon said, her hand joining SH's. "It's good to get it out."

Yun-hui threw her arms around the girl from the other side, burying her face in her hair. "You've got a lot of sisters now, Jin-suk. If you ever need to talk, you can come to the theatre. Even if I'm out performing for the troops, the other women will be there."

Sun-ja nodded, clutching at her skirts. "And I meant what I said about taking you to the river. I'll make sure you aren't so alone anymore."

Liaotung squatted next to the huddle. "You've got Chinese jiejies, too."

Joining them, Liaoxi said, "Grief shared is grief paired."

Gyuri reached in to ruffle her hair. "And if you ever need anyone killed, I can do it. No questions asked."

"I can kill people, too, but I've got to ask a few questions," South Pyongan called. "Politician, y'know?"

"We can't replace your real sister," SH murmured, running her hand along the crying girl's spine. "Or your mother. But you do have a lot of sisters looking out for you now, Jin-suk."

"Okay, that's enough disrespect," Chun-yeon grumbled. "I'm forty years old. I'm an auntie, not a sister."

"A lot of sisters and an auntie," SH corrected, and Jin-suk half-laughed, half-sobbed into her breast.

They clustered around the girl, holding her while she cried her heart out, a knot of grief and comfort. The shadows of planes rippled overhead as the Yankee fighter jets soared back from the Chongchon River, heedless of the women below and what they had taken from them, and the bombers flew north to take more, as always.

But for the moment, those on the ground ignored them.

There needs to be at least one Girls' Day chapter in every fanfiction I write. It's in my contract.

Also I probably should have clarified this awhile ago, but for the Korean ages, back then they would add an extra year for the time spent in the womb, like was said in an earlier chapter. But I'm usually using the modern system where someone born in 1900 would be 51/52 in 1952, unless I clarify traditional age, like with Jin-suk. This is because I have enough trouble with figuring out how ages and dates work with my own age, let alone adding in womb years and the age only changing with the year. I am time-adverse. So when they say Kim Sun-ja was 16 when her marriage got dissolved, they mean 16 flat, unlike when they say Jin-suk is 16 now, which is adding the womb year and the year change. I think I worked that out right for her. I would say sorry for the confusion, but no one is more confused than me. I genuinely cannot tell you how old I am without doing mental math.

So here are the ages in this chapter:

SH- 41 ('birthday' in August)
Hae- 41 ('birthday' in August)
SP- 41 ('birthday' in August)
Liaoxi- technically 44/45 (depending on which month Fengtian's 'birthday' was
Liaotung- same as Liaoxi, 44/45
Yun Jin-suk- 14 (birthday in May)
Ru Chun-yeon- 40 (birthday in September)

Pak Gyuri- 23 (birthday in February)
Pak Yun-hui- 23 (birthday in October)
Kim Sun-ja- 22 (birthday in June)

Also because I can't talk about women without talking about the suffering we have to deal with, I just learned more about the giant child sex trafficking ring the US had at the Subic Bay Naval Base and Olongapo in the Philippines. I say more because I already assumed American men did that to Filipina women without knowing anything, as they have done to Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese, and many other women. And just like all our governments, the Philippines let it happen. Tens of thousands of women, half or just under half children, that were used by their military men. They kept their pictures on a board like a menu. And they didn't stop doing this when the base closed. They left behind sexual diseases and half children and kept visiting without responsibility. They also poisoned the water there with waste that has apparently caused cancers in the local population. Now the American Navy wants to open a storage facility there again and have higher presence, and the government wants to let them to counter the 'China threat.' But to girls and women, the Americans *are* the threat. Remember- American soldier is synonymous with rapist. And to most men, woman is synonymous with worthless.

A Spirit We'll Pass Down

[image]

SH's transport papers would be good until tomorrow, but with night having spread its soft black wings over Korea again, most trucks would be bound for the front, carrying vital supplies to the defenders. The Nampo highway was quiet. So the women chose to stick to the more rural roads, meandering their way across the fields and low hills under the shadow of the new moon, in no hurry to reach the pass between the ridges that would narrow their path to the highway again.

Even though the civilian women were tired, none of them complained, too lulled by the much-needed rest day to actually feel their legs start to ache. Jin-suk dozed on SH's back, her chin resting on her head until she startled back awake, only to slowly start to nod off again. The province was torn between walking as swiftly as possible, eager to see her scheming come to fruition, and enjoying the calm.

She did choose the second one, though, keeping her gait slow to match the others, letting herself linger in the warmth of the vacation. Whether America gave in and signed the ceasefire or not, there wouldn't be any chances for another day like this for awhile. Chun-yeon and Sun-ja would need to devote themselves to their labour to make clothes and fabrics, whether for soldiers or civilians, Yun-hui would either keep maintaining their army's morale or turn to rehabilitation work, Gyuri would be kept at the front as an active fighter or in defense against another assault, and Jin-suk would be working at getting back into proper schooling, then her compulsory schooling with all the other children of Korea. And Liaoxi and Liaotung would leave Korea one day.

And SH, South Pyongan, and Hae... They had to keep fighting, no matter what. The work would only get harder when they were finally able to rebuild.

SH was looking forward to it. But it was still nice to take these

little moments where she could. These small glimpses of a future normalcy that should have been theirs long ago.

But as they neared the taller peaks of the hills that would curve them towards the highway, the tranquil night was disturbed by a rhythmic beating sound.

SH frowned, stopping in place to try and hear better. It didn't sound like a plane, and the droning from towards Hwanghae province wasn't getting louder. It sounded like...

"Is that a helicopter?" South Pyongan asked, stopping next to her.

"Sounds like it." Gyuri tilted her head towards the dark sky. *"Thowmp thwomp thwomp.* The Yankee commanders that come to scope out the front use them."

Helicopters were quick and stealthy, or at least stealthier than jets or regular planes. They were better for transporting high-ranking officers to observe fighting at a safe distance, or small bundles of soldiers. Not bombing missions.

Uneasiness bloomed in SH's chest, and her hold on Jin-suk's calves tightened.

"What's going on?" the girl asked, yawning sleepily.

"Nothing," she assured her cheerfully. "We're just all going to get down for a second, just in case."

Even if they weren't equipped with bomb chambers, that wouldn't stop a passenger from strafing the ground with a machine gun.

They all hustled into the field to lie flat, pressing themselves into the short spring grass sprouting between the rows, nightdew soaking their fronts.

The moon's absence made it hard to see, but after a few minutes of straining her eyes up at the sky, SH saw it- a small shadow coming from the west. The 'thwomp'ing sound grew louder as it came towards them, then evened out, the shadow hovering over the rugged hills to their north.

Keeping an arm over Jin-suk, SH craned her neck, watching intently as the barely-visible helicopter beat its blades to remain stationary. After a few seconds, it looked like something dropped from the bottom.

"Somethin' came out," Hae gasped.

South Pyongan was already rummaging in her pockets, pulling out her emergency gloves. "Ssi-bal, do you thinks it's bugs?"

"No," SH said tightly.

Something had bloomed over the shadow that fell from the helicopter, slowing its descent, and a second later, something else dropped, the same shadow ballooning out over it. The shapes under the parachutes were too large to be insect containers.

SH's languid feeling evaporated like paint thinner and she shot up, her rifle already in hand. "Paratroopers."

They must have came in from the coast.

"Shit," South Pyongan cursed. "Another gang? In my province? *Really?"*

SH watched three more parachutes bloom before the helicopter started to move again, dipping its nose as it wheeled around, heading back for the sea.

"Too few," she clipped. "Not a gang."

"They must be infiltrators tryin' to sneak into the units 'round Nampo or Pyongyang," Hae said, her voice flat and militant as she rose with her gun in hand. "We've got to get rid of 'em."

It wasn't a question. According to the men that had been caught or turned themselves in after being sent on operations just like this, they'd been sent to Tokyo for training, then given orders to infiltrate units using fake identity cards. America couldn't use Rhee's butchers or the Kuomintang because they had no idea how Socialist jargon worked, so he depended on the insider knowledge of POWs. They had a much better chance of succeeding, and could

use their position to do any number of things- pass on information, sabotage weaponry, commit crimes to tarnish the KPA's image, or even interfere with the anti-germ warfare measures. They had to catch them before they could do any harm.

"Jin-suk, stay with Comrades Ru and Kim," SH ordered, getting to her feet and passing her pistol to her old KPRA comrade. Even a washerwoman knew how to use a gun. "Comrades Pak Yun-hui and Pak Gyuri, with us."

The soldier women saluted, falling easily back into line.

The Song and Dance Ensemble had personal sidearms to protect themselves, but Gyuri had to leave her firearms behind on leave. SH jerked her head at Hae, but Liaoxi stepped in, holding out her pistol.

"Take mine. With my rifle, I'll do fine." She unslung her Mosin-Nagant.

"You shouldn't be involved in this operation," SH advised.

"They could be spreading all over those hills," Liaotung said, her submachine gun ready. "Comrade Shī and I will scout. We won't engage."

SH nodded. "If you are forced to, be careful. And don't shoot recklessly," she added to her cousins and the two soldier women. "If these men are as unwilling as some of the others, we don't want to kill them. We'll attempt to figure out if they're hostile first, but don't hesitate to shoot if you think you're in danger."

"Are you like, going to be okay?" Sun-ja asked, her brows furrowed as she pulled a shaking Jin-suk into her side.

"Please," South Pyongan scoffed, spinning her pistol around her finger. "Five guys? I could take them with one hand."

"W-What if they f-find us?" Jin-suk asked, the whites of her eyes gleaming in terror.

If these men *were* hostile, SH was going to make sure they

regretted it.

She smiled, crouching in front of the girl, softening her tone. "You'll be alright. Comrade Chun-yeon will protect both of you. If anything goes wrong, she'll get you to Kangso."

"Hey, kid. You've been learning to use a knife- take this." Gyuri threw her blade at her feet.

Jin-suk hesitantly picked it up. "Don't you n-need this?"

The woman gave her a feral grin. "I like using my hands better."

"You'll be okay," SH assured the girl again, standing back up and slipping back into her officer's voice. "Any questions?"

"No, Comrade General," the military women chorused.

"Then move out."

They left Jin-suk, Chun-yeon, and Sun-ja amongst the fields and started the march towards the hills, moving double-time. There was no knowing which units the men would head for, so SH kept a sharp eye on the horizon between them and Kangso, in case they headed for the post there.

It took ten minutes to reach the slopes, scattered with rocks and scrub trees. Liaoxi and Liaotung slipped away to recon the perimeter while the rest of them headed for where it looked like the helicopter had been hovering, moving carefully into the rippling terrain.

They were all on high alert, hands wrapped tight around their firearms, ears and 'ears' straining for the slightest sound.

As they reached a creek that ran out of the hillside and down towards the plains, SH twitched. She made no moves, other than to send a silent finger sign to Hae as they prowled along the water.

Yun-hui suddenly stiffened, her head pivoting towards the other side of the creek. "I saw something."

SH went to signal them on, planning on circling around, but before she could, someone burst from the bushes across the water, pointing a submachine gun at them.

It was a man, dressed in a KPA uniform. He came out confidently, hoisting his gun with assurance, but it almost faltered as he locked eyes with SH. Almost.

"Put down your weapons," he growled, aiming his firearm at her.

SH aimed her rifle back, as did the other women. "You can put *your* weapon down instead," she suggested sweetly.

He lifted his lip at her. "Put. Them. *Down."*

Next to her, South Pyongan and Gyrui exchanged skeptical glances.

"Seriously?" the province asked. "Why would we do that? There's like, four of us. Even if you get a shot off, you're going down."

His eyes flashed. "I'm not asking again. I don't care if you've got a couple of provinces. *Put-"*

SH shot him in the kneecap.

He screamed, falling to one knee, but kept his grip on his gun, raising it again. But before he could shoot, Hae burst out of the bushes behind him, where she'd gone when SH signalled, wrapping an arm around his throat and dragging him back, sending his spray of bullets into the sky. South Pyongan and Gyuri were across the creek in a flash, the province crossing it in a single bound to smash her foot into his gut, and in his moment of agony, Hae tore the submachine gun out of his hands.

Gyrui smashed her fist into his face, bursting his nose in a spray of blood and knocking him over as Hae released him, darting aside with her new gun. As the two women fell on the man, beating him into the ground, she scuttled back in.

"'Scuse me, pardon me," she chirped, unbuckling his belt as South Pyongan straddled him, driving her fists into him while he hollered.

Hae came up with his belt, holding it like a snake as she trotted away with his pistol, grenades, and submachine gun.

SH kept on guard, scanning their surroundings as she and Yun-hui crossed the creek, water seeping into their boots. The man's screaming was thankfully muffled as Gyuri took off her boot and shoved her sock in his mouth.

"Don't kill him," SH advised as she and South Pyongan stopped beating him and dragged him over the stones to the water's edge, shoving his head under.

"Just trying to put him to sleep without cracking his skull," her cousin said cheerily, dunking his head under a few times more than necessary before holding him there.

"I think he can take a few more hits," Gyuri said as he thrashed. "Yankee skulls are pretty thick. Have to be to try and take on all of us alone."

SH was pretty sure he'd had the arrogance because all of them were women. He hadn't came out until he heard Yun-hui's soft voice after all, and had only faltered when he saw she was a province. Believing this *might* have had some influence on why she hadn't just waited for Hae to grab him.

"Type 49, Tokarev, and Tokarev," Hae reported, pocketing his identity card and tags and frowning at the guns she had. "Stupid traitors are usin' our stuff."

"It's the weapons they get captured with," SH said, head swivelling around the hill. "And they need to blend in."

As South Pyongan dragged the now-unconscious man out of the creek, she could see that he didn't quite fit one of their soldiers. He looked more well-fed, likely having been eating better in Tokyo than the average POW or frontline combatant. And his uniform was both too unworn and too messy. It clearly hadn't been lived in for very long, but no KPA soldier should have as many loose threads as he did.

Of course, he probably had been a KPA soldier. But his uniform would have just been handed back by Yankee suppliers.

"I'll carry him," Gyuri whispered. "I'm strongest."

"Okay, actually *I'm* strongest," South Pyongan said, grabbing for the man's arms. "So I'll carry him."

"I can, really." Gyrui grabbed his feet.

"I outrank you, I'm carrying him."

"Whoever carries him can't fight," SH interrupted their squabble before they could tear him in two.

Both the women looked at each other, then dropped the man onto the stones face-first. "You carry him," they both ordered at the same time.

Yun-hui sighed. *"I'll* carry him. I have less active combat experience anyway."

"Good deal." South Pyongan hustled over to load the man onto her shoulders, wrapping his arms and legs around her the way SH had carried Jin-suk. The small woman huffed, bending under his weight, but got him settled.

"If he wakes up, just fall back and smash his skull off a rock," the province advised. "He'll be fine."

"We need to find the rest of them," SH ordered, marching away. "His noise will have attracted attention."

They were a small group, so it was more likely they would run instead of engage. But they shouldn't have dropped too far away from each other, so should be in the nearby area.

Sure enough, as they skirted over the hill, a light whistle came from above, and Liaotung's masked face peered down, gesturing them up.

The women silently followed, letting her lead them to the low rim

of a shallow valley filled with slender poplars, not yet cut down for their wood.

"Comrade Shī is on the other side," the Chinese woman whispered, pointing to the taller opposite rim. "The other four are clustered in the middle. The shooting spooked them."

She didn't need to ask about it. Yun-hui had the man splayed out at her feet.

SH nodded, adjusting her grip on her Type 49. "We'll head down. There's enough cover to launch a melee attack. With five on four we should be able to take them. You stay here with your rifle to make sure none get away."

Liaotung saluted, and they holstered their guns, army crawling down into the valley, moving slow so as not to crack any twigs or rustle the undergrowth. SH tested each spot before she rested her elbows on the rocky soil. As she got closer, she could hear voices filtering up.

"Do you think that was the other guy goin' after someone or someone goin' after him?" one of them murmured uneasily.

"Ssi-bal," another cursed. "We should've moved faster."

"We should go now," the third whispered. "Before there's any more trouble."

The women were close now, bellies pressed to the ground in the thin undergrowth around the poplars like tigers. In the light of day, they would have been spotted, but the moonless night hid them completely. As the men cautiously started to move out, they sprang.

SH leaped up, smashing her rifle across the face of the man closest to her, sending him sprawling to the ground. South Pyongan went for hers, opting for a graceful and powerful kick directly to his groin that sent an oddly operatic scream echoing over the hills, and Gyuri grabbed her target by the arms, tearing his rifle away and bending him over so his stomach could meet her knee. Hae barrelled into the last one, smashing him back into one of the trees

with enough force to make the leaves shake. Yun-hui moved to help her, but the other woman had already twisted him around and locked his arms behind his back, pressing him into the forest floor, so she went to make sure Gyuri wouldn't go too far with her beating instead.

SH had lunged onto the man she'd knocked down, locking her legs around his waist and pinning her rifle against his throat. His hands came up, clawing for her face, and she slammed her firearm down with one arm, making him choke, while the other tore his grasping hand away, bending his wrist back. Her heart leapt as she felt the bone creak in her grasp about to break.

"Wait!" the man gasped, throttled by her gun. "I didn't mean to... do that! Instinct! Long live... *Korea!"*

SH's hold tightened, then she let go, leaning back and lifting her rifle from his neck, though she kept him pinned. The man didn't take advantage of the pressure lessening to escape, his hands going to his throat instead, rubbing it.

"Comrades, it's Comrade South Hamgyong!" he rasped. "These are our guys." He turned his head, spotting the rest of the unit, and corrected, "Our women."

The other two stopped struggling, the one Hae had pinned to the ground craning his neck back with difficulty. His eyes widened as he saw her, and he went limp. Hae kept him down until Yun-hui had gathered all their guns, then let him go.

"Identify yourself, soldier," SH ordered the man under her, shifting so she had a boot planted on his chest.

"Private Kim Hyo-gon, comrade," the man said, his voice still slightly strained. "82nd Regiment, 2nd Division, First Corps. I was captured at the front last year."

"And what are you doing here now?" SH demanded.

She knew of course. But she wanted to see if he would tell the truth.

"This is goin' to sound crazy, and you might want to shoot us 'cuz'a it," the man Hae had caught said. "But we just got dropped by a Yankee helicopter."

"They want us to infiltrate our army and act as saboteurs," Kim Hyo-gon continued.

"But we weren't gonna do it," the soldier under Gyuri said nervously, squirming. "We were gonna turn ourselves in."

"But there's another guy out here," Kim Hyo-gon said urgently. "He was a real bastard in the camps, and I think he might be heading out to a different unit. You need to catch him before he hurts anyone. We heard gunshots-"

"He's been dealt with," SH said. "And now you will be, too. If you were going to turn yourselves in, I take it you won't have a problem if we do it for you?"

The man relaxed. "None at all, Comrade General."

SH finally got off of him. And since she believed him, she held her hand out, helping him up.

"Gyuri. Off," Yun-hui ordered. "Let the poor man breathe."

Grumbling, Gyuri got up.

"Ee, sorry about that," South Pyongan said to the man she was sitting on, getting up and hauling him with her. "On the bright side, if you can't have kids anymore, there are tons of orphans around. And you can tell everyone you experienced a genuine Pyongannam-do Dick Kick."

"Honoured, Comrade General," the man gasped miserably, doubling over as he clutched his loins.

Liaoxi and Liaotung trotted down the slopes, the latter with the unconscious man over her shoulders.

"He woke up," she puffed, setting him down unceremoniously. "But he's out again."

"Let's use his belt to tie him up," Hae suggested, already wrapping it around his wrists.

"Here, take mine for the ankles," the soldier she had gone after said, handing her his waist belt.

"Thank you," Hae chirped. "Sorry for twistin' you up. We thought you might be traitors."

"Just men who are *super* glad to be home," he sighed. "Despite the bruises."

"We're glad you made it home, too, comrades," SH assured them. "And also very sorry for the bruises."

She believed that they'd been going to turn themselves in. Their conversation before they had been ambushed fit in with it. They had wanted to move faster so they could report the other man, and the 'trouble' had been the trouble he could get into.

"We'll take you to Pyongyang with us," she told them, making sure all their supplies were gathered.

"Do you want me to carry him?" the burly man Gyuri had been mauling asked Liaotung.

"You just got out of a prison camp, comrade," she said. "I can handle it."

"We were at a training camp," he corrected. "I'm bigger, let me take him."

"Thank you, then." The Chinese woman handed over the prisoner, and he put him over his shoulder like a sack of rice.

"I can carry you," South Pyongan offered the man whose chances of continuing his bloodline she had destroyed.

"I'll be fine," he said hastily, cringing away from her, still hunched over.

"Suit yourself."

SH proudly led them out of the hills and back down to the plains, where Chun-yeon and the other two were waiting. Jin-suk quailed as she saw the men, hiding behind the older woman.

"They're comrades," SH assured her.

"Hi there," Sun-ja said eagerly, darting towards the burly man with the prisoner. She tucked a strand of neatly-trimmed hair behind her ear coquettishly. "I'm Kim Sun-ja."

"Down girl," Gyrui chided, dragging her away.

SH sighed, shaking her head. "Let's get going. We've had a long day, and our comrades have had a long few months."

"A long *year,"* one of them murmured.

They all headed towards the highway, the men speaking over each other as everything they'd been through rushed to come out. The POW camps, the abuse they'd witnessed, the comrades they had left behind, the training camps, and the moments of defiance- singing songs on Army Foundation Day, refusing to be screened, flying flags with Korea's face on them.

"Ah wish ah could've been like them," the one from Hwanghae murmured. "Ah gave in too easy. That's why they thought ah'd make a good agent."

"It got you home," Sun-ja comforted.

"And everyone else is still there."

SH wouldn't make a judgement on that. She knew what she would have done in that scenario, but even the men who were cowards or willing to pretend to renounce their country in the moment to make it home later had a part to play. Soldiers should be braver than that, but the stories they brought with them were useful, like the General had said. And there was another kind of patriotism in believing at their core that their country wouldn't punish them for their choices, even after the Yankees had spent months or years trying to convince them that their People's Government was bloodthirsty.

Not all of the men that turned themselves in had been innocent victims. Some of them had played along with the cruelty of the Yankees and their puppets, torturing their fellow prisoners. They had confessed to it. And some of them had done it because they were traitors that supported Rhee or Chang Kai-shek, and only after the cruelty had started to wear on them had their hearts changed.

So long as these men weren't like that, she could forgive them.

A lone truck made its way down the highway from Nampo, and South Pyongan ran to flag it down, the driver's eyes widening at the ragtag unit. SH's transport papers didn't cover the men, but she used a little of her provincial authority to get them all in. She could give her explanation when she gave her report.

The soldiers were in high spirits as the end of their long journey neared.

"I can't wait to eat my mother's cooking again," Kim Hyo-gon sighed, tipping his head back.

"I'll never complain when my wife makes fish soup three days in a row again," the burly man agreed, and Sun-ja pursed her lips.

"Ah hope my kids haven't moved anywhere too far away," the one from Hwanghae said. "As soon as Command lets me go, ah want to find them."

"I just want to see my mom," the soldier South Pyongan had kicked murmured. "I hope she's still alive."

The mood dimmed. They had all been gone for a long time. And when every day was filled with death in Korea, there was a good chance it had taken someone they loved with it.

SH grit her teeth, the dark thing stirring for the first time in hours.

"I'm sure they're all fine," she said confidently. "You'll see them again soon."

The words weren't enough to dispel the pall, so SH stood up, smiling.

"When I broke free from America's camp, I didn't really feel like I was home until I sang our anthem," she announced. "Why don't we sing it now to welcome you all back?"

She didn't wait for an answer, launching into the first verse.

"Shine bright, dawn, on this land so fair."

The other women scrambled to join, Yun-hui singing the words boldly and Jin-suk almost whispering them.

"Full of silver and gold."

SH smiled at the men, and after a moment of hesitation, they joined in.

"Three thousand ri of my beautiful homeland

In a long history of five thousand years."

They grew more confident as they went, until they were all singing at the top of their lungs, from deep baritones to Sun-ja's high clear voice to South Pyongan's imitation of a dying seagull. Even the driver joined in, and their voices streamed behind the truck like banners, welcoming their soldiers home.

They sang until they reached the checkpoint, *'The Internationale,'* the *'Song of General Kim Il-sung,'* and several of the tunes the prisoners had written in the camps, the men having been holding them in their breasts, unafraid to sing them now.

As they slowed to a stop, the soldiers looked out at the ruins of Pyongyang, the Taedong River gleaming darkly as it flowed towards them, and they quieted.

"Home," Kim Hyo-gon whispered, roughly rubbing his eyes, the single word containing a heartache and relief that SH knew intimately.

"Home," she confirmed, smiling as she climbed out of the truck to explain the situation to the checkpoint guards, and to send off the message she needed to.

The others got out with her, a few men coming to escort the former prisoners away. But before they could, Jin-suk grabbed Kim Hyo-gon by the hem of his uniform.

"Wait, please." She hurriedly let go of him, reaching for SH's hand instead. "Did... you meet anyone named Yun Jin-tae when you were in prison? He's my brother."

The men all thought for a moment, then shook their heads.

"A few Kims and a Pak," one of them said. "But no Yun."

Jin-suk hung her head. "Was it... really as bad as you said in there?"

"I won't lie to you, little comrade," Kim Hyo-gon said gravely. "It was. But if your brother's a strong solider, he can make it out of there. And if doesn't, he'll be avenged."

Jin-suk's lower lip wavered, but she gave a brave nod. "Thank you."

The former prisoners saluted, then walked away. The man from Hwanghae was weeping as he went, deep, relieved sobs that shook his frame, as one of his comrades rubbed him on the back in rough comfort.

And SH knew they couldn't let a single one of their soldiers stay in the south.

The spring breeze gently rustled the grass on Moran Hill, bringing the briny scent of the Taedong up to them. SH watched the explosions in the distance as the rail line between Pyongyang and Sariwon was severed again, brief bright sparks lighting up the horizon and extinguishing lives. Her fingers carded through Jin-suk's short hair as she dozed in her lap, gently untangling the knots the spring water had tied in it.

The other women had gone home, Sun-ja to her dug-out, Sun-hui to her Song and Dance Ensemble unit, Chun-yeon to the place SH

had arranged for her to stay before she left for Hungnam tomorrow, and Gyuri to the front. The small taste of combat must have brought her lust for battle back in full-force.

That was what she had said anyway. But the spark in her dark eyes hadn't been bloodthirsty, but determined. SH thought it was more that seeing the prisoners return home and hearing about what they'd been through had brought back her desire to free the boy she'd lost, and all of their other comrades, the way Korea had freed her.

SH was left feeling a soft melancholy, the way she always did after celebrations. When the fireworks or songs had died down and the company had trickled away, leaving a gentle ache in their place. She'd had a good day. She hadn't forgotten about the war, but for a few moments, laughing and splashing the other women with water, she had been able to pretend to forget everything else.

But it always came drifting back down, settling over her like a shroud, bringing a quiet dread with it. No matter how good a day she had, that wasn't what kept the nightmares away.

Hae shifted beside her, watching the bombs and feeling them echo in her skin. She was being oddly subdued, her arms wrapped around her legs with her chin on her knees. South Pyongan, too, had sobered on her other side, her arm slung over her leg, her gaze far away. For once, they also seemed to feel her after-party blues.

"SH?" Hae asked quietly, not raising her head. "Are we ever goin' to be done fightin'?"

SH blinked at the sudden question. It was a little dark to have come from her usually cheerful cousin. "Of course. This war won't last forever."

"Ah know that," she complained. "We're goin' to win. But ah mean... the Liberation against Japan, shuttin' down all the reaction'ries that tried to mess with our Agrarian Reform, now fightin' the Southern One... And America an' all the other sabo-tee-ers."

Her voice on the next sentence was low, with none of its standard bubbliness. "Is it ever goin' to stop?"

SH opened her mouth to repeat 'Of course,' but halted. She knew Hae wasn't a child. And she wasn't asking for a comforting lie right now, but the truth.

She thought of Korea saying that they would always need to safeguard the revolution, already sketching out new tactics for once the war was over, loyal bloodlines and soldiers who would never waver.

"No. It won't ever stop."

In the end, there was no future 'normalcy.' Not the way there would be for their people. The provinces would always have the struggle.

Hae blinked for a little too long, but looked as if she had expected the answer.

"We're always going to need to defend the Revolution," SH continued, looking out over their city and country. "We're always going to be fighting. Because that's what we're made for. To fight for our people."

Ever since she had told America that the day she had fled the camp, she had been thinking on it. *'We don't exist for ourselves. We exist for our people.'* The words felt right in the same way that those from Korea and the General did. They settled into place under her breastbone, filling an empty space there comfortingly.

"Korea an' the Gen'ral say we're the masters of our own destiny," Hae protested.

"Our people are the masters of their own destiny," SH corrected, looking down at Jin-suk as she ran a hand over her cheek. "And we're here to guide them and protect what they create. As long as the Korean people exist and strive for their futures, we'll be here to fight for them. And that fight will never end."

Every Countryhuman and their subdivisions had their own theory

on why they existed. Much like humanity, it wasn't something they could prove or quantify. And this was SH's, one that had been derived from years of listening to Korea and his ideas. He was everything a Countryhuman *should* be- one who fought for his people and put nothing else above them. Even if they truly didn't have a purpose, then this was as good as one, and she would be honoured to share it with him.

The three women were silent as they contemplated this.

"That might be true," South Pyongan eventually said. "But just because we'll always be fighting doesn't mean we can't have fun while we do. Y'know, play sports, eat good food, go to a real spa."

"You would go to a spa with us?" SH asked dubiously. Even if her cousin liked baths now, she had trouble picturing her in a real bathhouse.

"You know I love doing nothing," she replied with too much pride. "Doing nothing while floating in hot water is even better."

SH smiled despite herself. "Then we'll go to one once the war is over. It will be worth it to see you with a clay mask."

"You're on. And Hae-" South Pyongan leaned around SH to slug her on the shoulder. "Look at it this way- life would be boring if we had nothing to fight for. Sitting around doing nothing only feels good when you've been working hard to get there."

"And it won't always be like this," SH added, trying to make up for how blunt she had been. "With guns and bombs. It will get easier. One day we'll be able to go back to farming and painting and designing strange buildings."

Fighting for Socialism with art instead of weapons, the way she longed to.

"Cool buildings," South Pyongan corrected. "But the point stands. That's all part of the struggle. And as Provincehumans and commies, we need struggle to keep ourselves busy."

Hae bit her lip and slowly nodded, the truth of their cousin's

surprisingly comforting words washing over her. "Ah guess you're right. Fightin' ain't always about actual fightin'. And it *would* be pretty borin' if we had nothin' to do."

Then she gasped, eyes flying open. "Pyo! Ya said the c-word!"

South Pyongan looked stricken, flinching away from SH like she expected a slap. "Wait, when?"

"No! Not that one. You said you're a commie!" Hae beamed. "Did ya really mean it?"

"You're sure you didn't mean 'Korean' or 'freedom fighter' or even 'people's revolutionary?'" SH checked with mock concern.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up." South Pyongan rolled her eyes. "Just don't tell Korea yet. I want to make him sweat for a bit longer."

SH shook her head fondly, looking down at Jin-suk to make sure Hae's outburst hadn't disturbed her. She shifted a little, and the province stroked a hand over her hair, soothing her.

"Y'know, you've gotten pretty good with kids," South Pyongan observed, leaning back on her palms.

Hae nodded, resting her head on SH's shoulder. "Like Comrade Jong-suk."

The words made SH's chest glow and her heart twinge.

"I wish she was here," she murmured.

It was so unfair. Twenty-eight years of surviving Japanese prisons, starving in Korea and Manchuria, and fighting the Japanese, even serving as the General's bodyguard and saving his life more than once, and she had only known four years of freedom before the bad pregnancy had taken her life. She hadn't died to a bullet or bomb, but her own body. She had lived a revolutionary and still been rewarded with a women's death.

And SH couldn't even resent it properly. She knew she had wanted to get pregnant again. Her friend had loved being a mother.

"Me too." Hae buried her face in her knees again, her cheer fading. "Ah want everyone to stop dyin.' What if somethin' happens to Chun-yeon an' everyone, and we never see 'em again?"

"Then at least you knew them to feel the pain."

SH looked over her shoulder to see Liaoxi and Liaotung descending the hill, back from visiting China.

Hae hurriedly wiped at her eyes, not wanting the Chinese women to see her crying.

"No need to hide the tears," Liaotung said. "Didn't SH say we should share sweets *and* bitters?"

Liaoxi came to stand next to them, smiling down at Hae, her face mask down for the moment. "It's better to feel love and have tears fall, then to never feel it at all. If they all died tomorrow, would you regret today?"

Hae hesitated, then shook her head. "No. Ah had a lot'a fun."

"Mm. For love, grief is just the price we have to pay." Liaoxi pulled her mask back up. "And it's usually a worthwhile one."

She gazed into the distance, towards her country. Her sister watched her with unfathomable eyes.

"Comrade Liaoxi is right," SH said, putting her arm around her cousin. "Even when our people die, our... friends, we can't let that drag us down. We need to keep moving forward, to fulfill their dreams and avenge them."

"To carry them forward," South Pyongan murmured, her fist clenching.

SH nodded. "And the more we love them, the harder we'll work to do that."

Unlike North Hamgyong, who never even bothered to learn their names.

Hae shook herself like a horse swishing flies, then nodded in determination. "Ah know. Sorry for gettin' all sad. It just hurts sometimes."

"I think for a good province, it's supposed to."

She knew America never hurt when he lost one of his people. She knew he didn't weep for the Yankees shipped back home in boxes or those trapped in their camps. She doubted those dead eyes behind his aviators had ever shed a single real tear.

And when their own country wouldn't cry for them, why should she? South Hamgyong province was full to bursting with the weight of the tears she held for her own people. The wall swelled with them.

Liaotung's eyes squinted as she yawned. "This was a nice vacation. But I think I'm ready to sleep."

"You can all head back," SH said, standing. "I need to get Jin-suk home."

He should be there by now.

She turned down their offers of company, and South Pyongan helped get the sleeping girl onto her back without waking her.

"Thank you for inviting us, jiejie," Liaotung said, dipping her head.

SH returned the gesture. "Thank you for coming, comrades."

The other woman smiled under her mask. "I think you can all just use our names now." Liaoxi nodded in agreement.

SH's heart skipped happily. "Then you can use ours. Not that you weren't already calling me 'big sister.'"

"Now it's 'SH-jiejie.'"

"Korea says ah need to use your code names," Hae said gravely, clearly grieved by actually getting permission to use someone's given name for once and not being able to use it. "But after the war,

ah will."

"Looking forward to it," Liaotung said. Liaoxi nodded silently.

The others started down the hill as SH started across it for the other side. But a call stopped her.

"Hey, SH, one sec."

SH turned back to South Pyongan as she jogged back over. "What is it?"

The other woman looked suddenly uncomfortable. "...Never mind."

SH caught her before she could turn back around. "Oh no. No acting dodgy. What did you want to tell me? Or do I have to tell Korea about your newfound fervour for Socialism?"

"Oh, so *you* can do the whole 'pretending you never said that' thing, but I can't?" she complained. "But fine. It's just..." She actually appeared to squirm for a moment before blurting out, "I really admire you."

SH blinked, taken aback. "Um, thank you?"

Honestly, if she had been talking to anyone other than her cousin, the words might have sounded like the precursor to a confession. As it was, they were just... unsettling. South Pyongan- skilled, arrogant, strong South Pyongan- admired *her?*

She opened her mouth to ask if she was about to be asked for a loan.

South Pyongan held up a hand. "Don't talk until I'm done or I'll leave. You've been through a lot. Me and North Pyongan had it easy compared to you."

SH looked away. She never could have imagined that out of all people, it was South Pyongan bringing this up. During the Occupation, no one had directly acknowledged her time before joining the fight but South Chungcheong. And ever since the Division, Kangwon had been the only one. And even he always tried

to maneuver her into it, like when they were gathering herbs for Jin-suk. Aside from that, her cousins pretended like her life before Korea gave her her chance might as well not exist.

She had always wished that was true.

"You could have turned into someone like South Chungcheong or your jackass brother," South Pyongan said. "But you didn't. You're always trying to keep us in good spirits, or do crap for us. I know you're freaked out by everything that's going on, obviously, we-" She faltered a bit. "Everyone else is. But you still took time to do this for all of us, and cheer Hae up earlier."

"You're the one that cheered Hae up," SH protested. "I was just being depressing."

"I *said* don't talk. You're the one that brought us out here. We're in the middle of a war, and you took the time to organize an entire day to make us- and all of those chicks- feel better. All by yourself." South Pyongan took her by the arms, then immediately let go. "You're a really hard worker, SH, and it's always for other's sakes. And I think awhile ago I would have told you to focus on yourself instead, but..." Her lips thinned. "I think you're right. I think we exist for our people, not ourselves."

SH bit her lip. She hadn't meant that to come off that way. To her, it was a good thing, an inspiring thing. They had a purpose, and that purpose was to help their people. But she could see how for her more individualistic cousin, it could be a bitter medicine to swallow.

South Pyongan shook her head briskly. "But we're still the masters of our own destinies, even if it's different for us. And... look, while I'm being all touchy-feely I'll just get it all out." She huffed, fidgeted a little, then said, "I know you feel like you need to do stuff like sew and cook and shit that women 'should do,' but you don't. You let it get to you too much. I don't want to tell you how to live, but if you're bad at something and you don't actually want or need to do it, then don't. Like Pak said earlier- if it's not your passion, kick it in the gutter."

She had been avoiding eye contact, but now she looked at SH straight-on. "Since we aren't here for ourselves, if we want to be masters of our own destinies, we should get the reins on the parts of our lives that are actually *ours*. Don't waste time on crap we don't like or... can't change. Stop worrying about the past... Am I making sense?"

She was. SH considered how much of her spare time had been spent frustrating herself over soggy rice or underseasoned kimchi, not to mention how much time she spent while working having that frustration niggle at the back of her mind, and all her jealousy of Chun-yeon during their camp days, and now, if she was being honest.

And for what? Korea had never asked her to, neither had the General or any of her cousins. Generally, they actually pleaded for her to stop. And while she wanted to master sewing and learn how to knit, to make beautiful clothes for herself and her people, she didn't actually *want* to learn to cook. And she was the only one who had assigned the 'need' to herself. Korea didn't need soup to know she appreciated him.

Here she was, a woman in the Democratic Womrn's Union in the People's Korea, which had passed the Law on Sex Equality so soon after the Division to sweep away the cobwebs of feudalism, and yet she was festooning herself with them still.

'And I always accused North Hamgyong of clinging to archaic traditions.'

But while she could accept the overt part of her cousin's surprisingly touching message, the underlying one was harder. Attempting to stop wasting time on 'crap she didn't like' was a matter of avoiding kitchens and not letting her thoughts stray towards the subject. But the past was not so easily dismissed. There were ruts in her brain that certain memories ran in like wagon wheels. The painted wall and the dark rage it contained existed for a reason. They had to.

"And outside of our personal lives even, we're still our own masters," South Pyongan continued. "We choose how we fight. It's

like..." She gestured vaguely. "I think we can exist for our people, but live for ourselves. Ugh, don't talk to me. That sounded so corny." The blue-skinned woman clapped her hands to the sides of her head, trying to abscond again.

"Wait." SH caught her again, her cousin reluctantly letting her pull her hands back down, even though she could only use one to do it, the other holding Jin-suk steady. "It did sound a little corny. But..." She sighed. "You're probably right."

"I am?" South Pyongan blinked. "Oh, yeah, obviously. I always am. And while we're at it, Korea could stand to hear it, too. Not that I'm going to be the one to tell him."

SH smiled at that, shaking her head. "I think I was trying to prove that I..." She sighed. "I don't know. But whatever it was I was trying to prove, I wasn't enjoying the process."

Her cousin gave her a lopsided grin. "So does that mean no more oversalted rice?"

SH narrowed her eyes. "Was this all an elaborate ploy to get me to stop cooking?"

She had been joking, but South Pyongan answered seriously, "No. I really do admire you, SH. Way more now. But..." She grinned. "If you never pick up a pot again, I'll consider it a win."

SH smiled back, cheeks aching with joy. "Thank you, Pyo."

"Tch. Don't mention it." She kicked at a rock, looking suddenly embarrassed. "Seriously. Do *not* mention it, especially to your brother. I have a reputation to uphold."

SH laughed and linked their arms in lieu of a hug, before she let her go so they could go their separate ways.

But South Pyongan hadn't gone far before she halted in her tracks.

SH frowned back at her. "Something wrong?"

Her cousin bit her lip, something poignant- almost like grief-

flashing across her face, alarming SH. It was an expression she was unused to seeing on her.

"South Pyongan?"

She shook her head. "Yeah, I'm good. But I'm going to let the others head on back without me. And could you tell Korea I'm taking a longer leave when you get back?"

That was a little alarming.

"He's going to say no."

South Pyongan smirked, looking a bit less somber. "Yeah, which is why I'm making *you* tell him. I have something I've gotta do."

SH hesitated, unsure if she should insist that she stay. But there was something in her cousin's expression that told her to let her go.

"Okay," she assented. "But since I'll be the one taking the blame for it, you'll owe me half of your rations when you get back."

South Pyongan grinned, knowing that she was joking. "Half my dinner to avoid Korea yelling at me? Hard bargain, but I'll take it."

SH laughed a little. "Be safe."

"Yeah, yeah," she muttered, abashed again. "I will. I promise I'm not going out to cause trouble. Tell that to my brother, too, so he doesn't have a stroke. And... tell the kid I hope she gets her brother back."

SH smiled, shifting Jin-suk on her back. "I'm sure she will."

She watched her cousin walk away into the night, back up the hill with her hands in her pockets. South Pyongan usually had a spring in her step, a jaunty little swagger that implied she didn't have a single care about where she was headed. She would keep that bravado whether she was striding into a mass meeting, a rally, or the battlefield.

She didn't have it now. Her shoulders were bowed as if the weight

of the world pressed down on them, and each step she took up the hill was dragging, reluctant. If SH were to paint her right now, the title of the piece would be something along the lines of *'Burdens of Conscience.'* Or maybe that was too flowery. *'Reluctant Woman,'* would be simpler. Clearly she wasn't eager to do whatever she had to.

Surely she would be fine. She knew South Pyongan wouldn't take off for no reason, and while her cousin was a troublemaker, SH had never seen her as dangerous. And she had even been taking more responsibility lately. Admitting that she was a Communist was a sure sign of that.

She would be okay. So would Hae.

Jin-suk stirred on her back, yawning in her 'ear.' "Are we going home?"

SH smiled back at her, squeezing her leg gently. "Mhm. Let's go home, Jin-suk."

—

South Pyongan stood outside the door, taking a deep breath.

This was stupid. There was no way she'd be able to find her. She probably wasn't even alive anymore. She'd been what? Forty or something? She'd looked it anyway. So had he.

She should just walk away. It would be easier. Like being a soldier. Soldiers didn't have to say sorry for the people they killed.

But South Pyongan couldn't be just a soldier anymore.

She opened the door, sauntering into the General's office.

He was sitting at the desk, rubbing his face. Hyon Chol-hae had woken him up for her, and he clearly felt like crap. He'd probably only got an hour's sleep, even though it was so late. Him and Korea were workaholics, something she'd never get, even if she managed to make herself work that hard someday.

"Comrade South Pyongan," he greeted, sounding more awake than he looked. "Is everything well?"

She'd save the report on the guys they'd brought in for SH. She didn't waste time, strutting over and placing her palms on the desk.

"I need Korea's list."

The General raised his brows. "I might be able to help, if I knew what my province was talking about."

"Whatever thing he uses to know who literally everyone is," she said impatiently. "I know he has some sort of list with everyone's names and faces or something."

And crimes. Like that landlord. 'Neglectful but not cruel,' or whatever.

Kim Il-sung smiled at her. Wordlessly, he reached into his desk, pulling out a book and placing it in front of her.

It was bound in brown leather, the thin kind that didn't cost much, but the pages were thick. They looked swollen and well-handled, the edges not lining up right. The person that made it either hadn't been good at cutting, or a couple extra pages had been added. Maybe both.

South Pyongan realized she actually recognized it- it was the notebook she'd seen Korea writing in once and awhile during their time with the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army. She'd asked him what was in it once, and he'd snapped at her in that way that meant he was embarrassed, which meant she had devoted a few good weeks to attempting to steal it away to see if he was trying to be a poet like her brother or a songwriter like the General. But he always kept it too close, and she'd lost interest after awhile.

'Huh.' She would admit- she'd kind of been bluffing. She hadn't expected him to actually have a real physical list, if that's what this was.

She snatched it up, flipping through it.

Page after page of names, all crammed together in Korea's tight, no-nonsense handwriting. Some had scrambled syllable blocks next to them, clearly some kind of code. Some were slightly longer than others. Some had none. But each one had a little drawing next to it.

"Y'know," she said, looking at the General over the book. "If I was looking for someone, this wouldn't actually do shit for me. I'm not. But if I was."

"If you were, there might be something in there that could help you," he replied.

"Or, hear me out- because I'm your favourite province, we could just talk straight."

The man blinked patiently at her, and she heaved a sigh, flipping through the pages more carefully. As she did, something fell out into her lap.

A telegram strip. It was covered in syllable blocks, too, and Hanja. They were phasing those out, but she guessed they still would've been using them when Korea started this book. It was easy enough to guess it was the clue to the cipher. But...

"What about these little doodles?" she demanded, showing the General one that looked kind of like a cow if it had been halfway turned into meat.

"I won't profess to knowing the inner workings of my country's mind," the man said gravely.

Liar. Him and Korea had that little picture code of theirs.

"Korea just sucks too much at drawing for you to read these," she muttered.

The man didn't deny it.

South Pyongan didn't have to look as hard as she'd dreaded to find the name she wanted. It was at the bottom of the other side of the first page, between someone called Kim In-ho and a woman's name- Ok Su-jin. Unlike the others, this one didn't have a symbol next to

it. It looked like Korea had started to draw something that was either an eye or female bits (and knowing him, it definitely wasn't the second one), but had changed his mind, wiping it out with a smear of charcoal. There was just a name.

Guk Gun.

Her eyes lingered on the name under it. This one had a code, and the two rectangles with a line through them that a ton of the other names had.

"I'm borrowing this," she declared, snapping the book shut as she dared the General to challenge her.

"Very well," he said easily.

Too easily. It wasn't like him to give away their country's secrets so casually. Or their Countryhuman's.

South Pyongan narrowed her eyes. "Did Korea tell you to give this to me? Actually don't answer that."

She still didn't know how much they told each other. She didn't want to.

The General's face betrayed nothing as he leaned back. "I hope my birth province can accomplish what she needs to."

"You know South Pyongan province," she said, pushing off the desk. "She can accomplish anything she wants."

Not that she really *wanted* to do this. She'd rather be in the place of the guy whose balls she'd wrecked earlier than what she was about to try and do.

"By the way," she said as she strolled out. "I wouldn't go to sleep again. SH should be by soon to tell you about a little scuffle we had, and you know she's not a 'this can wait until the morning' person."

She shut the door on the General's sigh, heading off to find somewhere private to read the book, trying not to think about what it meant if Korea had given him permission to give this to her. If

he'd known she would come looking some day.

'Gross.'

There was no clue on where to start deciphering the symbols. It wouldn't be easy, even with the code. And if she managed to figure it out, what came next would be even harder.

What was that saying? 'We Communists do not fear difficulties?'

'Bleh.' Embarrassing. *South Pyongan* didn't fear difficulties, commie or not. She was the best at everything, so if something was hard, she had to conquer it. Sticking with what was easy was little bitch behaviour. And she wasn't a little bitch. If not talking about her tank crew was easier, then she had to tell Oh Renjiro how they'd died, how she had failed them. If being a soldier was easier, then she had to be a politician.

And if pretending she had never murdered one of their civilians and would have murdered another if she hadn't been stopped by the same person she had killed for, that she had chosen her brother over their people the way a reactionary traitor would, was easier, then she had to confront the fact that she had.

—

SH led Jin-suk along the path to her dug-out on the field's edge. She had let the girl down from her back so she could walk, stumbling along on sleepy feet, her hand in hers. They stopped a few paces from the mound, and Yun San-jin almost immediately poked his head out, his face slackening with relief when he saw Jin-suk.

"We're late," SH said, then made herself add, "I'm sorry."

The father had clearly been worried. Even if it would have been nice if he'd shown some of that worry for his daughter *before* he'd forced her to go through eight months of having her life force sucked out by a Yankee parasite, she should still be gracious towards him. Or civil, at least.

"It's alright," he said as he rubbed his chest. "As long as she's back."

He had to be alone or he would have said something. SH raised her head and caught a glimpse of movement from down the path. She had still beat him here.

She looked down at Jin-suk. "We had a good day, didn't we, Jin-suk?"

The girl nodded happily. "Thank you. It was a really nice birthday present."

Definitely better than last year. She was healthy, back in schooling, getting used to socializing again, and was going to be making new friends with Sun-ja.

And her family was coming home.

SH smiled. "That wasn't your birthday present."

Jin-suk tipped her head, puzzled, then turned to follow the province's gaze as she looked over her head. She froze as she saw the man coming down the path, instinctively going to hide behind SH before she halted, her eyes widening.

"Who is that?" her father asked tightly, heaving himself out of the dug-out.

The man pulled something from his shirt, holding it up in the air. It was too dark to see it, but SH knew it was a patchwork jogak-po, like the one Jin-suk's mother had made for her, stained and ragged from the months of being kept hidden.

"Oppa," Jin-suk breathed.

The girl looked back at SH, disbelief and hope welling in her eyes. The province beamed, pushing her forward gently, and she didn't need any other encouragement.

"OPPA!" She tore down the road and launched herself at him.

Yun Jin-tae caught her in his arms, and her stubby legs went flying as he spun her around. When her feet were flat on the ground again, he enveloped her in a hug.

"Jin-suk-ah!" he cried, crushing her to him. "I missed you, you little brat!"

Jin-suk laughed and sobbed, burying her face in him as she clung to her brother with all her might. She tried to speak, but just ended up crying harder, wailing into his chest.

SH was pleased to see the dim light glint from something on his wrist, glad he had made sure to wear his welcome home gift.

Behind her, Yun San-jin took a shaky step forward. "That's really...?"

SH held out her arm, stopping him for a moment.

"If she doesn't tell him on her own, then it never happened," she told him seriously. "It's for her to decide. Her choice."

Jin-suk's father's hesitation was far, far shorter than before.

"Always," he whispered, and SH let him go.

He half-walked, half-jogged down the road, like he was holding himself back. When he reached his children, he stopped.

"Jin-tae," he said awkwardly. "Welcome home."

His son raised his face from his sister's hair, formally holding out his forearm to clasp. Yun San-jin stood there, and the younger man's gaze fell to his missing arm.

He laughed then, and grabbed his father, pulling him into the hug, one arm around Jin-suk and one around him. And after a moment, Yun San-jin hugged him back. The last members of the Yun family held each other tight, like they would never let go again.

SH smiled, still with that bittersweet melancholy hanging over her, but satisfied. Another tear mended, as close to before as it could ever be. She turned to leave.

"Eonni!"

SH turned, and Jin-suk hit her like a missile, embracing her with all her might.

"Thank you," she whispered, her tears staining her uniform.

"It's what I'm for." SH stroked her hand over her hair again, then pulled away, and the girl ran back to her family, being folded into them again.

There would always be moments like the ointment for SH. When someone offered something small and innocuous that should have made her happy- bath oils or matcha, a roast fish- and she would be brutally reminded of what lurked inside her, what fed the dark thing, that she would never be able to feel silk against her skin or have a hot bath without being back there, huddled in the pile of clothes, screaming underneath the water. She would never be able to forget.

But it didn't have to be that way for Jin-suk. SH couldn't bring her mother or her sister back or make it so that what had happened to her had never happened. But she could make it so that when the girl unbuttoned her blouse, she didn't think about a Yankee man tearing the last buttons off, but of sliding into a pure spring, and when she ate kkakdugi, she wouldn't remember buying radish with the money that had been thrown at her, rather how it tasted in her mouth as she laughed watching South Pyongan overpower Pak Gyuri and spin her over head. And she could make it so that when she saw a watch, instead of counting thirty-two minutes and fifty-six seconds, she would think about how it felt to feel one press against her back as her brother embraced her again.

She could help her forget.

SH watched Jin-suk sob into her brother. And as she did, a feeling of guilt fell over her.

Kim Jong-suk had been a good mother, and not just to her own children, or theirs, but to the Chinese, and to the Russian children in the Soviet Union. She had never even been unkind to the Japanese, even when she knew they would grow up to be like their parents. She was better than them.

And so was SH. She was better than Yankee women. Even if she wanted them dead, even if she wouldn't cry for them, she didn't want them to suffer in the ways that all women suffered. If she had ever met an American girl like Jin-suk, she knew she would have wanted to protect her.

But there *was* a girl like Jin-suk. Or at least similar. One who had led them to the identity of their leak at the risk of her own life, but had allowed herself to stay caged.

Of course she had. You didn't leave the cage because someone else told you to. You left it because you told *yourself* to, because you had a chance.

But when you thought you were under a curse, how could you ever believe you had one?

SH walked away, leaving the family to their reunion, South Pyongan's words in her head.

'Masters of our own destinies.' She had needed to hear that.

And there was another woman that needed to hear it even more.

Kim Jong-suk was both SH's best friend, sister, mother-figure, and bisexual awakening. She haunts her narrative. And mine. Don't ask me about Revolutionary Heroine Kim Jong-suk or I'll start crying.

Post-Warring Pyongyang SH walks into the bathing room, turns on the light and sees Korea is sitting fully clothed in a bath of ice water. She turns the light off again and they sit in the freezing cold tub fully clothed in the dark together without saying a word. At some point Y/N walks in, turns on the light, they all stare at each other in silence, then she turns the light off and leaves, reminding herself that she chose to marry into this family.

I refuse to listen to those 'women living alone safety tips.' I will buy my single ice cream. I will walk home alone in the dark. I will answer the door. I will get into the elevator first. I ask the

gods every day to send a male to test my mettle. No sword formed against me shall prosper, and no man that thinks me prey will walk away unscathed.

I know this seems contradictory to the great distrust I have expressed for men before. It is not.

For Your Sake

North slowly opened the door to his room, his muscles rigid, ready to slam it closed at the slightest sound.

Nothing.

He warily peeked his head in, before realizing that if he *was* in there he would be making a fool of himself, peering around the door like a child who wanted to go out, but was afraid of being scolded by their parents.

Luckily the room was empty.

He slid in, moving fast, rolling his bedroll up and fastening a cord around it before grabbing his folded uniforms and packing them into his bag with his few mementos. He tucked SH's birthday painting of the bellflower under his arm since it was too large to fit in his pack with everything else. Then he took his clothes out, putting the canvas in instead. He would rather be seen carrying his uniform.

He paused with a photo in his hand, running his thumb across the letters carved into the paper by the pencil.

'The 63rd Army Lives Forever!'

Chest squeezing, he carefully tucked it in with SH's art, and the photograph he still couldn't let himself look at.

North Pyongan said Liaoxi had told him China was ready to emerge from Jonsung complex, which meant he would be coming back here. Which meant *North* would start sleeping in the office complex instead of splitting his nights between the military one and the bunker.

He was *not* letting China chase him out of his own headquarters. He was just… relocating for convenience. There wasn't any reason

for him to sleep here with his provinces and make the journey into and out of Pyongyang every day. That was all.

He buttoned up his pack, casting an accidental look at the other side of the room as he did, and the pile of gutted electronics.

As he did, something flashed. The glimpse of red clearly wasn't China's skin, but he still instinctively jolted, baring his teeth at it.

It was one of the handheld radios.

North cautiously approached, then shook himself, more aggressively picking it up. It wasn't like the man was crammed inside the military green casing, waiting to ambush him.

The radio looked finished, like China had said, though North assumed he still hadn't had time to test them, all things (getting shot) considered. It was ugly, the casing swollen with technology that almost bulged from it. Plastic panels had very clearly been cut and soldered to extend the housing chamber so it could fit the jumble of wires that had stuck out from the back before, and a weird grip jutted from the side, like plier handles. They might have actually been plier handles.

North gave them a tentative squeeze, and the radio emitted an aggressive whirring noise that made him scrunch his face in distaste.

Did they have a purpose or was China just making something to annoy whoever had to use this? North couldn't see the point of a combat radio that made a sound like that.

He found the antenna, unfolding it from the back to examine it. It was a little longer than China's last model, but far shorter than that of the BC-611-F transceivers that had been dismembered to make this one, only about forty centimetres. He wondered if it could still get good range, but definitely wasn't going to seek out China to ask.

The flash came again. A small bulb had been installed above the switch on the side that you would press to transmit and receive. It had a sort of hood that could be pulled down over it to hide the

light.

Running out of battery? North was a little smug that China hadn't figured out how to solve the battery issue before remembering that it had been lying in here since they left for the south, almost seven weeks. Even if he'd extended the battery life, that was still plenty of time for it to run down.

Admittedly, he wanted to know if China had succeeded at making a 'new' type of handheld radio, so he moved the switch up to see if it would hum with an empty frequency.

Instead he realized too late that the other radio was missing, moved since the last time he was here, just as the one in his hand crackled and China said, *"Ah, there you are."*

North threw the radio at the ground, leaping away from it and straight into the door, slamming the lock shut with a force that tore his burns open.

"Please be careful with your radio," China's voice said mildly. Unfortunately the thing conveying it had landed on his bedroll, remaining intact. *"I worked hard on it."*

North lunged for the device, but just as he grabbed it, the other country said, *"If you turn me off, you're going to have to talk to me for real."*

Gritting his teeth, the Korean demanded, "Where are you?"

"Maybe I succeeded at extending the range, and I'm on the other side of Pyongyang," China replied mischievously. *"Or maybe I'm right outside your door."*

North twitched with the urge to check, but didn't want to risk it. The man's voice was coming through with an amount of static that said he *should* be at a distance, but the thick concrete walls of the bunker and the stone of the mountain around it could be interfering.

*"But I know where **you** are,"* China continued. *"Hiding in our room."*

"I'm not hiding," North snapped.

"Oh? Didn't you lock the door just now?"

"No," he lied, making sure it was still locked, just in case the other country had figured out how to get it open.

"Mm," China hummed, sounding as convinced as all the times the Premier had told him he wasn't in while he was crammed under one of their desks. *"Regardless, I still know where you are. Which means we can finally talk."*

"I can hang up on you." North's thumb was already up against the switch.

"And I can wait outside all day," China breezily countered. *"I'm a very patient man. I think we both know I'm at least more patient than* ***you."***

North grimaced.

"So we can either have this conversation like this, or face to face," China said. *"Which would you prefer?"*

He didn't have any right to give him an ultimatum in his own country. North's thumb pressed harder against the warm plastic of the switch, quivering with the desire to slide it off.

Then he dropped the radio onto the bedroll, sitting back on the floor. "There isn't any conversation to have."

"I wouldn't think so," China said. *"Yet I get the distinct feeling you're avoiding me. And I have suspect the only reason you would come here in the daytime is to pack your things and move out."*

North eyed his bedroll and pack. "Stop acting like you know me."

"Everyone tells me you didn't even visit while I was bedridden. I was very sad when I woke up and you weren't sleeping on the chair, waiting faithfully for me to recover."

A mournful little sniffle emerged from the radio. North bit his

tongue on telling him there wasn't even a chair in his room.

"I have a job to do," he said stiffly. "I don't have time to waste worrying over idiots who get themselves shot."

"Well I do," China said, bouncing back to normal. *"How's your arm, by the way?"*

His provinces must have told him about it. North flexed his shoulder. The bullet wound was mostly healed, but all the strain it had taken while carrying China had torn the muscle. It would take awhile longer for it to fully mend. And he knew he would have another ache to look forward to in winter.

"Fine," he clipped.

"That's good. Interested in telling me what happened after I passed out?"

For a second, North could see how he looked on Song Dong-nyo's table, all the colour in his face drained into the bright red blood spilling from his slack lips, feel the impact of his palms on his chest, only silence inside.

"No."

China was unbothered. *"Thank you for getting me home in one piece, anyway."*

"You aren't home," North said tightly.

"And I still won't be going there until this war of ours is over," the other nation lightly replied. *"So let's not bother flogging that dead horse again."*

"You were almost the dead horse," the Korean growled at the radio. "And your debt is paid."

It had been a long time ago.

"You still aren't the one who decides that," China said. *"And you seemed to at least tolerate that until our little trip."*

North pulled his legs up to his chest, putting a barrier between him and the radio.

"I wasn't lying to you," the Chinese man said more seriously, softly enough that the static almost swallowed his voice. *"And I wasn't trying to drive you and your brother apart. I just thought you should know, Chaoxian."*

North grit his teeth at his name.

"But I don't think that's why you've been avoiding me," China said when he hadn't answered.

No. It wasn't. If it had only been about what he had told him about South, North would have just refused to talk about it, like he was refusing to think about it.

"You got shot."

"Mm, I'm aware," China said. *"I have a nice little scar from it."*

North drew his legs in tighter. "You took a bullet-" His arms wrapped around his knees, then dropped. "That bullet was meant for *me.* You shouldn't have made them target you."

"I'll point out that you wandered right into an ambush," China said, not sounding the way he should. *"You were surrounded."*

"Exactly." North's bandaged fingers scraped at the hard floor. "I was careless and walked into an ambush. The consequences should have been *mine."*

"I took a single bullet. You would've been filled with enough holes to be used as a xiao flute."

He deserved to be. He'd lost his temper like a child and stormed off. Having his organs turned into smooth tofu was what he deserved for violating military discipline. And personal discipline.

"I think it would be better for your nation if I was unconscious for a couple weeks, rather than their Countryhuman for half a year," China replied. *"You were aggravated enough at missing a month. I doubt*

you'd feel happy missing more, especially now."

"You shouldn't *care* about what's better for my nation!" North snapped, lurching forward onto his hands and knees to face off with the transceiver. "You shouldn't care about how I 'feel!' You got *shot,* China. For- another country. What if they had shot you in the head? What would your people do then?"

"They're managing well enough without me right now. I think they could last until I recovered."

"Countryhumans shouldn't risk their lives for other Countryhumans," North growled, gripping the radio like it was the other nation's neck.

The static crackled in a pause. Then China said, *"So if I'm getting this right, the reason you're mad at me is because I saved your life."*

"You didn't save my life," he denied. "I would have lived."

"But that is why you're angry."

North didn't respond. He should have choked him to death after all.

"I hate to ruin- Please hold me up, our connection is fuzzy."

The Korean angrily thrust the radio at the ceiling with both hands.

"Much better," China said with approval. *"I always hate to ruin someone's melodrama, but I can't help but point out that I've saved your life- or stopped you from taking injuries severe enough to send you into a coma, if you prefer- what has to be a few dozen times by now. And you've done the same for me seventy-three times, by my count. You fight very recklessly, by the way."*

"I'm not reckless," North snapped. "And it's different."

"How so?"

In the thick of battle there wasn't time to think things through, only to act and react. There were only enemies and comrades. And

China was a comrade. If North saw a gun aiming for his back or a knife coming for his ribs, then he had to get between them. It had gotten… easier. But it had never been a choice. China was a soldier. He had to be the same way. All the times he'd came between an enemy and North's blind spot were just reaction.

"Because *I* know I won't be taken out," he told him. "You knew you *were.* You *chose* to- make them shoot you."

'Comrade!'

If he wanted to warn North, he could have called from the other side of the ridge, where he would be safe. He had stood up there on purpose, trying to startle the reactionaries towards him, give them another target to shoot at.

He abruptly stood, storming to the door and throwing it open, needing to yell at China in person.

The hall was empty, so he went outside, glaring around at the clearing and forest.

"Where are you?" he demanded again.

"You're coming through clearer now," China noted. *"On the hunt, are we?"*

North picked a direction at random, storming off through the woods with the transceiver gripped tightly in his hand.

"So you're the only one allowed to risk himself for others?"

"I never risk myself," he snapped, looking around the bathing clearing and continuing on. "If you had been the one stupid enough to walk into an ambush, I wouldn't have done the same for you. I would have let you get shot."

"You would have?"

"Yes."

China laughed quietly.

"What?" North asked, voice tight as he started up the mountainside.

He bet he was somewhere high up, spying on him. He was going to push him off.

"Nothing," the other country answered, less staticky now. *"I don't need to know you'd do the same for me anyways. Kindness solely for the sake of reciprocity bores me."*

"It wasn't 'kindness,'" North growled, struggling up the steep side of Jangsan without using his hands. "It was stupidity. I didn't *want* you to do that."

"I don't see why that warrants giving me the cold shoulder. You know I hate the cold." China made a mock shivering sound.

"I'm going to kill you when I find you," North warned.

"Exciting. Need a hint?"

North ignored him. "I don't want to be around you and I never have. *That's* why I am avoiding you."

"Says the man I believe is currently scaling the side of a mountain to find me."

The Korean whipped around, looking back down the rocky ridge, eye darting over the treetops and the fields beyond them.

"Don't bother going back down," the radio said before he could. *"You're getting warmer."*

North bared his fangs at the transceiver. "I am not a man. I am a *Countryhuman.* And so are you."

"Observant as ever."

"I am a *foreign* Countryhuman," North reiterated, his jaw clenching as he had to use his sore arm to help him up the final metres to the mountaintop. "One who can't stand you, has pointed a gun at you seven times, and would be thrilled if you told me you

were leaving tomorrow and I never had to see you ever again."

'And got you shot.'

"So why would you fucking *do* that?" His voice echoed down the ridgeline as he staggered up onto Jangsan's spine, the abused burns in his thighs easily bursting. *"Why would you take a bullet for me?"*

He hadn't meant to say it like that. Immediately he switched the radio off and almost threw it back down the mountain, only stopping himself at the last second.

North swung around, scanning both sides of the bladed peak, on high alert for the slightest bit of movement to send him careening in the opposite direction. Nothing.

He ground his teeth, then switched the radio back on.

"You missed my deep, heartfelt monologue," China said immediately. *"It was very touching."*

North started down the other side of the mountain, mincing his steps to avoid falling flat on his face. That would be his final fucking straw.

"Do I need some deeper reason?" China asked after he had been descending for a few minutes. *"Can't it just be that I didn't want my friend to get shot?"*

But *why?*

"For the last time," North growled, his legs aching. *"I am not your friend.* I am an *allied. Countryhuman.* There isn't any reason for you to want me to get shot less than yourself."

"Isn't there?" China lilted, the signal stronger than ever. *"Our fates are linked, aren't they?"*

'Ssi-bal.' His provinces must have given him the damn transcript of the General's broadcast from a few days before International Worker's Day, or North's speech on the day of.

"That wasn't about *you,"* he muttered. "It was about the entire democratic Socialist camp."

"Ah, but the part about being united closely was about me. I believe I heard we have 'unbreakable friendly relations' and a 'militant friendship."

"That was about our *countries,* not us."

China's teasing made North take bigger steps so he could kill him sooner, and as a rock slipped from under his boot, he had to thrust out his arms to stop himself from going over.

"Careful, don't trip."

North showed his teeth at the piles of waste rock from the mines at the bottom of the ridge, hoping the bastard could see it from wherever he was.

"The speeches were about *proletarian internationalism,"* he enunciated. "Because it was *International Worker's Day."*

"I heard that in your speech you said, and I believe I quote, 'The Korean people love the People's Volunteer Army for their self-sacrificing spirit and their unwavering bravery in the fight against American imperialism,'" China recited. *"Interesting that my people are praised for their self-sacrifice, but not me."*

"Pro-le-tar-i-an in-ter-nat-i-on-al-ism," North spelled out through his teeth as he neared the bottom of the slope. "Do you *read* Lenin?"

"And I believe you also said, 'Korea is proud to link fates with China.'"

"I never said that."

"I was lying when I said 'I believe,'" China said with amusement. *"Someone from my Xinhua News Agency recorded it, and my Chen Geng and I had a listen."*

North wanted to bash his head off the rocks as he immediately shoved everything else he'd said that China would have heard out of his brain.

"'Proud to link fates with the *People's Republic of China,'"* he hissed, face burning.

"That isn't what you said~"

Ssi-bal, he *knew* he should have said the full name. He had been trying to show the Chinese soldiers and reporters he was speaking to at the theatre that he saw their claim to China as the only one, like when their news referred to him unequivocally as 'Chaoxian.' And he had only been echoing his General's words about fate from before.

"If our fates are linked, then shouldn't I be equally worried about one of us getting shot?" China asked as the ground evened out under his boots. *"And when you consider that **I** have a body double and **you** don't, don't the practical considerations mean it's better me than you?"*

"A Countryhuman should *never* think it's better for them to get shot than another Countryhuman," North growled, swivelling his head as he tried to listen for his response beyond the crackling air waves.

"I did," China said softly. *"Is it really so strange that someone wouldn't want you to take on any more pain?"*

North opened his mouth, then managed to retort, "I haven't taken on any pain to begin with." His skin burned as he stalked through the towering piles of waste rock. "Look out for yourself because I don't need anyone to look out for me. And I am *not* looking out for you."

The air waves hummed.

"China?" he demanded. "China?"

Ssi-bal. He had probably just led him on a vain search. He'd probably managed to extend the damn range on these stupid radios and he was across the Taedong, or halfway to Beijing, hopefully.

North gave a frustrated growl as he switched the radio off, turning around and immediately flinching back.

China smiled at him. Beamed, wide enough to show off the yellow spots on his canines.

"Impressive, isn't it?" China asked before the Korean could say anything. "We weren't that far apart, but the fact you were underground at first had to count for something."

North blinked dumbly, not understanding what he was talking about until he darted forward to pluck the handheld radio from his hand.

"I managed to combine some of your gifted radio parts with the parts from the Yankees' long-range tech that I hadn't mangled yet," China gushed, turning the radio in his hands. "We'll need to test the limits more, but I think I've succeeded. I dealt with the battery issue, too. See this?"

He showed the handles on the side to North, then started to rapidly squeeze them, making the radio emit that grating whir.

"I took inspiration from the foot-controlled generator on the set you gave me and installed a smaller hand-controlled one in the transceivers," he explained excitedly. "I had to use a lesser battery in order to fit what I need in it without making it too bulky to be practical, so the battery life is actually shorter than it was before, but now it can be charged anywhere. Did it get hot when you were using it? Because my prototype blew up."

He thrust the device at him, tapping the bulb on the side. "I took away the sound it makes when it starts receiving, too. The light is much more subtle. And you'll notice I added a way to hide it. It could be inconvenient for a field soldier since he never knows when a comrade is going to contact him, but since these are just for you and me, it should be fine. And you'll have an excuse for not answering, so you don't have to hurt my delicate feelings. So- what do you think?"

China should be glaring at him. His glare should be filled with resentment for North's carelessness getting him shot, *killing* him, if only for a few minutes.

But instead he was nearly vibrating as he tapped the handheld radios together, his eyes glowing.

North looked away. "…Don't do it again."

China tipped his head. "What do you dislike most about me- my dishonesty or my tendency to say things that make you incredibly uncomfortable?"

"The second one," North muttered immediately, growing even more uncomfortable as some of the things he had said over their acquaintance crept into his mind.

'I'm with you to the end.'

He hadn't asked for that. He didn't *want* it. Just like he hadn't wanted him to take that bullet.

"Then I promise I'll never risk my life for yours again," China said with perfect solemnity. "I regret it deeply."

North grimaced, snatching the radio back as it was offered before barging past him, making sure to shoulder check him hard enough to be satisfied.

"You wanted to talk about the negotiations and Geoje, didn't you?" he asked bluntly, staying far enough ahead of China that he wouldn't have to look at him. "Then let's talk."

"Mm, and how did you know that?"

"My General told me." At least North wouldn't have to hi-tactically camouflage himself under his desk anymore.

Even if it *did* mean he was going to have to keep putting up with China.

Ssi-bal. When they got close enough to the bunker, he would have to sprint in and put his things back where they belonged. He didn't want him to know he had been right about his plan to move out.

"I suppose you weren't very happy about the Yankees pulling us

around on their string again," China remarked.

North grimaced. "No."

Them and that *stupid* wording. Even now that Joy and Ridgeway had been replaced, and the indefinite recess fought off, they still wouldn't hand over the lists or agree to repatriate all prisoners.

"Think we'll have any future luck with the new batch?"

"Harrison is the same as Joy," North told him, eager to move away from… personal topics. "Comrade Nam Il inquired about the names missing on the newer lists, and was told they had escaped since December. But your Chang Wenjung was on them."

The man had been air-dropped over Korea in February. He'd managed to take out the helicopter that had brought him with a well-timed grenade, heading to the nearest friendly unit and allowing them to capture his Yankee handler and root out the other men that had been brought with him, most of whom had turned themselves over willingly, like SH's recent captures.

"All the Yankees are the same," China mock-sighed, following him up the mountain. "Consider me shocked and surprised."

North snorted.

As much as embarrassment was still itching under his skin, it was… good to be able to talk to the other Countryhuman again. He had- found himself annoyed that they couldn't have their debriefs the way they usually did at night in the bunker or at Jonsung complex while China was unconscious and he was *not* avoiding him. They were useful. A good way to summarize the information they had in a place where his every word wouldn't be examined, and he could theorize without accidentally instilling wrong conceptions in any of his officers' heads. And he didn't have to keep his wording as professional with China.

That didn't mean he liked talking with him. He shouldn't have used the word he had for it that first night he'd let him sleep in his room. He was just looking forward to being able to say he wanted

to beat the Yankee generals to death with sticks without Choe Yong-gon raising his eyebrows at him.

But there were some things he wasn't looking forward to discussing. Rhee had redeclared martial law in the south and started arresting assemblymen, clearly in a lead-up to the elections he was sure to lose without interference. Now that the press were allowed in certain areas of Geoje again, they had leaked another massacre of thirty-three prisoners on April 10th to the world, painting the picture some of the escapees that had came back to the north carried of being punished for resisting screening in more detail, and definitely more than the Red Cross had been willing to share. And-

"Boatner is worse."

The man that had replaced Dodd on Geoje Island had an unpleasant reputation for training Kuomintang soldiers to fight the People's Liberation Army during the World Anti-Fascist War, when the Chinese Communists and Nationalists had still been allied against the Japanese. He had already made it clear that his predecessors' pledge to stop the abuses of prisoners was null and void by breaking up the compound and militarizing the prison camp even further- more guns, more tanks, more soldiers.

In the two weeks and a few days since the Geoje uprising had happened, there had already been more massacres. Eighty-six prisoners had been killed in a camp near Busan after being starved for over a week for refusing screening. The Yankees had said it was a handful of agents that had snuck in, but the British press had brought out the full story before the press ban was slammed back over that camp- out of the one thousand six hundred prisoners, one thousand and one hundred had actively fought, and even more had sided with them. In one of the 'anti-Communist' compounds, only supposed to hold those who had promised to kill themselves if they were sent back north or to mainland China, only three men hadn't resisted.

And it had been a hospital compound. The Yankee officer making his statement had proudly described deploying tanks and armed soldiers against men on crutches and missing limbs.

And every day there were stories of small killings making it out of Geoje Island, where Haydon Boatner ruled.

"A dog with rabies is worse than a dog with distemper," China said. "They both need to be put down."

North's jaw feathered. He would if he could.

He had been close to Geoje by the Raktong. He should have-

But he hadn't. There wasn't any point in regretting it. He just had to move forward and rescue as many of his soldiers as possible with the armistice.

"America sent in more units," he reported.

American, British, Canadian, and Greek soldiers had all been flown in to reinforce the island prison camp this week.

"En," China hummed, picking his way up the ridge. "They don't seem to care much for the Geneva Convention either."

North had been right. Even after the Geoje news spread, even when the American commander of the hospital compound had said himself that all five thousand five hundred prisoners in the entire 'anti-Communist' camp were all Communists, even now that the International Commission of the Red Cross had gently chided the Americans for 'possibly' sending POWS back to war and starving prisoners, more violations of the Convention, no one cared. No one stopped their soldiers from being sent to the camp to join in the carnage. The Red Cross and the United Nations didn't lift a finger to prevent it. And even with the admittance that America was violating international law in all those ways, they refused to listen to Korea and China telling them that they were violating it with biological warfare, too.

Enemy prisoners starving to death in North and China's camps because they didn't have enough food to feed them when they didn't have enough food to feed their own people because the prisoners' army had destroyed their fields and murdered their peasants was a crime. But doing it intentionally was fine. Because it

was America.

"It's unfair, don't you think?" China asked softly. "When someone else sets rules you have to play by while they flout them. Makes you wonder why we should bother following them at all."

"Because if we didn't, they would make us pay for it," North clipped. "Only the nations with power get away with flouting the law."

"Just like only the bourgeois and the Japanese got away with it," China said. "And we both took care of that. If you don't want to get punished, there's a simple solution- don't get caught."

He murmured the last words directly in North's 'ear,' making him jolt and walk faster.

"Is that what you're planning on doing?" he asked, already regretting his decision not to move out.

"Hmm." The other nation sounded like he was considering it. "No. I intend to become one of those countries powerful enough to flout the law. And I intend to do it by the rules. Don't you think it's much more fun to beat someone at their own game when you're playing with a handicap?"

"Life isn't a game," North said, tense as he remembered America leaning over the 38th Parallel with that grin on his face. "I'm not trying to win anything other than this war."

He *wasn't* as greedy as China. Or greedy at all. He didn't care about being the most powerful country or being able to do what he pleased. He just wanted to be able to give his people the best life possible.

"Life *shouldn't* be a game," China corrected. "But if it is and you don't play, then you'll lose."

"You can't lose if you don't play," North countered. "And I will not play America's games."

He would aid the rest of the democratic camp in the way they

were aiding him, but he wanted nothing to do with grand alliances and risky moves. He had seen the stress it brought CCCP.

"Then I suppose you'll have to become powerful enough that you can deny your stage cue," China said after a moment. "Or turn, if you will."

That North did have every intention of. Like he had told South Hamgyong- America would still be out there when they had won and Korea was Reunified. So would the enemies of the Revolution. Rebuilding was important, but building up Korea's military might was going to be even more so. No matter how many new houses or factories they built, it would mean nothing if America decided to darken their skies again. It was why the foreign country didn't want him building airfields- so he couldn't defend his people.

But North would. It was unfair that America could freely violate international law while Korea got attacked and embargoed for fighting a civil war his government hadn't even started, and China was embargoed just for helping. North didn't want to flout the law like the Yankee- if he did it would only make his people more of a target. He only needed to become strong enough that they wouldn't be punished for any more made-up crimes, or the very real one of wanting to be free.

Though no matter how strong Korea became, no matter how impenetrable North made his country…

America still had the atom bomb.

—

China watched his friend tilt his head to the side, his single eye narrowing. He would say his poorly hidden expression was one of his usual anger mixed with a little dread. But there was a thoughtfulness in there, too.

'Thinking about how to get off stage, no doubt.'

Unfortunately for his friend, that wasn't something one could do. Life *wasn't* a game- it was a play. And they were all chained to the

stage.

But he had no doubt North would think of a way to go off script. He might not have very much (or possibly any) artistic creativity, but China knew if it came to his people, Korea could surely think of something.

He took advantage of his distraction to slink around to his seeing side and ask, “By the way, before we get too into our debrief- did I happen to die?”

North stiffened, his eye darting to him.

“…No,” he said after a moment.

China hummed, dropping back again. “That’s good.”

His friend looked away, shoulders tense. He only looked back over as they crested the mountain, standing on top of the narrow spine with a full view of the plains sprawling around them like a great green and gold cat. One that had been thoroughly peppered with birdshot.

North’s gaze lingered over the right side of his chest, then darted away as he plunged down the hill.

The Chinese country was relieved to see no pity in his eye or on his face. Guilt yes, but no pity. And if he could manage the ocean of guilt his friend felt for his people, then his guilt over him was also manageable.

He wondered between the two of them, which hated the idea of being pitied more. North, most like. China had played roles meant to be pitied before- as much as he disdained them, he had performed them when necessary, though he was thrilled they never would be again. He knew his friend well enough by now to know he could never bring himself to even act in a way that drew pity, even if it brought gains with it.

If he had met him back then, the Korean country likely would have faced him with cold professionalism and a steely veneer, even more severe than two Novembers ago. He would have wanted to

avoid being treated like a pitiable child or refugee.

And if the other one were here now…

China laughed silently. Well, then *he* wouldn't be. And be definitely wouldn't have a new 'souvenir' across from his heart. Or a whole host of them over his body.

He eyed North. From this angle he could just see the sharp curve of his hunger-pang cheek and a sliver of his eye whenever he turned his head to make sure China wasn't creeping up behind him.

Hmmm. Even if he wished he'd know his friend sooner, it was probably for the best they hadn't met back then. China would have had to treat him with respect, not wanting to offend his pride, which would surely be even easier to do since North would need to compensate for being in a young body. And considering that he had looked so cute in that little photograph of his that China had wanted to cut the other one out of the picture and make it vanish into his sleeve, it would likely be very difficult for him to resist offending him just a bit. The Chinese Countryhuman might be a good actor, but if North's cheeks had been even half as squishy as his brother's, it would have been near impossible.

North twitched to look over his shoulder again, then looked cross with himself.

"Get up here," he ordered, pointing to his side, likely paranoid that China was considering breathing in his 'ear' again.

Smart. He was.

He smiled, drifting up. His friend had pointed to his seeing side, but he slid up on his blind one, and the Korean didn't protest, only gave him another wary side-eye, like he was waiting for him to say something.

China wouldn't. He had told his friend what he knew. The rest was up to him. Even if what he'd surely decided was unfortunate for his own sake, the South wasn't his country and he wasn't his brother. There was only one Korea he was invested in.

“Did you get your Choe Jong-ok where she needed to go?” he asked, enjoying the little look of surprise and something deeper his friend gave him, the same one he wore every time China remembered one of his people’s names or something he’d said about them.

China knew how it felt.

“Yes,” North muttered, looking down. His banded face softened, just slightly.

“Good,” the Chinese country said, pleased.

He might’ve had to head off on a little side quest if his friend had had to leave one of his people behind for him, even if she was already dead. And he was on thin ice with his Xiao Mao as it was.

Knowing North had somehow managed to accomplish his mission *and* carry him all the way from the south likely while starving and in pain made China want to paddle his feet, though he kept his footing in steady rhythm with his friend’s.

Of course, he did feel bad that he had to put him through that. He’d been trying to spare him pain after all. But it was still exciting.

China’s gaze slid to the handheld radio North had unthinkingly buckled to his belt, lips curling.

Overall, this war wasn’t a good thing, obviously. China would have chosen to meet his friend back then instead of his boring brother and instead of now, for both of their people’s sakes. No matter how hard it would be to resist pinching his cheeks. But since things *had* happened this way…

He leaned over slightly, and North slammed his ear slit into his shoulder, twisting himself awkwardly to glare at him. Smiling innocently, he leaned away.

China was also proud to finally link fates with the right Korea.

Once again, I try to do through technological research for this time, but not for China's radios. He can just do that. Is it

realistic? I don't know, but he did it.

Something 'funny'- the person to suggest voluntary repatriation at the meetings for drafting the Geneva Convention was the Austrian delegate. The British, Soviet, and American delegates said no, and so did everyone else because obviously it's common sense that POWS shouldn't have the option to give up their rights as a POW because they could be tricked or threatened into losing that protected status, and there isn't any way to prove that they weren't, or that they weren't forced into choosing to stay (or it *was* common sense until America decided they didn't like it two years later). The only one who agreed with him was the Israeli delegate. I wonder... why a nation of settlers would want to be able to let POWs 'choose' where to go... It's almost like they have to recruit people to populate their fake country...

If North was a normal human, he would be the type of man to ghost his girlfriend of five years that he lives with. They would have one bad argument where either he hurt her feelings by accident or she said something that made him feel too vulnerable, and she would come home to find he had taken his clothes and nothing else, and she would never see him again. Avoidant. He would advise 'If you don't like something unnecessary (like personal relationships), leave,' but as a Countryhuman he can't walk away. Unfortunately for him.

The Wrong Brother

1938

Stand, pace, sit, stand, pace, sit.

South was starting to feel like North pacing the floor of the-

"No, no, get it together, South." He slapped his cheeks. "No thinking of stuff like that when you need to be calm."

Calm, he was calm. Why wouldn't he be calm? It wasn't like he was going to be meeting the only other Countryhuman he'd ever met or anything. Well, the only other one that wasn't-

Not thinking about it!

Stand, pace-

Door!

Hearing the polite knock, he shot for the door of his suite, then stopped. Did he get it? Did he wait for someone else to? He reached a hand out, shaking.

'Three, two-' He yanked it open, blinking at the person on the other side.

He blinked back, tilting his head and smiling warmly. "Korea, I presume?"

"I, uh, yes!" South realized he'd been slightly hunched over, gripping the doorknob, and shot up. "Korea! That's me!"

The name still felt clunky, even when the members of the Provisional Government had been using it for the past couple years.

'South, I'm South,' he wanted to say to them. *'I'm only half of Korea! My North is out there!'*

He thought. He hoped. He prayed. ***'Please.'***

He had told them. He'd *told* them he was missing North and he hadn't been alone in there at first. He didn't think they believed him. They wouldn't call him South. They thought being locked up for so long had made him go weird.

But Kim Ku had promised to look. He'd promised to find North. He'd promised to bring him back to South like North had promised to come back. Hopefully Japan's invasion of China wasn't distracting him.

China!

The man was still standing patiently in the doorway. "I brought gifts." He hefted the bamboo basket in his hand.

"Um." South looked both ways down the hall. "W-Where's Mister Pak?"

"I thought we could talk alone." China was still smiling. "Is that alright?"

"Um…" *Was* it alright? He wasn't really allowed to talk to people. If Japan found out he was here…

But the Provisional Government had set this up, and one said he knew China, sort of, so this was probably fine, right?

"Of course," he said, trying to sound calm. "Yeah."

He continued to stand in the doorway. China's smile widened.

"Oh, right, sorry." South flushed, ducking inside with the other man following.

Maybe the years locked up *had* made him go weird.

China laughed, but for some reason it didn't sound like he was laughing at South. "No need for apologies."

He held the gift basket out, and South blanked. Etiquette,

etiquette. Korean etiquette or Chinese? He'd been taught Chinese etiquette for this specifically, but now it was all fleeing his head like rabbits and he couldn't remember if accepting with both hands was just a Korean thing or not and oh God China was going to think he was rude and leave-

"Don't worry about etiquette, by the way," China said airily. "You can take the gifts out now, too."

South sagged in relief, taking the basket with both hands, the way he took stuff from Kim Ku and the others. After a panicked second of hesitation, he added a small bow. The men said since he was their Countryhuman, he didn't have to bow to them, but China was another country, so he should probably show proper respect.

"Thanks. I, uh, got you something, too, by the way."

Well, the Provisional Government had. He couldn't really go shopping or anything.

He set the basket down, heading to the desk, his hands shaking as he pulled out a black lacquer box to present to China, who took it with both hands. Chinese etiquette? Or was he just better at foreign manners than South?

China opened the box, examining the glossy smoking pipe in it. He uttered a soft laugh that made South nervous.

"Do you, um-" He tried to make his swallow as quiet as possible. "Do you like it?"

"Did you make it?" the man asked, examine the pipe.

"Um, no." South rubbed his arm. "B-But it's briar."

Why did he stutter? He'd never stuttered with North, but it just kept happening with everyone else.

He nervously watched China while he ran his finger down the curved stem.

"It's lovely," he said after a moment, smiling genuinely. "I actually

needed a new pipe. I'm sure I'll get good use from it."

South sagged with relief. "Oh, good. Um, you can sit."

China sat at the small table by the paper-covered window, blinking at him, and the Korean quickly realized he should sit, too, practically throwing himself into the chair across from him.

"I asked your friends what you liked before I got here." The other man reached into the basket, pulling out a few bottles. "They said you fancy sweet drinks and cakes, so I brought you some plum juice, chrysanthemum tea, and some extra sweet huangjiu rice wine. And a red bean bun, of course."

He set the little package in front of South, who eagerly pulled it close. He preferred the little European cakes he was sometimes given, and the rush of sweetness that came with them, but he would never turn down food. It was still a novelty, getting to eat whenever and almost whatever he wanted.

"Thanks," he said, biting into the still-warm bun.

"I'll pour us drinks." China went to the glass-faced drink cabinet of the parlour, coming back with crystal glasses.

South watched him, chewing on his bun. The man looked older than him, physically twenty-sixish, maybe, though who knew how old he really was. Japan had looked maybe thirty-five, but he'd actually been-

'Not. Thinking. About. It.'

China wasn't wearing as nice of clothes as he had expected. While South was wearing white silk with a blue jeogori over it, patterned with darker embroidery, the man was only dressed in a bluish uniform and hat, the brim of which covered his flag design. It didn't even look like an officer's uniform.

He was tall, a *lot* taller than South. And slender, with long limbs. The Korean was kind of jealous, sitting up straighter in his chair.

He was sort of jealous of his face, too. His complexion looked

really nice, and he had high cheekbones, even if his cheeks looked a little hollow, like Nor- like hollow cheekbones looked. But on an adult, it made him look less malnourished and more dramatic.

South poked his own round cheek, feeling it squish. He guessed he was just happy that he wasn't starving anymore, but he wished he could be well-fed *and* pretty, like China.

"What drink would you like to share?" the man asked, swishing back over. *And* he was graceful. Some things really were unfair.

South almost pointed at the plum juice before his finger curled in.

That would be way too immature, right? The Provisional Government people always drank alcohol with each other and with him when they visited. Alcohol was a business drink and this was… business? He thought it was, anyway.

So he pointed at the rice wine, even though he didn't really like the way alcohol burned, or how even the sweet stuff was still kind of bitter.

Actually, if the man had asked the Provisional Government about the stuff he liked, he was surprised they hadn't told him he didn't like alcohol. He'd gotten hungover once and it had sucked. Like *really* sucked.

China examined him for a minute, making him nervous, then smiled, setting South at ease as he poured them each a glass. He had a nice smile, warm and friendly.

He had called the Provisional Government South's friends, and that felt good. South had never had any friends. Maybe China could be…

"Cheers." China held up his glass and South clinked his against it with only a few seconds of panic.

"Yeah, ch-cheers," he said, bracing himself before taking a sip of the rice wine.

'Eugh.' It burned, like he'd known it would, though he did his best

to hide it.

“Do you like it?” China asked, watching him.

“Yeah, it’s really good.” South mustered a smile. “Thank you.”

The man smiled. “I’m sure you’ll get as much use out of it as I will my gift.”

“I will.” He could just give the rest to Mister Pak as thanks for standing outside his door all day. He took another drink to be polite.

“You’re not worried about poison?”

“Um.” South blinked, holding his drink in his mouth. “Wha?”

China’s lips curled over the rim of his own glass. “A joke.” He took a little sip, which meant it probably had just been that.

“Oh. Haha,” the Korean quickly laughed, taking another drink. It didn’t taste sweet at all, and he kind of wanted to ask the man if he was sure he’d gotten extra sweet.

But everyone had stressed that he had to be really polite. China was powerful and could be a big help against Japan (and they *were* kind of crashing in his country). So South made himself take another drink without making a face.

“So.” China swirled the deep golden liquid in his glass. “What’s your favourite colour?”

South paused at the random question. No one had ever asked him that before. Did he even have a favourite colour?

The sky above as North hustled him up a tree, the scrap he could see out his barred window, the wide expanse that had made him burst out sobbing when he had been pulled out of the cargo trunk, only setting foot in China for a brief second before collapsing to his knees, overwhelmed.

‘Free, finally free.’

“I guess blue,” he said shyly. “Sky blue.”

“Why?”

“Uh, I just… like it,” South murmured, fidgeting with his glass. “I… didn’t get to see the sky much until recently.”

“Courtesy of our mutual antagonist, I suppose.”

He nodded quietly.

China didn’t poke anymore at that, asking instead, “Do you prefer silk or cotton?”

South was more confident on that one. “Silk, definitely.”

China kept asking him questions, nothing really important, just things like:

“What’s your favourite food?” “Those little French cakes with jam.”

“When it comes to meals, do you feel flavour or presentation is more important?” “Uh, flavour? But I think it needs to look nice, too, or you won’t want to taste it.”

“How do you like your tea?” “Um, with honey.”

“What do you think of Trotsky?” “Who?”

“Something I wish *I* could say.”

It was actually kind of fun. South hadn’t really thought about the answers to most of them before, even though so many of them were mundane. China wasn’t as scary as he thought he would be, aside from that little poison comment. South liked the way he smiled while he talked, genuinely invested in what he was saying.

“What do you think of the arts?”

South brightened. “I love art! Mister Ri brought me a few. They’re on the wall.”

He pointed to the landscapes and still lifes- Mount Kumgang, Seoul, Mount Jiri, the Taedong River, Paektusan- little snippets of a country he had still never seen, aside from glimpses out a window and while being ferried across the border. Places he hoped to see with North someday.

China had seemed to brighten, too. “Do you paint?”

“Um, no, but I want to try.” South rubbed his arm. “Mister Ri promised to send me some paints and stuff. And- And I like to sing and dance.”

That… was a little embarrassing to admit. But he felt like the man had almost seemed… disappointed in his answer.

“Show me.”

“I, uh… I don’t think I’m drunk enough for that yet.”

China laughed, making South flush with accomplishment. “Well then tell me when you are.”

South poured another glass, wanting to get drunk now to gain the courage, even if it gave him a hangover tomorrow. He’d only ever sang for North before. Maybe if he did it for China, he could be bold enough to sing for Kim Ku and Mister Pak and the others. It might help take their minds off the invasion.

Should he ask about that? Was it rude to question your ally about the fact that he was being invaded as they spoke?

South was mulling this as China leaned over the table.

“So, I’ve heard a little rumour.”

“About what?”

“I hear that the Korean Countryhuman is waging a resistance war against Japan,” the man said casually, trailing a finger over the table, examining it for dust. “Leading armies in Manchuria and Korea.” He cut his eyes to him. “Is that true?”

South's eyes widened. "Me? Fighting in a war?"

That sounded more like something North would do, and for a moment, hope flickered in his heart.

But no. His brother wasn't really the type of person to lead armies. Army commanders should be charismatic and confident, and while North was definitely the second one, he was too gloomy and quiet to make people listen to him.

'Only you.' Only him. And it had lost him his brother.

It was something his brother would *want* to do, not something he was capable of.

But still South asked, "Where did you hear that?"

"Just around," China said idly. "But I suppose my information was wrong. Pity."

The hope curled up and died. Of course, it couldn't be North. If North were out there leading armies, he would have come back to rescue South. He would have come back even if he was alone. The only alternative was that he was…

'Maybe that would be better.'

South was horrified at the thought, shoving it away with all his might, taking another swig of not-so-extra sweet huangjiu to take the edge off the bitter voice. It hadn't meant it.

"Do you have any intentions to fight?" China asked casually, thankfully distracting him.

South laughed nervously. "I'm not… really a 'fighting' person. That's what Mister Kim Ku and the others are doing."

"I see." China took a sip from his drink, which was somehow still mostly full.

The Korean twiddled his thumbs in his lap, unable to tell what the other man was thinking. "So… are you saying that *you* fight?" He

looked at the blue uniform with new eyes.

China smiled. “Occasionally.”

South couldn’t imagine that. Being alone with Japan was bad enough, but being on a battlefield with hundreds, maybe thousands of people trying to kill you?

“But isn’t that, well… scary?”

The dark-red-skinned man laughed lightly, taking another sip of his wine. “I suppose it might be, if I were afraid of dying.”

Blinking, South asked, “You’re not afraid to die?”

“I have many goals. Living for nothing has never been one of them.”

There was something sharp this time about China’s smile, and his eyes almost seemed to… glow. The intensity in them made South lean back a little, suddenly nervous.

“*Victory* is,” China said, his voice low. “Liberation is. For *all* of us.”

“Oh,” South said, unsure of what else he could say. “Well… I really hope you win, then.”

China examined him, his eyes almost seeming to pierce into South’s soul.

Then he sat back, his voice light again. “I will. More wine?”

South let him refill his glass. That had been… weird. He thought. Maybe other Countryhumans were just like that.

Aside from the little bit of weirdness, he liked China. He made jokes and told little stories as they ate the steaming bowls of rice noodles that Mister Pak brought them, and even plucked one of his pork slices up to place it in South’s bowl.

And he looked him in the eyes. Even if China had… kind of an intense stare, it was still nice to have someone look directly at him.

The Provisional Government men were always bowing their heads and dodging his face, even Mister Ri Dong-nyeong, the Chairman. South knew it was polite, but it always made him think of those nurses, pretending he didn't exist as they treated his bleeding back. And Japan. The way he would stare *through* you instead of at you.

The only one that had ever looked him in the eyes before was North. And even if it made him squirmy to have someone that wasn't his brother stare at him so directly, it was still… nice.

And when South finally got drunk enough that he was filled with the urge to sing, China joined in, teaching him a Chinese song, something about an international… something. It was fun, anyway. More fun than South had had in... a long time. Maybe ever. Though of course he wished his brother were here.

God, he wished he could do this with North. Get drunk and stuff themselves on noodles and cake, sing at the top of their lungs and fall into the big soft bed and sleep with their backs pressed against each other like they always had, except this time uninjured and full and happy and *together*-

"When the tears start to flow, that's usually the time to put down the bottle."

South was vaguely aware of his fingers being unclasped from the neck of the huangjiu before he could pour the last of it into his glass, and someone straightening him up before he slumped forward into them.

"North," he murmured into their chest, clutching at his cotton shirt.

"Is that someone I should know?" China asked.

Right. Not North. North was still gone. He had left.

Suddenly, South wanted to tell China that. He wanted to tell him all of it, the beatings, the shack, Japan, the March First Movement, that small cement room where he had- *North.* He thought this man with his sharp eyes would believe him. He could tell him it was

awful that his brother had left him and reassure him that he was alive, that he would come back.

But his tongue was too tired to do more than mumble an incoherent response, and all he wanted was to curl up and sleep. The bed felt soft as China helped him into it, tucking the blanket around him.

He would tell him in the morning, when he wouldn't embarrass himself. Maybe he could convince the man to stay for a bit and keep him company. They could sing more and maybe he could help South learn how to paint. Hadn't Mister Pak said that the Chinese Nationalists might move to Chongqing if Japan took any more land? That meant China would be nearby. That meant they could see each other more often.

South could finally have a friend.

When he woke up in the morning, his head was pounding from what was only his second real hangover, and his mouth tasted like gravel.

And he was alone.

—

1952

South wasn't a bad person. He *knew* he wasn't a bad person, no matter how much Kangwon wanted to convince him he was.

'There's only so many bad choices-'

'It wasn't bad!' South cried, maybe out loud as he slammed his hands on the table he was kneeling beside. *'I had to do it,* I had to!"

Gangwon had *made* him do it. If he'd just came back when South had called, if he hadn't deafened himself like a crazy commie, if he'd just renounced North, he wouldn't have had to do it.

South wasn't a bad person. He felt guilty about it. He couldn't even walk by the house the province was being kept in now without

feeling a little stab of it, he had to go the other way the rare times he went outside or he'd get so upset he had to turn around and go home and drink until he forgot what it felt like to have the impact of the whip shudder up his arm, those cold eyes boring into him, full of-

Japan had never felt guilty. He had *never* felt guilty, not after breaking South's ribs, not after dropping North's mangled body on the floor after he was done with him or tearing his leg out of its socket, not after locking him away and stripping the flesh off his back. He'd just stared through him with those cold empty eyes as South cried and wailed and pleaded for it to end, his arm rising and falling, rising and falling and it wasn't anything like when South had done it to Gangwon. He wasn't *anything* like Japan.

'You could have fooled me.'

"North fooled you!" South didn't remember picking up his glass, but suddenly it was shattering against the parlour wall, shards of glass spraying the room. "North tricked you all into thinking he's kind and caring and good and I'm bad!"

'He said you were kind.'

"You're liars!" South screamed at the stain the whisky dregs had left on the wallpaper. "You *lied* to me! You never did anything but lie to me!"

Just like North.

Even when he'd been so nice, bringing them food and company and that scarf that Hwanghae had thrown away as soon as she could. And they'd still hated him. They didn't have a right to stare at him the way they did when he'd removed their silent Commands or say the things they did until he Commanded them to stop. They acted like he'd done something unforgivable, but they already treated him like he had before it, so what was he supposed to *do?* Why should he keep being nice, why should he just give them a slap on the wrist when they would hate him no matter what, and he knew that if their positions were reversed, North would have done the exact same thing. *Worse.*

He was the violent one, not South. *He* was the one that liked hurting people. South didn't. He *didn't,* and he knew he didn't because he felt bad about it. Even after the provinces had been so mean, even after Gangwon had abandoned him, even after South Chungcheong had betrayed him, he still felt bad. He wasn't looking forward to punishing the Communist provinces and he didn't want to have to Command the ones here to stop being mean to him. He wanted them to not *want* to be mean to him. He wanted to be nice, to be friends, to be *family* the way they were *supposed* to be. He wanted to say sorry, but why should he when they would just tell him that sorry didn't fix anything?

Why did he have to feel this way when he knew he shouldn't? Why had those blisters on his palms scarred and left ugly little marks when he knew Japan's never had?

South wasn't a bad person. He *knew* he wasn't a-

There was a sound outside, and he scrambled up- when had he fallen back to the floor?- heart slamming against his burned ribs.

'North.' He'd heard about what South had done and he'd come here to punish him for it and he was right outside-

"Don't be stupid," South muttered to himself, slapping his cheeks. It didn't sober him up, but it did knock some sense into his bleary brain.

There was no way North or his commies could've made it into the heart of Busan. The martial law that Rhee had slammed down on the southern counties again would just make it even harder. The only people on the streets right now were the ones that had permission.

America, maybe.

He was exhausted and felt sick, but he staggered down the hall anyways. If he didn't want his friend to question his Commanding of Gangwon, then he had to be obedient. If America wanted to drink at two in the morning, South did, too. If America wanted to take him to see the prisoners being driven to the camps in trucks

and forced out at bayonet point, South did, too. And if he wanted to watch a movie when all South wanted to do was curl up in a ball and drunk until he forgot the smooth heft of leather and the shock through his arm, then no he didn't. He wanted to watch a movie.

Because if he didn't, America might start to get suspicious. He knew he was already visiting Gangwon. He'd seen him doing it late at night as he stared vacantly out the window, searching for his brother's shadow in the dark.

Luckily South had Commanded the province not to tell him about China, or that South had lied to him, no matter what.

South knew his friend wouldn't leave. Not forever. He would always come back for Korea. It was why this was all necessary.

But he didn't want to risk him leaving at all. Even if his soldiers stayed, he didn't want to find out if he would, or if he'd go to Taiwan, start watching movies with *him* and buying *him* gifts and calling *him* 'kid.'

He didn't want to know if he would choose Red China over him, the way China had chosen North over him.

South grit his teeth as he leaned against the wall, trying not to slide down it.

He couldn't believe Red China was really here on the ground after all. What did it mean? He knew the guy was a soldier, but he had been a Nationalist soldier, hadn't he? He shouldn't like Communists now. He shouldn't *be* a Communist now.

South had had a momentary flicker of hope that it wasn't the same Countryhuman. That civil war had been messy after all. There had been like, ten. Maybe the one he'd met had died. Maybe he'd meant to come back and visit South, but the Chinese commies had killed him.

But no. America had let him look at a newspaper from the trial last year. South would recognize those slanted eyes and little smile anywhere. Or at least on any China.

It was him. The China that had drank with him, laughed with him, made him think maybe he'd finally had a friend, that he wouldn't be so alone, then left him without even a goodbye was the same Red China fighting at his brother's side.

It didn't even matter if he was puppeteering him for the Soviets because South knew North wouldn't take that lying down. He might have left to be with CCCP, abandoning South in Seoul again, but he hadn't been nice to the man. He'd been rude and bossy and aggressive, the way he always was. He had to be that way with China, too.

So why was he here? Surely he didn't need to do the puppeteering himself. He had to have… people for that. America was in Korea, but that was because he was South's friend and had been since before the war. China didn't even *know* North. He had known *South.*

And he had left him.

South had been sad at the time, he might've even cried. Okay, he *did* cry. He'd nursed his plum juice and cried like a baby once a day had passed and Mr. Ri told him China had said he had no interest in allying with them. But now…

It filled him with that sick dark feeling, the same one that would bubble up when Japan left without even looking at him, only paying attention to his brother, or when North had told him the reason Japan had let him out of his isolation for a day to take that photo for the paper was to lure him out.

He hadn't *wanted* to be around Japan, and he didn't want to be around China. He was a commie, probably just as crazy and bloodthirsty as the rest of them-

'I have many goals. Living has never been one of them.'

-but that knife was still lodged in his ribs, twisting. Maybe if China had been friends with him, South could have stopped him from being brainwashed into being a Communist, the same way he could've stopped North if he'd just *stayed.* But he would never know because for some reason the other Countryhuman had decided he

wasn't good enough. It hadn't even taken him more than a few hours to realize what everyone else eventually did- that South was broken inside, that something was wrong with him, wrong enough that people would choose North- violent, rude, disobedient North- over him, no matter how nice and fun he was.

And his brother had left. For 'more important things.'

So *why,* as South finally managed to reach the front door and throw it open, did he have to feel disappointed to see it really wasn't him out there?

It was a man. Wesson had him pinned to the ground on the other side of the gate, while Smith was showing Ku Cheol-moo some sort of card.

"What'sh… going on?" South slurred, blinking as the bright sunlight stabbed his eyes.

"Nothing, sir," Seok Ki-cheol said coldly from his place beside the door. "Go back inside."

But the man on the ground had seen him, and shouted, "Look, he's right there! Just show him the damn thing. If he drops dead, you can arrest me then."

"You will be arrested regardless," Ku Cheol-moo shot at him. "You are violating martial law by being on this street without proper papers."

"I have my identity card," the man griped. "I told you that the only reason I'm here is to deliver Mr. Korea's mail. Have you *tried* to get a permit? If it was something important, by the time I got one, the letter could be out of date. And guess whose head would roll for it?"

Were they executing people for late mail or was he just being dramatic?

If they were, South guessed it was necessary. Messing with the news could mean someone was a commie, trying to sabotage the flow of information, or something. Someone would have to investigate at

least.

"Look, I don't even know what the letter says," the postman huffed in exasperation. "You do. If it's a threat or whatever, come to the station and I'll let you look through our records to find out who sent it. If it's not, then let me up."

A letter? Maybe it was from one of the countries whose armies were here, wanting to finally talk. Or just another nation that wanted to see how he was doing.

"Can I see it?" South asked, interested.

Seok Ki-cheol looked like he might say no, but Ku Cheol-moo glanced at the card again, then said, "It should be acceptable."

At Smith's nod, Seok Ki-cheol went to grab it.

"Good," the postman said. "Now get this American off me."

Ku Cheol-moo turned cold eyes to him. "You're still under arrest for travelling without the proper permits and possible Communist sympathies."

"Comm-?" The man's face paled and he started to struggle under Wesson, his annoyance changing to fear. "No! No, please, I was just trying to do my job, I have no idea what's in that letter, *please-!"*

Wesson dragged him up, shoving him at the other American gate guards, who slapped handcuffs around his wrists.

"You can't do this!" The postman's voice went high as he was dragged away. "I have family!"

"Rest assured, they'll be investigated as well." Ku Cheol-moo turned on his heel as the man was hauled off, still screaming.

South paid no attention. He'd be fine. If he really wasn't a commie, he'd be let go once they investigated. And if he was…

Well. He would get what he deserved.

The Countryhuman snatched the card out of Seok Ki-cheol's rough hand, but froze as he saw what was on it.

He didn't recognize the square or the tower in the background. But he knew what the red star on top of it was. The same one on the medal CCCP had worn pinned to the shirt underneath his jacket when he came here, and that South had confiscated from South Pyongan's brother's hat before giving it to her. The one echoed on his own brother's flag.

The Soviet star.

His eyes flicked to the word on the front. He couldn't read it, but the language was vaguely familiar from some of the books in his borrowed house. Russian.

"Is this from the Soviet Union?" He tried to smooth his pulse and not sound nervous. Or maybe he *should* sound nervous. He let his brows furrow, just in case.

"Yes," Smith clipped, emerald eyes boring into him.

They all were, watching him without seeing him, only wanting to see what he would do.

South switched to holding the card by the corner, pinched between two fingers like he was afraid it might bite him. "Can you go get America for me? Please. He should know about this."

Wesson's blue eyes flashed with approval. Slowly, Smith nodded.

"Thanks." South smiled, turning around and taking the postcard inside.

None of them tried to stop him.

Inside, he went to turn the card around, but stopped. He should wait until America was here.

He went to the kitchen, setting it on the table. Then he moved it to the counter, trying to make it look like he'd tossed it there without caring what it said.

But it would be weird to not be a little curious, right? Maybe it would look like he was trying too hard to be unsuspicious.

He *wasn't* suspicious. He had no idea why he would be receiving mail from the Soviet Union, unless it had some sort of tiny bomb attached to it or was covered in one of the weird powders South Pyongan had tricked him into testing her brother's hat for.

But what if North was trying to frame him for something? What if he'd realized South was too smart to let him use Communist tricks on him to make him hate America, so he'd turned to trying to make America hate *him?*

His friend would have to know he'd never work with CCCP. But he was really… Not afraid. America wasn't afraid of anything, he didn't think. But he was paranoid about Communists. For good reason. But no matter how good the reason was, South still didn't want to end up being investigated with that post guy. Being in a cold, dark cell, on a cement floor just like-

Yeah, no. He didn't want to let North set him up for anything.

South picked the postcard up, moving it to the table again, setting it down carefully far enough away from him that he would have to reach for it. That was good, he thought. He'd just have to stare at it fearfully when America walked in. Easy to do. He'd tell his friend he was too scared to touch it, in case the commies were trying to use the germ warfare they'd been accusing America of using on them.

South heaved a sigh as he slumped into the chair, burying his face in his arms as he waited.

He wasn't a bad person, he reminded himself, the way he had been since that day. He knew he wasn't. Bad people didn't feel awful about the stuff they had to do. They just did it. North hadn't been torn up when he'd killed those people.

It wasn't like South thought it was wrong that he'd killed their guards. They'd been trying to hurt them. They *had* hurt them. That second guy had been going to-

They had deserved to die. He knew that. But he still thought North should have felt bad about it, or at least felt a little guilt. It wasn't normal not to. Gangwon would heal and be perfectly fine, but the memory of punishing him still made South feel sick after all.

He... He wasn't saying North was bad. He was just brainwashed. He was South's brother and he loved him and this wasn't about him and whether or not he was a good person. It was about *South*, and he *was.*

Punishing Gangwon had been necessary, for him, for the province, for all of them, for Korea. It had been necessary and he hadn't liked doing it and he knew if he hadn't the province would just find some other way to rebel, some way to help North, so *why* did he keep thinking of how it had felt to be locked in that room, his knees grinding into that man's blood, his back tearing open as the Japanese watched him, as Japan's arm rose and fell over and over again until he lost count and knowing that there was an end in sight hadn't stopped him from begging for it to stop, please ***stop.***

South shot up, grabbing the postcard and flipping it around, needing to feel something in his hand that wasn't warm leather.

The word on the front was Russian, but the ones on the back were in carefully written Korean. He stared dully at them.

'Please take care of my brother.'

There was no signature. If there was a return address, it was on the envelope his guards had kept. But South knew who it had to be from.

Kangwon. Telling him to look after Gangwon.

The words stared up at him mockingly. *'Please take care of my brother.'*

South felt the smooth heft of the whip, the impact up his arm, the burn of the blisters on his hands and down his sides as they broke open, heard the disgusting choking gasps and was crushed under the weight of those silent, hateful stares as he punished Gangwon,

as he flayed his back open the same way Japan had once flayed his open.

An awful pressure formed in his stomach, surging up into his throat and into his mouth like vomit, until it burst out of his lips.

And he started to laugh.

South's body shook with it, from his shoulders to his toes, the feeling too big to contain, and he knew why America always hit him when he laughed now. He slapped at the tabletop, pounded it with all his might and drummed his feet against the floor as he threw his head back at the ceiling, howling long piercing shrieks of laughter that sounded and felt more like screams and it still wasn't enough to get the feeling out.

It was funny! It was really funny that Kangwon thought he had any right to ask him to take care of Gangwon when he had turned himself into a cripple forever just to stay away from South, when just like those prisoners he could have just renounced North, could have at least *pretended* to renounce North, and everything would have been fine, when Kangwon had lied about Hwanghae and lied about South Pyongan and *lied* about seeing him as Korea and gone running back to North as soon as he could.

Because why *should* he? Why should he take care of Gangwon when Kangwon hadn't even taken the time to add to take 'take care of yourself' or that he hoped he was okay? Why should he take care of Kangwon's brother when his own brother had left him to die and never even *tried* to rescue him? Why should he take care of the provinces or the arrested assemblymen or the prisoners of war when no one would take care of *him?*

South laughed and laughed, slamming his knees off of the table and rattling it so hard that the vase of peonies toppled over and shattered on the floor.

The ceramic crunched under America's heel as he trod over the powder-pink flowers.

"Hey, kid," he said chipperly, not even questioning why South was

seizuring like he'd been cursed. "Heard ya got a letter. Must'a been a funny one. Keen on sharing?"

South pushed out of his chair with a scraping noise, so hard that it toppled back, and threw himself at America, grabbing onto his jacket, clinging to it with all his strength as he howled into his broad chest.

He wanted him to wrap his arms around him the way he had the night South had his breakdown back when he'd been so naïve, to hold him tight until he felt safe again. He couldn't breath, he was drowning in his laughter, drowning the way he had been for years and he didn't just want to cling to him like flotsam, he wanted him to pull him out of the freezing water and back onto dry land.

America put one hand on his shoulder, but the other reached over his hand, plucking the postcard off the table.

"Huh," he said. "Looks like the nurse has Big Red running mail for him. Guess we'll have to figure out how that happened."

South's shoulders shook as he slid down America until his knees smacked into the floor, and he was gasping into his stomach.

America sighed. "I'm glad you're starting to find the humour in things, kid, but you've got forty-two seconds before this gets too weird for me."

South gripped tight to the back of his suit, pressing his face into his waist, peaks of uncontrollable laugher spilling from his lips. He could taste blood in his raw throat and yearned to wash it away almost as much as he yearned for America to take his hands off his shoulders and put them around him, as much as he yearned for his brother to come back and hold him the way he'd used to, as much as he wished that this was all *over* already.

It was unfair. Unfair that Kangwon would ask him to take care of Gangwon when North hadn't asked anyone to take care of *him,* when there hadn't *been* anyone to take care of him because his brother had *left him all alone.*

He couldn't breathe and he didn't want to. He wanted to run out of breath, to choke on his own blood and 'die' so he could wake up when North was defeated and everything could go back to normal.

But he didn't even know what normal was. Normal was him and his brother and no one else, no war or politics or more important things. Just the most important thing, just them.

But he knew North would never treat him as normal. Not after what he'd done. No matter how necessary. His brother wouldn't understand until they were Reunified.

And when they were, it would just be Korea. Alone.

"Gangwon deserved it," he rasped, raising his face to look up at America, his words muffled by his suit jacket.

He'd wanted to see his friend look at him with pride, to accept him, and he did. But it still wrapped around his heart and squeezed.

He knew North wouldn't look at him that way if he told him. He'd look at him like he had that day in Seodaemun, as South pulled the trigger to save his life.

"Yep," his friend said, grinning down at him. "And you did a good job givin' it to him, Southie."

The words went in warm, but twisted inside, another ice cold knife between his ribs. He buried his face in America again.

"China deserves it, too," he muttered.

"Yeah?" America asked after a moment.

"Yeah."

China *did* deserve to be punished. For breaking international law to help North, for sending his soldiers when if he hadn't South could have been reunited with his brother before this all happened, before he'd burned Seoul and punished Gangwon and crossed the line. And for leaving.

And the Chinese needed to be punished for being Communists, for letting themselves get brainwashed like the northerners had.

"I'm glad we see eye to eye on that, kid," America said eventually, patting him on the head.

He wouldn't find out China was here, not from Gangwon or South. He wouldn't leave Korea- South wouldn't let him.

But once the war was over, once him and his brother were one and all the Communists were gone, South would be more than happy for America to make China regret ever helping North. He had the provinces, he had thousands of people that loved him so much that they cheered as he told them he wanted them to die for him. He didn't *need* friends. South *did.*

And China was going to pay for choosing his brother over him.

South pressed harder into America, trying to soothe the ache inside him.

He didn't really know what he was aching for. He would say a home, but he knew where home was. He just didn't know how to get back to it.

He was starting to think he couldn't.

—

America petted South on his little round noggin. The kid had started to shake again, chuckling wildly to himself, but it was less 'Anna Ecklund' now and more 'guy you crossed the street to avoid.'

He'd ran over his allotted weird time, but meh- at least he wasn't ruining another suit with his tears.

And he thought Red China deserved to get his own punishment, just like the little deaf commie. He guessed he could stop trying to make him sing now.

Hey, it wasn't like America was *torturing* him or anything like that. Finding out if the chink was here was definitely torture-level

information, but not when South could still use the Commands to find out. Between Little Red and the hand-talker, Seoul, and the POWs, his Southie was ahead, and this was the one race America had no intention of winning.

Well, he *was* winning, obviously. But no one needed to know that. He didn't need South to start eyeing the scales and take a chance on blabbing to certain Northern parties. Good thing his belief in God was paperweight stuff and he wouldn't go confessing to the nearest Cat-licking priest to unburden his guilty soul, either.

But *any*way, the kid had pretty much given his seal of approval for locking the guy up and 'forgetting' the key before. Keeping him boarded up in a room with no windows wasn't torture- it was just for his own safety, in case he tried to take out his eyes or his tongue or something next. And if South disagreed, he could just play the tape back for him.

'Yep, gotta love modern technology.' He had enough material that with enough splicin' and dicin', he could pretty much make South say whatever he wanted.

Not that he probably couldn't anyway.

America smiled down at his Korea, a wolf holding a docile little lamb between his jaws, not drawing blood, but firm enough that there wouldn't be any breaking free.

And South didn't try to.

The wolf bared his straight white fangs as the Moscva postcard crumpled in his grip.

I had to go to city yesterday and now I feel ill. If I go dark for a day or two it means I am suffering for the crime of making sure my number card had no issues. Ironically.

North and South's biggest dream is to stop existing. Neither of them would phrase it that way, but their biggest desire is to be Reunified. And no matter how you look at it, to be Reunified is to stop being themselves.

For the Provisional Government's sake I want to clarify they weren't rich. They were struggling in China. South just makes it seem like they can get him anything he wants because they try very hard to, and he doesn't know what goes on behind the scenes. Many of them weren't Communists and had the more traditional view of 'He's our Countryhuman so he needs to be doing well even if the normal people (and us) aren't,' so they would seek out French bakeries or buy expensive meats just for him. Keeping him in silks and suites was a very crowd-funded effort, helped along greatly by a few Korean capitalists who were aware of North and wanted to make sure they had a non-Communist Korea once Japan was gone.

I also think there were some Korean foods South would avoid during his time in China, even when he could access them. He loved trying new things (and always immediately thought 'I need to share these with North,' keeping them in mind so they could have a feast when (if) he ever saw him again), but he wanted to save at least one of theirs foods to experience with North. He purposefully avoided songpyeon because they were more celebration foods to be eaten with family, and he wanted to try them for the first time with his family. Not knowing that North already has.

Chronic Masquerading As Acute

Korea's book was confusing as hell.

If someone normal was making a list of seemingly everyone in their damn country, they probably would have crossed out the names of dead people to make it a little less confusing, right? But noooo. Clearly that wasn't how *he* was operating because not a single name out of what could literally be thousands was crossed out, and South Pyongan *knew* some of them were dead. Son Du-soon, Dan Hoon, Kim Chaek. Guk Gun.

Her tank crew were in there, towards the end. All with that symbol that was definitely an eye next to them.

And she couldn't figure out what the rectangles with a strike through them meant at all. They showed up almost as much as the eye, but while she was pretty sure that one meant someone was dead (she didn't recognize any living names with it anyway), she had no clue what they could represent. A couple didn't even have the line through them, confusing things even more.

She'd found them next to a few people she vaguely recognized- the wives of some of their comrades from the Anti-Japanese People's Guerrilla Army who lived in the north, an old farmer she remembered solely because after he'd let them hide in his woodshed while he faced down with the Kempeitei, telling them he hadn't seen anyone come this way and sending them in the opposite direction, she'd joked she would never forget his name, and Chungbuk had challenged her on it so she had made sure she didn't.

But she also found them next to names she recognized for sure. Kim Sok-won, a few dozen pages in, who stuck out because it was darker on the paper than the others. Paik Sun-yup, for the same reason. Jo Man-sik.

So- rectangles next to people that had helped them and they definitely liked, *and* next to dog's son bastards that even the thought of had made Korea almost tear through the page with the pencil he'd gone over the charcoal with. Plus the fact that the traitors didn't have an eye next to them threw a spanner in her 'eye means dead' theory.

She guessed it didn't really matter. She'd already used the cipher to crack his code and read the words some of the names had next to them while hunched over in the Party Foundation building with her flashlight. They were addresses, giving her a rough idea of where to go.

But trying to work out the secrets of Korea's sucky drawings kept her mind off the destination. Maybe she should be thinking about what to say, but she wasn't going to do that. No way. She'd just psyche herself out, and South Pyongan did *not* get psyched out. Better to handle it in the moment, like always, instead of thinking about that smudge of charcoal next to Guk Gun's name, or what the 'relocated' part of the address next to the one below it meant.

'Relocated from Seoncheon County to Inhung County.' Relocated like 'she moved here' or relocated like 'she's *been* relocated?' What did those crossed-out rectangles next to her name mean? Why did Korea know her name at all? Guk Gun, yeah. She'd been hoping to find him with maybe an address so she could check if his family still lived by the sea. But her?

She knew it was the right person. Seoncheon County was in her brother's province, on the coast halfway between Sinuiju and the Chongchon. She hadn't known what villages were nearby at the time, but she recognized them now. The location matched.

So here she was, trekking across the fields of South Hamgyong's province, close enough to the east coast to hear the ships pounding it.

She wished she could go man the anti-ship batteries with their soldiers. It would be better than this. Easier.

Which meant she couldn't. Even if she would admit (to herself)

that she'd chosen to walk specifically to kill a couple of days, and that maybepossibly the stops she'd taken in the villages on the way to make sure they were conducting anti-epidemic work right weren't *entirely* just because she was trying to be politicianly and maybe more because she was trying to stall even longer. Maybe.

But she was almost there now. She was in Inhung County anyway, in the shadow of the mountains that covered the west of South Hamgyong, pretty-looking but deadly, like the cousin they belonged to.

For the next couple days she asked around Inhung Town and the nearby villages for a lead. She didn't have to information-gather the way they'd used to, stealthily, judging each mark before deciding if it was safe to speak to them. She could just strut in and demand to know if any of the local People's Committee members had heard of Ok Su-jin.

But she still tried to be subtle. It wouldn't exactly look good if anyone looked into why she might be asking. Their official story was that the Pyongans had ended up in the Pyongyang Men's Prison just for refusing to bow to Japan. If anyone asked about the murder rumours, they'd say the Japs had obviously just been trying to justify it.

No one had ever asked.

It'd never been common knowledge. The Japs hadn't really cared about the farmer. All they cared about was the 'sedition.' They'd just wanted to make them disappear. So they never had much of a paper trail on them, and had burned most of their crap when they'd left anyway. But there could still be enough evidence out there to sniff out the truth. And that would suck.

She knew Korea didn't like lying to their people, the same way her brother didn't. Since he'd lied for her sake, she didn't want to end up being the one to get him busted.

Well, probably not *her* sake. More their image's sake. But still.

Toward the end of the second day, she started to think it was a

vain effort, that maybe the woman and her family had been killed or fled south when the reactionaries left, taking the chance to put distance between them and the Provincehuman that had murdered her husband and got away with it.

South Pyongan *hadn't* got away with it. She'd been caught and thrown in jail for a month, and would've been killed or something if Korea hadn't came to get them. But she doubted that would be enough for the woman. It wouldn't be for her. Even if she'd had a husband that was an idiot that tried to sell out their country, that would be *her* issue to deal with. Not someone else's.

Part of her wanted to give up. 'Oh well, I tried' and hitch a ride back to Pyongyang, satisfied that she had given being responsible a chance, but it hadn't worked out this time.

But South Pyongan province didn't give up. If she wanted something, she *got* it. And she wanted to be strong enough to face this. She wanted to be a good politician.

And she was the master of her own destiny.

She found her lead as the sun started to dip, in a few peasants at one of the camouflaged market areas. They had used to buy produce from her target.

In 1946, Ok Su-jin had moved onto a small patch of farmland to the east, closer to the sea. But the farmhouse had been destroyed in the bombings, and the coastal bombardment meant it was still gone.

She had also died a few years back, in 1947. Old age, apparently.

Part of South Pyongan was relieved to hear it, even if she wouldn't even admit that to her brother. But the feeling just made her more determined to force herself through.

One of the women knew which direction to point her in, towards the mountains that bordered Chongpyong County to the north. So off she went, forcing herself not to stop when war refugees called out to her, inviting her over. She could do it on the way back. They could wait. She'd probably left this long enough.

The place was near the entrance to the path to Anbulsa Temple, tucked away in foothills that had used to be covered in forests, but were now dead, scorched by napalm that left them bald as her brother's head, just like everything else. The orange light from the setting sun made them look like they were still burning.

Surprisingly she didn't find a dug-out. It looked like the local government organs had managed to get the building materials for a small hut to her, at least.

South Pyongan had reluctantly taken off her protective suit, not wanting it to look like she was hiding behind it. She didn't hide.

She'd thought about bringing her rations or picking something up from Completely Reasonable Prices Kim, but had decided against it. She didn't want the chick to think she was trying to bribe her into forgiving her, or that she thought a few bags of rice could make up for what she had lost.

She stared at the straw door to the hut, her fists clenched tight.

Maybe she'd get lucky. Maybe he'd been one of those husbands like that Kim Sun-ja's, or worse. Maybe he'd beat his wife and kids and they'd toasted with rice wine after she'd left. Maybe she had freed them from him.

But remembering how the woman- Ok Su-jin, she had a name for the face that had looked at her that way now- had called *'Yeobo?'* with a trembling voice, and the tears that sprang to her eyes, she didn't think so.

There was movement at the hut, and a woman pushed the flimsy door open and stepped out. She looked around the same age as the woman back then had been. Which meant she would've been what, ten or something when he'd died? Been killed.

'Old enough to remember.'

South Pyongan took a breath, strangling her fighting instinct, and strode forward.

The woman startled, turning to face her. Right away, the province

could tell that yeah, she knew the full story. And she remembered.

She took a step back, laying a worn hand over her chest, her woven basket held tightly under one arm.

Her eyes looked just like her mother's, the same dark orbs that had stared at her in shock and confusion. And accusation.

'Creepy.'

As she stopped a safe distance away, South Pyongan awkwardly said, "Hey," because how else was she supposed to start this? 'Don't worry, I'm not here to shut you up for good so you can't tell anyone what I did'?

The woman bowed her head stiffly. "Comrade South Pyongan."

It wasn't too late to run. Cold-cock her and hope it gave her a concussion bad enough to forget she'd ever been here.

No. Korea had totally told the General to give her that book if she asked. Which meant he expected her to be responsible enough to do what he wanted her to. No- what she *should.*

She took a deep breath.

"Yeah," she said to the woman. "South Pyongan province."

She took her hands out of her pockets and straightened her back so she didn't look so casual, going for professional and apologetic, something she'd never really had to look before. It felt awkward and unnatural on her, like everything else about this.

"And you're Guk Gun's daughter, right?"

—

Those clams in Taedong County, more flies carrying typhoid east of Kunu-ri, blighted leaves in Liaotung, case after case of high-fatality pneumonia in Liaoxi, thousands of fleas dropped on Song-dong in Hoeyang, enough that every single dug-out in the area had to be evacuated and sprayed down with chemicals, and the

inhabitants, people already poor and suffering, had to be isolated for over a week, along with everyone who brought them supplies and cleaned the area. And if even a single flea hadn't been burned, a single germ had missed being doused in DDT, a single vaccine wasn't strong enough, someone could still catch the plague and spread it. Even if didn't infect anyone else, it could still kill them, like Pak Yun-ho.

They were doing well, they were keeping on top of it. But Kangwon could admit that the effort to *stay* on top was starting to wear on him. Not to Korea or his cousins or his patients- they needed to feel like the germ warfare was handled so they could do everything they needed to do. Especially Korea.

But Kangwon couldn't close his eyes without seeing those frothy white sprays of cholera diarrhea crusted on the floor in that house in Taedong, or masses of fleas writhing on a hillside or swirling in a jar like a thousand glistening black eyes, saying he'd missed one, that there was going to be another patient coming soon, another house filled with bodies and the dank smell of death and someone he couldn't save.

It clogged his nostrils, mixing with the sharp smell of chemicals and the sickly sweet stench of disease, the only thing he could smell lately. Escaping to the military hospital, replacing the cloying scents of illness with the tang of blood, had almost become a relief. Even his own burning flesh was starting to smell better.

Kangwon took a deep breath, finishing his disinfecting and going to sit on the edge of the cot in the break room, holding his head in his hands, shutting out the harsh white overhead light with his palms, trying to ignore the pain wracking his body from today's heavy attack on Wonsan, like usual.

It was going to be alright. Keeping everything under control was difficult, but him and everyone in the Epidemic Prevention Corps were still managing it. They were getting a steady supply of chemicals in from their allies and putting them to good use. There were pretty much no stray animals left to spread disease, and the insect population had gone down majorly, which was good for crops, too. The International Association of Lawyers had been by to

conduct their own investigation and act as another voice confirming to the world that biological warfare was being used in Korea. A couple of the American pilots that had been shot down while dumping their germ bombs had given their testimony in Beijing, and even if America was still denying it, it put more pressure on him, especially with the prisoners on Geoje making the rumours of biological weapons testing there an actual accusation. And the World Peace Council had made their appeal to the UN and all the American people to call on their government to stop. The more attention that was called to it, the more eyes would be on the International Scientific Commission when it arrived to investigate at the end of June.

The cold list of facts didn't make him feel any better when it was weighed against feverish eyes and rotting skin.

Kangwon took deep breaths, drawing each breath in and holding it for six heartbeats, trying not to taste the sterile air, before slowly letting it go.

He was usually pretty good at compartmentalizing all the trauma he had to face in the hospitals. But every once and awhile he could feel the walls of the compartments growing thin under the weight of the patients he hadn't been able to save. Even if he'd done everything he could, it didn't change anything. They were still dead.

He could say now that he'd never dealt with anything like this before Liberation. It was one thing to have a battalion or a small village of a few dozen sick people depending on you. It was another thing to have the entire country. If almost everyone in a village made it through an illness, the small percentage that didn't would be seven or eight people. Now, even though he was doing good, even though they were saving the majority of the infected, a 'small percentage' was still hundreds. And even one was too much.

It all became a kind of pressure that built up inside him until he felt like if he didn't let it out, he would explode. And it had started building faster in the past few weeks as he shuttled between the hospitals and investigation spots, only seeing his cousins to take their blood and Korea to give him his reports. Everything else

blurred together into white walls and bloody lips and last words. He didn't have Gangwon to help him shoulder the burden anymore.

But he was alright. He just had to take his ten minute breaks to breathe deep and remind himself of all his successes. Kim Do-bom had gotten better and it didn't seem like his brain had been affected by the malaria, and… He'd think of more in a minute, when his shoulder muscles didn't feel like they were about to snap from tension.

He had to center himself before Korea got here for his blood donation later. If he picked up on any anxiety or anything, he'd get paranoid over how the anti-epidemic work was going and start trying to involve himself again. He needed to stay focused on the peace talks.

And Kangwon wanted to keep him away from germs. Thanks to his screw-up, his Countryhuman would reject a recuperative coma even more aggressively if he got sick. He couldn't let him run himself into the ground again.

Even though he hadn't given Kangwon his final strike and forbidden him from treating him ever again, he still hadn't been by to have his burns cleaned since then.

The door opened, and the short heels some of the nurses wore clacked unsteadily on the tile floor. Kangwon raised his head to see Kim Yo-mi stagger in, falling against the wall, her braced back the only reason she didn't end up on the ground.

The woman's eyes were wide and glazed, and she stared at him like she didn't recognize him or the hospital she practically lived in around them.

Kangwon was on his feet in a second and at her side. "Comrade, what's wrong?"

"I- I-" Her breathing took on the ragged edge of someone about to reach their limit, and he hurriedly placed a hand on her back.

"Deep breaths," he soothed. "You're alright."

“No,” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. “I’m- I’m…” Her head curled into her chest as she started to shake. “I can’t do it, I can’t do it, I *can’t-*“

“What room?” Kangwon asked gently.

“T-Twenty-two,” she whimpered, her legs giving out.

She didn’t make any sound as she hit the floor. Just sat there, shaking quietly.

Kangwon wanted to comfort her, but if there was a patient in a condition that could make a nurse that had worked here since before the war began break down like this, he needed to get to them. He grabbed his coat and a clean pair of gloves and took off, not stopping to rebandage his hands, only to direct one of the nurses in the hall to the break room.

They couldn’t afford to lose a good nurse.

The door to Room 22 hadn’t been shut right. As Kangwon pulled it open, dread-filled resignation settled over him, and the pressure he hadn’t been able to drain strained at his ribcage.

There was a shape on the bed. A mottled mass of charred black and wet red in the shape of a person. A small person. All the hair had been torched off, the lips burned away, exposing the glint of teeth on one side, and one arm had been fused to their side, melted to it by extreme heat. Their body was exposed, too burnt for bandages or clothes, and all features were blackened beyond recognition, besides one incongruous patch of untouched brown skin on the left ankle. Someone else could’ve said that they weren’t even recognizable as human. But Kangwon had seen enough bodies like this that he couldn’t see them as anything but.

And he knew they were a child.

He smiled, softly shutting the door. “Hey there.”

One of their eyes was gone, their lids merged together into a rippled expanse of flesh that drooped down their face like tallow that had melted and congealed. That was exactly what had

happened. The fat in their body had boiled like water.

America was using a lot of chemical weapons on them. But there was only one Kangwon knew that could do this.

Napalm. From the attack last night. City Hospital One was full, so the worst cases had been brought here.

The lids on the other eye had been burned completely off, leaving the brown orb exposed. It rolled towards Kangwon, filled with an agony so deep and all-encompassing that it made his throat close.

He made himself walk forward, kneeling at the bedside. He reached for the chart. Male. Between five to eight years of age. Severe fourth-degree and third-degree burns. A long list of everything in his body that had been destroyed.

But his name wasn't filled out. And the room was empty, only a puddle of water and a tin cup on the floor, left behind by Kim Yo-mi.

"Can you talk?" Kangwon asked, keeping his tone low and reassuring.

The boy only looked at him with that devouring agony in his eye.

There was confusion in it, too, like he was asking Kangwon why he was doing this to him. Children didn't even understand how the world worked yet. They couldn't understand feeling that much pain. Or why.

Kangwon smiled at him. "That's okay. I'm Doctor Kangwon. I'm here to keep you company."

He didn't know if he could hear him. The ear on the other side of his head had melded with his skull, and the one on this side was sagging and disfigured. But he kept talking, hoping he could at least pick up the steady tempo.

"Sorry your nurse had to leave," he said, reaching for the cup and setting it upright on the floor. "But I'm here now."

The boy's breathing was thick and wet, his thin chest struggling to rise and fall, something rattling inside it every time.

"You're very brave for dealing with this," the province told him, not shying away from the shiny burnt mask his face had become. "And we're going to have you better in no time."

He spoke slow and calm, maintaining eye contact and a smile, and he saw the eye return a bit of that calm.

"There we go." Kangwon shifted onto his knees. "You'll be alright."

He didn't reach for the carafe of water. He'd have to peel the child's head off the pillow and help him swallow. It would just hurt him more. For the same reason, he didn't move to set up a blood transfusion.

The arm on this side, the one that wasn't melted to his body, twitched, fingers scraping at the stained sheets, and a gurgling choking sound came from his throat. After a second, Kangwon removed his gloves and took the mangled hand trying to reach for him in his. He tried to be gentle, but the boy gripped tight.

His skin cracked under Kangwon's, wet warmth soaking his palm, and the blisters on his fingers popped as he twined them with the province's, but he didn't let go, grabbing desperately onto him.

Kangwon smiled, not letting his eyes fall to the blood and pus seeping between their clasped hands.

"You'll be alright," he soothed, heart cracking. "I'll take care of you until you're better, okay comrade?"

The boy stared at him with all the pain in the world.

Some of the American pilots said they'd received briefings on what they were dropping over Korea. How the germ bombs worked and that they *were* germ bombs. Others claimed they'd had suspicions, but hadn't been told. And some insisted they hadn't known at all, and wouldn't have taken the flight if they had. They had thought they were just dropping normal bombs.

Bombs like the one that had turned this child, and hundreds of others like him, into masses of dead flesh, making sure they could never live normal lives. Kaesong was full of them, the disfigured children taken to the neutral zone so they wouldn't have to go through any more suffering. The wards were full of boys and girls who couldn't walk, couldn't talk or blink or move and never would be able to again. Children that had survived, but would never be able to live.

Kangwon thought of that feeling he'd had in the sky, of soaring over the Soviet Union and China and Norway and feeling closer to the people down below than ever before, and squeezed the boy's hand tighter.

He didn't know how long he was in there, holding it. There was only the depths of the pain-filled chestnut eye, the warmth of the hand in his, the bombs rippling through his own body, and the empty reassurances coming from his mouth in the same soothing tone, telling him everything would be fine and he'd be better soon.

No one came to treat him. There wasn't any point.

Kangwon wished his brother was here. Not to do this while he went and treated patients he could save. Just to keep him company, to hold his other hand steady. To have someone that understood.

He hoped South had got his postcard.

The boy's breathing grew shallower, thicker. Every inhale took seconds to shudder into his swollen throat and heat-ravaged lungs, and every exhale came with a shaky whistle from between his exposed teeth. Blood stained the inside of the lips he had left.

Kangwon stared into his eye, smiling, and wondered if the pleading look he got back had been what Sip Tal-sun's son had seen.

He could pull the pillow out from behind the boy's head. He could make it quicker. Gentler.

But he wouldn't. He'd never been the type to mercy kill, no matter

how badly his patient wanted it. Maybe it was selfish, not wanting to lose a patient. But he knew the pain they were in didn't let them think straight. And he couldn't let them make a decision like that when it was talking for them, like it had been talking for Sip Tal-sun.

No one *wanted* to die. They wanted to get better. Kangwon couldn't take that chance away from them, no matter how small it was.

Even when there wasn't a chance at all.

He held the boy's hand as his grip grew tighter, flesh giving way under his, and his single eye stared feverishly into his, pleading for it to end.

"It's okay," Kangwon soothed when he was sure he could. "It's going to stop hurting soon. I promise."

As a doctor, he couldn't give promises lightly. But he could make this one.

"You'll be better soon."

He kept holding tight as the boy started to convulse, his organs shutting down from the shock, or his damaged lungs giving out. He choked and spasmed, what was left of his skin peeling off of the bedsheets, leaving scraps of flesh behind.

"You'll be okay."

A choked sob escaped his mouth, the first real vocalization he'd made, as his fingers dug into Kangwon's, the burnt scraps of his nails sloughing off. Kangwon held tight, not letting go.

"You're going to be alright."

The boy couldn't cry, his tear ducts fused shut. He stared at him with his wide unblinking eye, so terrified and hurting and confused. Kangwon gripped onto him as hard as he could, hoping he could feel it past the dead nerve ends, hoping he understood his province was here, that he wasn't alone.

“You're alright. Doctor Kangwon's got you.” Kangwon leaned forward, placing his other hand against his melted cheek, making sure he could see his smile, see something warm. “You’re alright.”

Skin crackled and flesh squelched, and tiny finger bones broke between his.

“It’s going to be alright." *'Please.'* "It’s going to be okay.”

The eye stared up at him, finally emptied of pain and everything else. Another hollow corpse on a hospital cot, another empty body in the room.

The worst part about being a doctor was losing your patient. The second worst part was when the first thing you felt was relief.

“It’s alright,” Kangwon murmured, still crushing his hand in his as his forehead met the cot. “It’s okay.”

He repeated the words to the dead boy over and over, until the door opened, and a woman said, “Comrade Kangwon? Comrade Kim Yo-mi told- Oh.”

Her voice softened with sorrow.

“It’s alright,” he said, giving her a reassuring smile. “I was here.”

He gave her the instructions for dealing with the biohazards in the room calmly, still holding onto the boy’s hand.

“I’ll see if we can find any family,” he said, the words sounding muffled somehow. “I’ll-“

Right. He couldn’t send South Pyongan to look. She was still gone.

And for a moment, his mind went blank, losing his next words, along with everything else.

His comrade was avoiding looking at the boy, looking at him instead. Her brows were furrowed, and he made himself speak before she could get worried.

“I’ll send someone,” he finished.

“Alright,” she said quietly. “And I’ll… get someone to take care of the body.”

Kangwon had to unlink their hands. It was harder than it should’ve been. Rigor mortis hadn’t set in yet, but the boy held on after death. So did he.

Slowly he pried his fingers free, feeling skin tear under his, bits of flesh coming off on him like they had on the blanket. Kangwon stared at them, red and black crusted under his nails and ground into the lines of his palms.

“Comrade Kangwon?” The nurse’s voice wavered.

He smiled up at her. “I have to wash my hands.”

His legs prickled with paresthesia, but he couldn’t feel it. He walked steadily down the halls, his hands held out at his waist, palms down, lips curved peaceably up.

Halfway to the break room, he turned on a heel and headed for the blood lab, in case Kim Yo-mi was still there. He didn’t want to upset her any more. They only had so many nurses.

The lab was empty. He went in and shut the door. He turned on the sink, water gurgling through the hastily-installed pipes. He put his hands under it, starting to scrub.

The water was cold. They didn’t have hot water here. It had to be boiled over the stoves. The water was cold. It wasn’t cleaning him right. The scraps of flesh washed off, but the grease of melted skin and fat stayed caked into his life line and his open burns. Kangwon couldn’t feel the water. He could feel the pressure in his chest. He kept his nails meticulously short, too short to use them to get the grime out from underneath the rest. The stench of cooking meat filled the room as his skin and more children in his province burned, invading his senses, nauseating and inescapable and he wondered how he’d ever thought it was better than the smell of sick.

The flesh wasn't coming off. He couldn't get it off. His breathing was coming faster, taking on a ragged edge he couldn't get under control, his inhales shallow and shuddering like the boy's had been, exhales coming out short and sharp.

He tried to grip the sides of the sink, but his palms slid against it, leaving smears of human grease, and the feeling made something inside of him recoil.

The water streamed into the sink with a hollow drumming sound, splashing up around the edges, where the boy's flesh had settled. It caught a piece, dragging it towards the drain, and the idea of letting it go into it suddenly seemed like desecration.

He grabbed for the scrap, but it was too small and all he managed to do was spray more water everywhere, splattering against the metal sides, washing them clean the way it refused to do to him. He grabbed for the flesh, a panicked sound leaving his mouth as he tried to stop them from going. But they slid through his fingers, disappearing down the drain.

Kangwon slammed the water off, staggering back, hands thrust out in front of him. The light overhead felt too bright, piercing through his lids even when he closed them, but he couldn't cover them, couldn't touch anything.

The boy's eye had to have been so dry, it had to have hurt to have the light beaming down on him. He should've dripped water in it, should've shut it off, should have slit his wrist and made him drink his blood to dull the pain. He hadn't done everything he could have and he'd died and maybe if he had did that it wouldn't have saved him but it could've made it hurt less.

He grit his teeth as pain flared across his skin, not ending quick, but going on, the endless pounding from the naval bombardment or fields of napalm dousing his land, razing fields and towns and flesh the way it had been for over a year.

It was all suddenly too much. The boy whose name he'd never know, the empty farmhouses, the endless march of sick patients, the blood staining Sip Tal-sun's wrists, the constant beating pain he was

never free from, his brother. His compartments were crumbling, all the things he'd been keeping neatly stored to let him deal with everyone else's pain falling onto him. He wanted Gangwon. He wanted-

For the first time in his life, Kangwon's eyes started to burn like the boy's had. But the burns hadn't claimed his tear ducts yet, and he could feel hot liquid forcing its way out.

He collapsed to the ground like Kim Yo-mi, burying his face in his knees, his hands splayed on the floor next to him, as far from himself as he could get them without amputating, itching with an awful feeling he couldn't wash away, trying to calm his jagged breathing as his tears soaked his pant legs, the salt stinging his searing burns.

'It hurts. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it-'

The door opened, and Kangwon jerked up, hoping it wasn't one of the nurses, hoping he'd see green skin and a golden province.

Korea stood in the doorway, here for his blood donation. He had frozen at seeing Kangwon, standing rigid as he stared at his tear-streaked face.

"Korea." His name came out in a croak without even thinking about it as Kangwon looked helplessly up at him. "It *hurts."*

He didn't know why he said it. He didn't know what he was hoping for, when he knew Korea wasn't the comforting type, even if some of South's stories had made it sound like he could be.

His Countryhuman stared at him with a single wide eye, terrified. Then he slammed the door on him.

Kangwon hung his head between his knees, his eyes screwing up as the tears kept flowing.

'Stupid.'

Korea already felt guilty about how long the war had been going on for, and how damaged the provinces were. He could see it in his

eye every time he looked at the bandages on Kangwon's face. He'd just made him feel worse.

Kangwon's shoulders shook in silent sobs, but still there was a part of his mind that remained separate, calmly telling him he'd already been on break for too long, that he had to get off the floor and back to the Quarantine Hospital. He had lives to save.

He didn't *want to* go back. He didn't want to face more children with lesions and failing organs and scared confused eyes. He wanted to crawl into the woods and hide like he'd wanted to when the villagers had brought that man with the sword wound in his stomach to him.

'And then he would've died.'

He knew that. He wasn't going to hide. He was going to keep trying to save people, even if he couldn't.

But he wanted to cry for a little bit longer first.

He watched wet spots bloom on the tiles between his feet as his tears struck them, and saw the door open again, black military boots appearing in the edge of his vision. He kept his head down so he could pretend he was just resting, not crying.

"Kangwon?" North Pyongan asked, confused.

He slid his lab coat sleeve across his eyes, trying to wipe the tears away. "Yeah," he said, his voice still too thick. "What's up?"

"Are you… crying?" His cousin sounded surprised. "What's wrong?"

"I…"

What *wasn't* wrong? He'd just had to watch another kid die, he'd lost a patient and upset Korea, his skin was burning off his body, and he had to go back to the Quarantine Hospital, to immerse himself in the smell of people's bodies rotting around them while he could still smell the boy's flesh and his own cooking and he always would.

And his brother was gone.

"It won't come off," he said, and his voice cracked as he held up his hands.

North Pyongan's eyes filled with sorrow as he saw the mess of burnt flesh, blood leaking from his palms where he'd scrubbed too hard.

"I will be right back," he said, gently shutting the door.

Kangwon rubbed his face hard against his arm.

He'd been trying so hard not to let his cousins see how this was affecting him. He didn't want them worrying about him while they were doing their jobs.

The door opened a few minutes later, and North Pyongan slid in, carrying a large clay bowl of steaming water from the kitchens that he set down on the ground before closing the door and coming to kneel next to him.

"Thanks," Kangwon rasped, reaching for the cloth in his hand.

His cousin pulled it away. "Let me do it."

Kangwon pulled his legs flush to his chest, one hand still lying on the floor as far from his body as he could get it. North Pyongan took the other one, rolling up his sleeve and dipping the cloth in the boiled water before gently rubbing down his palm.

Kangwon kept his face buried in his knees, fighting back more tears, and the calm voice telling him he could do this faster, get back to the other hospital sooner.

He wouldn't let himself fall into the same habit Korea had. This wasn't about cleaning his hands, it was about bringing the pressure down.

North Pyongan carefully rubbed at his life lines, using the hot water to cut through the grease. He didn't ask what it was from.

Kangwon closed his eyes again, still seeing the boy's staring into them.

The American pilots had sounded so calm as they gave their broadcasts. The handwriting in the testimonies he'd looked at had been steady, even if he couldn't read the English letters well. Even the ones that regretted it.

They'd been so horrified to learn they'd been dropping germ bombs, but how was the napalm any better? They didn't like to think they'd caused someone to get sick, but burning people alive, melting all the fats in their bodies and searing the skin from their bones didn't make them miss any sleep?

And some of them had known what they were dropping.

Would the Americans be able to do it, if they had to look the children in the eyes? If they had to pour the plague-infected fleas on them by hand and watch their flesh blacken and their buboes split open, if they had to press the smallpox-ridden feathers into their hands to play with and feel the blood they hacked out spray their faces the way Kangwon did, if they'd had to hold that boy's hand and watch him die? Would the Norwegians and the Turkish and the Canadians keep fighting if they did? Would the countries that sold the United Nations Army weapons and food and supplies keep doing it if they had to face what they were being used for themselves?

Kangwon wanted to say no. He wanted to say that the distance was the only thing that let them do it, that if they all had to face what they were doing to Korea's people, they wouldn't be able to. They would stop.

But after Taejon and Pyongyang and Sincheon and Wonsan, after all of their protests about the germ warfare and the massacres had gone unlistened to, after their POWs had been brutalized and ignored, after Oslo…

He couldn't.

"Do you think people are good?" he asked desperately, raising his

head to his cousin.

North Pyongan paused in his cleaning, holding his hand in his as he stared down at his bloody palm.

“I have to believe that they are,” he said eventually, his white eyes far away.

Kangwon rested his forehead on his knees again as his cousin went back to cleaning him, gently rubbing all the residue off his skin and using the tip of his knife to clean under his blunt nails, until the only thing left was the fresh blood coming from his burns. Then he moved on to his other hand.

“I’m sorry,” North Pyongan murmured as he traced the palmar creases with the cloth.

“For what?” Kangwon’s throat still felt clogged.

“You lost your brother.” He kept his gaze on his hand, wiping his knuckles. “And I haven’t tried to comfort you.”

Kangwon shook his head. “It’s alright. I get it.”

He’d seen the way he looked at him in the bunker, and when he came to get his blood drawn. And when South Pyongan had come to pick up their blood results before he’d started sending them here to Kim Yong-hwan instead, she’d always shift in place, opening her mouth before making an awkward joke and slinking off.

“No,” North Pyongan said. “It isn’t. I knew words won’t bring him back to you, so I didn’t know what to say.” His eyes raised to his, ashamed. “But I also know if you had been with us on the tactical retreat, you would have comforted me over my sister. I should have found the words and done the same.”

“You know we don’t really talk about things.” He said it with a faint lip pull to show he was quoting South Pyongan.

“No,” North Pyongan admitted. “But you and I can. So I’ll say it now- I’m sorry about your brother, Kangwon.”

He looked away, eyes stinging again. “…Thanks.”

“We will get him back.”

Kangwon nodded wordlessly, his heart squeezing.

His cousin cleaned the nails on this hand, too, then wiped them down. Then he wound clean bandages around his palms. Kangwon had a better technique, but he didn’t correct him, flexing his fingers. They felt clean again.

But he could still feel the boy’s hand in his.

North Pyongan didn’t stand up. “You know I meant that. You can talk to me whenever you need to.”

Kangwon pulled his sleeves down, finally letting his hands touch his legs again. “Yeah.”

“Kangwon.” He laid a hand on his shoulder, making him meet his eyes. “We don’t like that you’re always working so hard, and you can’t even join us for meals most of the time. That isn’t healthy.”

Kangwon opened his mouth, but he gently interrupted, “I know you can’t stop when your work is so important. But that’s even more of a reason to talk. Instead of always asking us how we’re doing when we visit the hospital and saying you’re fine or tired, share how you’re really doing.”

He couldn't talk about how he was doing without talking about everything he had to face in the hospitals. He didn’t want to think about it any more than he already had to during those few minutes where he got to see his family again and take his mind off it with their problems. Personal issues were easier to solve.

And he was the one without personal issues. He didn’t have to struggle with his faith or his codependency or inability to work things out with a sibling or whether or not he was too clinical or crippling headaches or a deep fear that they’d lose everyone they had ever loved. If even he could be brought to tears by dealing with the weight of the germ warfare and the bombings, then he didn’t want to place it on top of the burdens his cousins were already

putting up with.

He couldn't say all that, though. It was easier to just say he was tired.

“You’re always trying to help us with our problems,” North Pyongan said gently. “Let us help you with yours. At least once and awhile. Please don’t become like Korea.”

Kangwon’s lips parted, then flattened wryly.

He *was* acting like Korea, wasn’t he? And he always tried to get him to share his burdens, even though he had more of them than anyone. He'd gladly share some of the weight his Countryhuman had to bear, even if it broke him, so long as it broke Korea a little less.

“Don’t worry,” he said, a little clearer. “I won’t. Next time you come to donate, I’ll… tell you what this was about.”

Not right now. Not when he could still see the boy’s chestnut-coloured eye so clearly, and his charred body was in the same building.

But he didn’t have Gangwon anymore. There wasn’t anyone to chuckle with as they almost choked inhaling their rations or know exactly how to comfort him because he knew exactly which patient he’d lost and how he'd really feel about it, or to press his back to at night. If he wanted to stop another breakdown like this, he needed to relieve the pressure. And he couldn’t do that if he was only ever helping his cousins relieve theirs.

“Good.” North Pyongan shimmied over to sit next to him, putting an arm around his shoulders. “I’m always here for you, Kangwon. We all are.”

Kangwon hooked his arm over his, squeezing his shoulder from behind. “Thanks cuz. I’m here for you, too.”

North Pyongan gently rubbed his back while he wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands.

“I think I scared Korea,” he sniffed, tears dry. Mostly.

“Korea?” North Pyongan asked, raising his brows.

“Yeah, he was here.”

And now he’d probably never come back again. He would probably start making Kim Yong-hwan draw his blood full-time, too.

“Ah.” North Pyongan almost sounded amused as he patted him lightly.

Kangwon let himself lean against his cousin for a few more seconds, then pulled away.

“I’ve got to get back to the Quarantine Hospital.”

He couldn’t help the dread he felt at the idea. But he could put it away in a compartment again. He had people to fix.

“Alright.” North Pyongan helped him up, picking up the bowl and cloth. “I can take care of these.”

“What were you doing here anyway?”

His cousin looked mildly embarrassed. “I was looking for Comrade Kim Yong-hwan to see if South Pyongan was back yet. I know the first thing she’ll do is come get her blood tested.”

Kangwon still couldn’t bring himself to chuckle, but his lips twitched up. “Yeah. She hasn’t been by yet. But I’m sure she’s alright.”

“Mm.” North Pyongan turned away, the bowl in his hands. “Korea must have got the wrong room.”

Kangwon paused in putting his gloves back on. “What do you mean?”

“I ran into him in the hallway. He told me Comrade Kim Yong-hwan was in the blood lab.”

His cousin smiled over his shoulder, and Kangwon finally mustered a real one back, a little more pressure leaving him.

North Pyongan left, and he finished snapping his gloves on, loosening his shoulders. He'd wasted too much time. He had to get back to saving lives.

Kangwon marched through the halls, his lab coat swishing. He didn't let himself linger on the small shrouded shape being carried by on a stretcher.

He couldn't save everyone. He just had to keep pushing forward, cure the people he could, make sure the International Scientific Commission got the information they needed to make their case and make it so that the world was unable to look away from what America was doing and what they had helped do to his people.

Whether they would care, or if they'd brush it off the same way they had all the reports from the International Association of Democratic Lawyers and the Women's International Democratic Federation and the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the World Peace Council… Kangwon didn't know.

He wished he could believe they would.

Sobbed writing this. Every story about Korea or Vietnam where they talk about what the napalm did to anyone, but especially the children messes me up very badly.

Also if you're interested in the American pilots' testimonies, some of the handwritten ones are in the ISC report linked in the germ warfare source chapter.

This poor woman was murdered at her work by a man with a knife. I go online and there's several (men) saying 'I bet he wasn't Japanese.'
No. He was Japanese. He was her ex-boyfriend who had been stalking her and the police didn't deal with her stalking complaints as harshly as they should have (though rarely they did actually listen to her). A big majority of Japanese men genuinely have the worst view of women for a lot of reasons

(porn culture being one). But these men only care when immigrants rape and murder women because that's *their* job and they hate when immigrants take their jobs. This is not specific to Japan. Men in every country bluster about immigrants with backwards views on women but completely ignore the crimes their own men commit. Because they don't actually care about women, they just don't like immigrants. The man killed himself too by the way. He could have saved the trouble and just offed himself from the start and left her the fuck alone. He did it in a Pokemon Center where she worked. Where children go.
Rest in peace Harukawa Moe-san.

So You May Be Healed

It sucked. It was awkward and uncomfortable and made South Pyongan want to throw herself into a dug-out and collapse the roof. She'd known it would be. But it sucked even more than she'd thought, and she wasn't going to get into it *ever,* no way. She was pretty much never going to think about this again if she could help it.

And that was fucked up, wasn't it? She could forget bashing that guy- Guk Gun's- head open with a rock. But she bet his daughter would never forget how it felt to have her mom stumble into the family farmhouse with her father's blood on her apron, or helping haul his corpse up from the beach.

'When we kill them, we affect more than just their lives.'

Guk Gun had been a greedy bastard willing to betray his province and country for a few yen. He'd deserved to be bashed over the head, knocked out and left on the beach with a nasty concussion for his wife to find later, maybe to tell him he'd been an idiot while she cleaned his wound the way North Pyongan had cleaned the blood from South Pyongan's hands.

But he wasn't a real traitor. Not like the collaborators or the Rheeites. He hadn't deserved to die.

And she hadn't done it because he was a traitor. In the moment, all she'd been thinking about was saving her brother.

He *had* had kids. He'd had two daughters and three sons. She'd left all of them and his wife without a man in the house for most of the Occupation, a bad time for a woman to be unsupported. Ok Su-jin had to struggle through everything that involved, and the World War, sending her sons off to be conscripted by the Japs and losing two of them, alone.

South Pyongan was lucky she hadn't ran south and sold her story

to Rhee's chumps. She was lucky she hadn't told people around Seoncheon or Inhung to turn them against her, and Korea for covering it up. South Pyongan had barely even thought about that day up until she lost her tank crew, but the Guk family had lived with it and the consequences of her actions for thirty-three years.

They were good people, she guessed. They understood why it was covered up. They hadn't let her actions turn them against Korea, even before him and her brother had…

But they could have. Her one second of thoughtless fury could've seriously screwed them all over. How would Korea be supposed to look their people in the eyes and say he was fighting for them when they knew he'd let her get away with killing one of them?

So she got it now. She got why even though she knew Korea wanted everyone that had ever hurt their people dead, they couldn't just kill all of them. Because even a traitor could have loyal family members, who could *stay* loyal if their husband or whoever was dealt with more lightly. Or could turn traitor, too, if they weren't. Even if she still didn't really like it, she got it.

She didn't get how they could forgive her. That was the worst part- that they did. Guk Gum-yeong said she'd hated her when she was finally old enough for her mom to tell her who had really killed her dad. But Ok Su-jin had told her not to.

'She said she wanted to, too. But when she looked at you, she hadn't seen hatred or viciousness. All she saw was a scared little kid. And she couldn't hate you for being afraid.'

South Pyongan guessed she had been (*not* the scared part). Even if she'd never really been a kid, she'd only been nine or fifteen that day, depending how you looked at it.

It still didn't feel like an excuse. She *hadn't* been scared- she'd been about to kill the woman, too.

She told Guk Gum-yeong that. Maybe she shouldn't have. But she did. The woman just said she didn't know if her mom had known that.

‘And you didn’t.’

Only because of North Pyongan.

South Pyongan didn’t say that one out loud. Their people didn’t need to know about her and her brother’s crippling codependency, even if it was… in the past. Or trying to be.

She didn’t feel satisfied when she left. She’d thought maybe it would feel like crossing something off a list- ‘steps to becoming responsible.’ But it didn’t. Maybe it was because she hadn’t been able to apologize to Ok Su-jin herself. Maybe it was because this was the first time she’d ever bowed in apology, let alone got down on her knees and touched her forehead to the ground.

Or maybe this just wasn’t the sort of thing that felt satisfying in the end. Killing on the battlefield was final and clean- the problem was gone. But maybe things like this lingered like bloody wounds, even if you tried to sew them up.

Then again, she guessed killing enemy soldiers lingered, too, for their families and friends. Even if they deserved it.

Maybe she wouldn’t forget about this as easily as she hoped.

She didn’t want to stop to talk to the refugees on her way back. She felt crappy and just wanted to get back to her- Y’know, the bunker and stuff.

But they probably felt crappier, crammed in holes in the ground. And when the war was over and she had to be a politician full-time, she’d have to get used to doing shit even when she didn’t want to. Might as well start now.

So she meandered her way back to Pyongyang, stopping to talk to peasants and workers, joking and reassuring them that they’d kick America’s ass out of the south any day now. She wondered if they’d smile at her less if they knew she’d killed a farmer.

It would be sort of worse if they wouldn’t.

Guk Gum-yeong had smiled at her. A small one as she said goodbye.

South Pyongan wished she'd taken up on her offer to slap her instead. Maybe then she'd be able to feel like they were a little more even. Maybe her last brother would do it if he survived the war.

She was still killing time. Even though she wanted to get back to… headquarters, she wasn't really looking forward to seeing if Korea would say something to her about her absence. Or bringing up what she'd learned with her brother.

She didn't feel satisfied. But she did know what those little struck-out rectangles in Korea's book meant now. After what Guk Gum-yeong had told her, she'd gone back and looked at the first names to ever have the symbol next to them- Kim Sun-hon and An Yong-un, some of the first names in the book at all. She probably wouldn't have recognized them without that little hint, but after wracking her brain harder than she'd ever wracked it before, she had a vague memory.

It was during their 'mapping Korea' time. Korea had snuck away near Seoul. Maybe he'd been looking for info about where his brother was being kept, too, but he'd came back with two sacks of rice. Big ones. He'd refused to let Sang cook with them, even when they hadn't been able to catch anything that night.

It was somewhere between Gyeonggi and Kangwon when he'd snuck away again, creeping off into the dark. South Pyongan had been awake to tease her brother on watch, so she'd followed, naturally. She hated leaving North Pyongan without her, but the others were there, and the lure of snooping on their Countryhuman had been too good to pass up.

It'd been a little farmhouse. She hadn't been able to see what happened after he was invited in, but she'd been close enough to hear him greet the man that answered as 'Kim Sun-hon.' And he'd looked past him to say 'An Yong-un.' He'd entered, stayed for a few minutes, then left without the rice bags.

South Pyongan had been a little curious- she'd asked Kangwon if he knew the names, since he was the only one that had been with Korea longer than her and her brother. He didn't. All he could give

her was that maybe it was the couple that had pointed Korea towards his village. Mystery solved, she'd tossed it aside. Korea didn't like when they pestered him about the time before they'd met him (completely understandable now), and it hadn't been interesting enough for her to bother doing it anyway. Yeah yeah- Korea wanted to help out their people. She knew that already.

But now, between that and Guk Gum-yeong, she thought she could decode that symbol. They had to be two rice bags. Them being next to a name meant Korea owed that person. And the strike meant he'd paid them back.

That was why it was next to people like Paik Sun-yup and Jo Man-sik, too. *They* owed *Korea* something- their lives. She was glad to see they'd paid up, at least. It was comforting to know they could still kill *some* people that deserved it.

It was the last day of May by the time she made it back. She thought. She hadn't really been keeping count. Maybe Korea would accuse her of shirking her work and she could make him mad enough to fight her. It could help blow off some of this uncomfortable feeling and make her feel like herself again.

She went to give her blood sample to Kim Yong-hwan (not being able to check it these past few days had been making her feel… itchy), then actually caught the General on his way back from directing the troops or hugging orphans or whatever he got up to. He pulled up in his grey car on the outskirts of Pyongyang, smiling at her out the back window.

"Here." She thrust the book out at him.

It disappeared into the vehicle without him breaking eye contact.

"I trust my birth province accomplished what she needed to?"

"Yeah yeah," she muttered, shoving her hands in the pockets of her protective suit. "South Pyongan province can do anything."

His smile made her shoulders hunch. "I'm aware. Would Comrade South Pyongan like a ride?"

And risk him delivering her straight to Korea? Nooo way. Their fight could come later. Three days wasn't enough to time to feel normal again. She didn't want to say anything embarrassing like that one night she'd jumped him.

"The exercise is good for me," she said, inching away.

The General nodded with mock solemnity. "Revolutionary vigour can only spring from personal vigour. Your dedication to staying fit is admirable, comrade."

Definitely planning on kidnapping her.

She stuck out her tongue at him as he slowly cranked his window up. Crossing her arms, she watched him drive off for Moran Hill, then turned for the north highway. It was both too late and too early to do fieldwork, so she figured she'd visit refugees or something until it was time to meet up at the GAZ.

Ugh. She wasn't looking forward to her cousins asking her where she'd been. She knew SH would mind her business, but the others were definitely going to push. Especially Hwang and Hae. And North Hamgyong, just because he'd sense he could embarrass her. She'd better think of a good lie. Assassinating reactionaries in her province, maybe. That sounded cool.

She stopped at the rest house to check in on North Pyongan's boys, Han-jin and the pretty one. He was a man now, so it probably wasn't too smart for her to be around him, considering how delicate his features were. They kind of made her think about punching him, like Korea's brother, or any other pretty guy.

But he was crippled, so it would be kind of unfair to take away what he had going for him. So she could resist the urge to rearrange his features a bit. Especially today.

"Comrade South Pyongan." Tae-min's dark eyes lit up when he saw her, and he hobbled over from the rest house.

Huh. That was livelier than she'd ever seen from him.

"Are you here for uniform repair or just to visit?" he asked,

leaning on his cane. “We’ve got soup on the fire. I helped make it.”

There was a prideful tinge to his voice.

“Little landlord’s learned how to cook, huh?” she asked, ruffling his hair. She loved doing that to men. They pretty much always hated it.

Tae-min leaned away from her, giving an embarrassed half-laugh. “Yes. I know I should have learned growing up. But I’ve caught up to Han-jin now. Do you want some?”

‘Soup…’

She’d been semi-foraging, semi-accepting-small-meals-from-people-that-invited-her-home for the last few days, so the idea made her mouth water.

But since she’d already been taking stuff from people, she knew she couldn’t now. The rest house supplies should be for their soldiers and the Chinese.

“I’m good,” she said, sucking her saliva back (gross).

His gaze dipped down. “Do you want me to sew up your suit?”

“What?!” South Pyongan’s head jerked down, her eyes shooting open as she realized there was a small tear in her white protective suit.

Ssi-bal, it must have torn when she was going through the hills. That’s what she got for fucking wasting time.

She stripped off the suit and her uniform quickly followed, but she stopped short of her undershirt and pants, remembering Korea’s warning not to let people see too much of her burns. She patted herself down aggressively, making sure no bugs had crawled through the gap.

Tae-min watched, bemused. “Is that a yes?”

“Yeah yeah, Sewing Boy, fix my suit.” She ignored him walking off

with it, turning in circles as she checked herself for ticks or fleas or anything with more legs than it should have.

She didn't find any, but ssi-bal, she was going to feel itchy for the next week. She needed a bath.

Shuddering, she went to lean against the wall of the rest house outside the dug-out part, sheltering under the eaves so bugs couldn't get dropped on her. It'd been bombed a few times, but the aid women were used to taking cover. They hadn't had any fatalities yet.

One of the women nodded to her, but her and the others were preoccupied with feeding a few soldiers, so unfortunately none of them came over to force her to accept the delicious-smelling soup filling the air with the scent of doenjang and radish.

Hm. Now that she thought about it, she'd sort of taken off without telling her guards. Korea couldn't exactly blame them for that one since SH had gotten his permission for her to ditch them, but she hoped she hadn't given them an aneurysm. They were *just* starting to respond to her teasing.

It was a little relieving to be out of her suit and able to feel the air on her face, even if it was starting to get uncomfortably warm. General, she was probably going to start melting once summer really got going. Kangwon's foreign investigation squad had better blow this germ warfare shit open when they got here.

Her eyes lingered on the magpie head carved into the top of Tae-min's cane, then flicked away.

There was probably someone else she should say sorry to. Not today, though. Not until she was more… settled.

She watched Tae-min sit on his haunches by the stove, starting to sew her suit. He was working fast, and his stitches looked good. Not as skilled as hers, obviously. But good. He even kept working as he responded to something one of the aid women said, making her laugh and putting a slight smile on his own (unnaturally pretty) face.

It looked like he was finally cheering up. She'd have to tell her brother. He probably already knew, since some of his weekend rations went to them, but it would reassure him to hear it from her, too.

"Looks like your comrade's doing well," she said to the person standing next to her.

"Yeah," Han-jin muttered, his brown eyes fixed on Tae-min. "He's great."

One of South Pyongan's eyebrows went up. "Wow. You sound *thrilled* about that. Someone piss in your rations?"

He tore his gaze away from his friend. "It's nothing."

Unfortunately for him, South Pyongan needed any excuse to stop thinking about her own crap.

"C'mon, Farm Boy. I'm a government official. Don't make me order you to tell me."

Totally not an abuse of power. She was trying to be helpful. With zero ulterior motives.

Han-jin crossed his tanned arms, looking away. "It's just…" His jaw feathered. "When we were growing up, Tae-min depended on me for everything. I'm the one that did his farm chores for him, I'm the one that made sure he wasn't bullied, I'm the one that carried his stuff and defended him from Kim Kang-sim. And now…"

He put a hand over the right side of his chest, where he'd been shot, looking frustrated.

"I can't do none of that stuff," the young man said bitterly. "And it was the only stuff I was any *good* at. I'm not even as crippled as Tae-min, but I'm way more useless than him. I knew how to mend stuff and cook before he did, but he's already better than me. He can sew and cook and sing, and I can't even build us a house or catch us food. All I can do is chop wood." His fingers tented over the old wound, nails digging at his workshirt. "And even that leaves me feeling like I got run over by a horse."

South Pyongan's hand went to her xiphoid process, thankful that she'd listened to Kangwon and not savaged any of the bastards in the holding camp.

"I can't take care of him anymore," Han-jin said, his eyes on his friend again. "I can't protect him. And he doesn't need me to." His voice cracked. "He doesn't need me anymore."

He ducked his head away, hiding his freckled face in his shoulder. South Pyongan looked away too.

Yeah, she shouldn't have asked. Those words hit… just a little too close to home.

But she guessed that meant she knew what to say.

"Kid."

Han-jin looked over at her as she slapped his broad shoulder, but his eyes darted to the side like he could hide their glistening that way.

"You can't seriously think it's a bad thing that he can take care of himself."

"No," he muttered. "But I just…"

He trailed off, and she hated that she could almost hear what he was thinking.

'Who am I if not his protector?'

"No 'just,'" she scolded. "It's pathetic that you want him to stay useless just so *you* can feel needed."

Han-jin's cheeks darkened in shame. "I don't! That's not what it's about."

"Could've fooled me," South Pyongan retorted. "You're watching him grow out of being a spoiled landlord's brat and actually start to be useful to people, and you're over here moping about it."

His expression turned indignant. “Tae-min might not have been good at farm work or anything, but he’s *never* been useless.”

She could have asked if he thought that just *maybe* his friend might feel the same way about him, but she knew that wasn’t what he needed to hear. Even when she’d known her brother would always want her by his side, even now that he didn’t need her there, it hadn’t been enough.

“But he was weak, right?” she challenged. “He needed you to protect him because if you didn’t, he’d end up beat to shit or dead.”

Han-jin looked down.

“And what happened when you *couldn’t* be there for him?”

His lips thinned as his hands balled into fists.

“That’s what I thought.” South Pyongan crossed her arms. “We’re literally at war, and the Yanks are raining all kinds of bullshit on us. You could die any day and Tae-min would be left alone. Would you want him to bumble around without you until he fell into a hole and died?”

Obviously her and her brother would look out for him in that case. And Liaoxi, she guessed. But that didn’t make a good threat.

And it wasn’t like they could make up for losing him.

“No,” Han-jin muttered, and he looked so dejected that even she softened a little.

No. Wrong word. Chilled a little.

“Look, Han-jin-" Ugh, she *hated* saying names directly. “You’re best friends, right? Like brothers, basically?”

“…Yeah, I guess,” he said eventually, kicking at the ground.

South Pyongan nodded. “So he’s never going to want to get rid of you just ‘cuz he’s better at everything than you now. He’ll keep you around while you find new ways to look out for him. Beating

assholes up isn't the only way. You've just got to find new tactics."

Like her.

"Plus I'm pretty sure 'no manual labour' doesn't mean you can't throw a punch or two," she added, trying to keep things light.

"I'm just…" Han-jin looked down at his work-worn hands, flexing them. "I have no idea what other tactics there are. I've really… only ever known how to protect him. And I couldn't do it when it counted." His eyes dulled. "I couldn't even protect my own family."

She was *not* getting into serious crap like that. She'd had enough of it to last a lifetime, thanks.

"You can figure them out eventually," South Pyongan told him, focusing on the first part. "But until then, you should be glad you don't have to protect him anymore. "

If she'd been able to count on her brother to defend himself back then, maybe she wouldn't have killed Guk Gun. If North Pyongan had known how to disarm him, or even if she'd just been able to trust that he wouldn't let himself get stabbed just to stick to his pacifism, maybe she could have held off for just a second more, and he could have handled things. Guk Gum-yeong and her siblings would have grown up with their father. Ok Su-jin wouldn't have had to shoulder their family on her own. South Pyongan wouldn't feel like this now.

She wasn't blaming her brother. She wasn't like Korea's, trying to shove the blame off like a little coward. South Pyongan could take responsibility, when she needed to.

It was *her* fault, for coddling him, for letting him remain gentle for so long. She had only wanted to protect him, but in the end it was selfish of her to always throw herself into danger, fight after fight after alleyway mugging, when she couldn't even feel assured that he'd punch a guy with a knife out to save himself. Obviously she was too good to get taken out by some schmuck. But if one of them had ever gotten lucky, her brother would have been left alone, defenseless.

The Hamgyongs had never told anyone the full story about how exactly SH had ended up where she had, except for maybe Korea. But it was easy enough to put the pieces together with all their quips and jabs. If she'd ever been taken out, North Pyongan could have ended up in a position like that. Not the exact same, obviously. But similar. Desperate measures. And that was *if* he hadn't been knifed in an alleyway by whoever managed to off her.

She wished they could have lived a life where her brother could have kept his gentleness. Where he never needed to worry about the blood on their hands and she didn't need to worry about whether or not he could get it on his hands if he had to.

Well, not really. She didn't regret all those fights or battles. And the only life she truly regretted taking was Guk Gun's. She wasn't bloodthirsty, she didn't like killing. But she was made for combat, and she could never regret that. She *was* a damn good soldier, even if that wasn't all she could be.

But she would give her past of thrills and violence up, and replace it with one of tranquility, one where she was someone else entirely, if it was for her brother's sake.

But it wasn't possible. They'd been formed into violence and they would live in it until this war was over. They had lived a life that broke gentle things. And by sheltering her brother, she'd been setting him up to be broken. Hadn't she realized that years ago, when she'd first told Korea about his pacifism? Hadn't that been *why* she'd told him, why she'd made that suggestion?

'Demand.'

Maybe she'd known that lesson long before Korea had taught it to her. She just hadn't wanted to learn it.

"It's good Tae-min can protect himself," she said to Han-jin, and she felt that final little bit of discomfort that had been clinging to her liver dissipate. "You shouldn't have to *need* to protect him. You should have to want to."

It was a little embarrassing to quote Korea like that. But it wasn't

like the man would ever know. Either of them.

Han-jin lifted his eyes to his friend again, who was tying off the thread on her suit. “I do,” he said earnestly, his throat bobbing.

South Pyongan nodded in satisfaction. “Then you’ll find a way. And you know he’ll be fine until you do.”

It was good that her brother wasn’t dependent on her anymore. Now they could both depend on each other, and so could their people. So could Han-jin and Tae-min. It’d just take them a little time.

Probably. If not, she’d done all she could. Any further help would be in North Pyongan’s hands.

“Yeah,” Han-jin said quietly. “I guess I do.”

“Comrade South Pyongan.” Tae-min limped over with her protective suit. “Here you go. I… hope I mended it well enough for you.”

“As long as germs and bugs can’t get in, it’s great,” she said, snatching it back and shoving herself in after putting her tunic back on.

‘Phew.’ She adjusted her hood and face mask. *‘Much better.’*

She’d still need to get a new suit, but now this one could last until she requisitioned one.

It *wasn’t* like she was afraid of germs like North Hamgyong kept saying to her. She just didn’t want to end up comatose like Korea. Or all gross and rashy.

Tae-min’s gaze flicked warily to Han-jin. “He wasn’t saying anything strange to you, was he?”

“Oh yeah, totally,” South Pyongan said, tucking her sleeves into her gloves. “He’s worried that now that you’ve got life skills, he’s useless to you and you won’t need him anymore.”

Tae-min's eyes narrowed, and Han-jin whirled to her, gaping in shocked betrayal. "What?!"

She shrugged, smirking. "Sorry, if you wanted me to keep quiet, you should've made me swear a vow of secrecy before he got over here."

Yeah, she'd throttle someone if they did that to her. But she'd had a long week. Let her have this.

Tae-min glared at his friend, his lips pressed into a disappointed line. "You're still being like this?"

"I didn't- I mean-" Han-jin gave South Pyongan a look like a kicked puppy.

"Bye," she chirped, waving as she walked away. "Have fun with your awkward conversation."

Tae-min reached up to grab Han-jin by the collar, dragging him behind the rest house, and maybe she'd been wrong about him being able to still throw a punch because it looked like he wasn't even able to escape the grasp of a man with one good leg.

Joking. She was never wrong.

"I'm sorry," she heard Han-jin say shamefully as she left. "I know you hate-"

Tae-min cut him off, hissing, "How many times do I have to tell you you matter to me, no matter what?"

Yep. *Definitely* an awkward conversation. And finally one she wasn't a part of. That made her feel a little better.

But she hadn't made it far down the road before that weighty sense of, ugh, *responsibility* crept back in. She stopped, chewing on the side of her cheek.

Then she did an about-face back towards the city, strutting off with purpose.

This shouldn't take long, right? She was sort of already primed for it. Korea had been pretty much grooming her for the job since those first years, even if she'd been ruffling her fur back up after.

'Learn new tactics.' New ways to protect her brother and their people.

She couldn't just say that crap to Han-jin then not use the obvious tactic she had. Like Korea and the General said, they had to win over the masses through deeds, not words. In this case, that basically meant putting her money where her mouth was, right? Sure.

It had been their deeds that kept Ok Su-jin and her children from turning against their People's Government because of *her* deed after all.

General, wouldn't it be embarrassing if she screwed up and got rejected? She would never be able to face Korea again. She'd have to go into hiding, maybe run back to Anbulsa Temple to become a Buddhist monk or something. She could do that. She was already bald.

She shook her head until her brain rattled off the walls of her skull.

No. She wouldn't screw up. South Pyongan province didn't screw up. Not anymore. She would get in, even if it wasn't today. She had to. She needed to find new ways to protect her people, to make life as peaceful and good as possible for them, to try and make it up to Guk Gum-yeong for what she'd done as best as she could by making their country the best place possible for her and her children and grandchildren. To make a world where people with her brother's gentleness could live without being broken.

She wanted to.

—

'I have to believe that they are.'

North Pyongan sat upright in his cot, his legs folded under him

and his back against the cool wall as the words he had said to Kangwon yesterday ran in his mind like a river.

Were people good? He couldn't know. Humanity was inherently sinful, but he didn't hold to the view that some did where that meant they were inherently bad. Even the most upright person sinned simply by being born. What mattered was not committing sins of your own free will.

God's creations were all supposed to be good. But he had seen enough to know that even if that was true, that they could grow warped on the way through life, like the roots of a tree growing for water, only to rot once they reached it, until they weren't. People like Paik Sun-yup, Syngman Rhee, and Kim Kang-sim and his father couldn't be said to be good.

And where did people like Kim Pan-suk, who would lie on the Bible to protect her neighbours and make sure justice was served by executing a boy, fit in? Or Pak Chae-eun, who had truly thought he was doing the right thing, even if he had taken money for it?

Where did *he* fit in?

He didn't have his Bible anymore. He couldn't look through it to try and find an answer in words he had read before. Perhaps there wasn't one. It had been written by men after all, trying to communicate God's word. They were imperfect and flawed, and likely didn't have a better answer than him. Perhaps it was easier to divide the world into black and white, Good and Evil, than it was to try and convey what a deity truly saw as behaviour worthy of Heaven.

'Imperfect and flawed.' Maybe that was what humanity was.

But as imperfect and flawed as they were, they were theirs.

North Pyongan had always turned away from the passages in the Bible that portrayed God as cruel or vengeful. He had always seen them as men ascribing vengeance to justice, or misinterpreting. He couldn't believe that the Lord, the one that had created them and watched over them, was corrupted by the same petty hates as

mortals. Because how could he feel safe in His hands then?

But their people *were* vengeful. And sometimes what they wanted was justice to him, but to them, it was so often just vengeance. Han-jin had wanted to see Kim Kang-sim dead to protect Tae-min and Ahn Chun-hui, but he had also just wanted to see him dead. No matter what had occurred between them, that was still vengeance. Even the people that had never lifted their hand against another or had only done it for pure justice or liberty were prey to the same petty hates as mortals because they *were* mortals.

The people they were guiding were people, with all the flaws and imperfections and hatreds that entailed. And so were they.

So he had to believe they were good, didn't he? In the same way he had to believe that if there really was someone watching over them, He had to be good, he had to believe that the people he was guiding, and that were guiding him in turn, were good. Otherwise he would be looking over his shoulder the way Korea had been looking over his at him, questioning their every step, fearing that he would be allowed to head down the wrong path.

He had to believe god was good.

The door to the men's room creaked open, and he relaxed. It was pitch black, but he knew who it was. She brought the smell of ozone and sweat with her.

"Sister," he said softly.

She didn't answer. The door shut, and she padded over. His cot sighed as she climbed onto it, and he lifted his arms so she could curl up with her head in his lap. He rested a hand on her shoulder, waiting for her to speak.

"I went to talk to Guk Gun's family," she said eventually.

He had thought so. Korea had hinted at it after he had caught him at the hospital.

"And?" He kept himself at a whisper. His sister would get violent if one of their cousins woke up and discovered her like this.

“When were you going to tell me you visited them?”

“I wasn’t,” he admitted.

Soon after Liberation, Korea had asked him for the location Guk Gun had died at, so he could find his family and relocate them to South Hamgyong, far from bad memories. North Pyongan had gone with him to gift them with rice and livestock, and to try and make up for that day.

It hadn't been enough. Not for him.

“You apologized for me,” she accused.

“I didn’t think you would.” His cheeks burned with shame as he confessed. “I wanted Ok Su-jin to hear it before she passed. I’m sorry.”

“They forgave me,” she said after a moment, quietly.

“Yes.”

He had always wanted to tell her. But then he would have had to tell her he had gone to see them. And… he didn’t think she would believe it from him. Not when he had told her so many white lies before.

His sister was quiet for awhile. He stroked a hand over her firm shoulder.

“Do you think they would have if I wasn’t a province?”

“I don’t know,” he said truthfully.

He had wondered the same as they presented the Guk family with their new home, land, and gifts. Would Ok Su-jin have carried that sympathetic look as she said they were forgiven if they had been human instead of Provincehumans?

“We can’t know,” he said. “All we can do is be worthy of their forgiveness regardless.”

And to hold themselves and each other to the standards that their people might not. To hold each other steady on their path.

"You don't need to be forgiven," she muttered into his leg. "You weren't the one that offed him."

"I could have stopped you."

"No, you couldn't have."

No. He couldn't have. But if he had been stronger, he might not have had to.

"I would stop you now," he promised.

"I wouldn't do it now."

"I know."

South Pyongan drew her legs up until her knees dug into his thigh. "Do *you* think I'm…?"

North Pyongan smiled, even though she couldn't see it. "Yes."

Regardless of whether or not his sister would have been forgiven if she wasn't a province, she was worthy of it.

She was still for a long while as he ran his hand over her side.

"It was my idea." Her voice was the quiet susurration of a wellspring.

His hand kept up its rhythmic motions, waiting for her to finish.

She turned her face further into him, warming his stomach. "I'm the one that came up with the idea for Korea to hit you, and to beat the crap out of me to scare your pacifism out of you. Not him. It was all a set-up."

"I know."

Her head shot up. "What do you mean 'I know?'"

He smiled. “You never would have gone down so easily.”

She was silent for a moment, her arms caging his legs in, then, “It was messed up.”

“A little.” Even if he had never been able to feel proper resentment for it, towards either of them. “But it was something that needed to happen.”

He didn’t know if he would have been able to shoot that brothel guard if it wasn’t for that lesson. And if he had let that girl be dragged back inside when her eyes had been gleaming with that desperate hope, he would have been committing a greater sin than ending a life.

It was shameful that he had to have his sister threatened for him to realize that. But at least he had. Out of all the times South Pyongan had protected him, the time she had let him get hurt was the one that had truly protected him, and others.

“You should hate me.” She sounded smaller than he had ever heard her.

“I could never hate you,” he said simply. “You’re my sister.”

South Pyongan let out a shaky exhale, then planted her face in his lap again. “Gross,” she muttered.

He chuckled.

“…You know I’ve never thought you were useless, right?” she quietly asked.

“I do.”

Even when he sometimes had felt it, he knew she hadn’t. Because if their roles were reversed, he could never feel like *she* was useless. Like he had told Tae-min- they weren’t ever not good enough for the ones that loved them.

“Good. You can’t be useless. You’re my brother.” To make it sound less sappy, she added, “No one related to me can be lame. Even

North Hamgyong.”

Speaking of people related to them…

“The next time you see Kangwon, could you give him a few words about Gangwon?”

His sister squirmed, but didn’t protest the way he had thought she might.

“Yeah,” she said, subdued. “I’ll… try.”

“Thank you.” He couldn’t help but still feel guilty that he had let his cousin go uncomforted for so long. He knew it couldn’t be the only reason for his distress yesterday, but…

He had never seen him cry before.

“Oh, check this out,” his sister said, more upbeat as he heard her rummaging around in her clothes. “Boom.”

She didn’t say anything else helpful, so he had to reach around in the dark above her for whatever she was holding out, eventually having to start at her shoulder and work his way up once he realized she was moving her hand around.

When he did, he felt something like a card in her hand, thin, with pages inside.

He raised his eyebrows. “Is that…?”

“Yep,” she said, whisking it away. “And I bet it’s cooler-looking than yours.”

“They all look the same.”

“Yeah, but yours is a little lamer.”

North Pyongan shook his head fondly, heart glowing. “I’m proud of you, Pyo. And not just for this.”

She *‘tch’*ed, suddenly embarrassed. “Whatever. It was nothing.”

He knew that wasn't true. It was hard for his sister to apologize to people that weren't him. It was harder for her to be vulnerable, even with him. He knew what she had done must have taken an incredible amount of determination and bravery from her.

He should have known she would be able to do it someday, he thought, running the side of his hand over her ribs as she shifted to stare up at the bottom of the upper bunk with a weighty sigh.

After all, his sister had always been the bravest person he knew.

—

One last embarrassing thing, then South Pyongan would stop putting herself through humiliation torture.

She snuck out of the men's room before morning, acting like she'd slept in her own bunk all night, then left for the city with the others. Everyone wanted to know where she'd been, obviously, so she told them she had a top-secret mission to hunt down more reactionaries, and they totally believed her.

Okay, except for SH. She gave her a knowing smile.

'Bleh.'

Korea was waiting for them as usual, arms behind his back in a military brace. His eye flicked to her as she jumped out, but he didn't say anything, just launched right into their orders for the day.

The main crops were all planted by now, but the fields still needed tending, and namul could be grown all summer. Plus there was stuff to get done for the scientific commission thingy that would be visiting at the end of the month. They needed to head to their provinces and look for more people that had seen the Yanks dropping shit.

South Pyongan had thought that was Kangwon's job, but she guessed he was probably wrapped up in hospital work.

'Great.' She was going to have to expose herself to more germs.

But she didn't complain, just saluted with all the others. Then loitered around after they'd left.

Her brother gave her a curious look back, and she hunched. He smiled, padding away with Liaoxi.

Keuda and Jakda were waiting nearby for her, so she made it her first order of business to order them to walk twenty metres away and face their backs to her. She did *not* need an audience for this.

Finally, she turned around.

"You're back," Korea said.

The General had probably already told him, since he'd been at Jonsung last night. South Pyongan didn't bother searching his face to see what he thought about where she might've been or what she might've done. She rarely found anything that didn't make her squirmy there.

Instead, she reached into her protective suit and pulled something from her tunic pocket, flicking it at him. He deftly caught it out of the air, examining it.

It was a small red booklet of good quality cardstock, printed with the words *'Worker's Party of Korea,'* along with the hammer-sickle-inkbrush. A Worker's Party membership card. She hadn't stolen her brother's this time- this one had her headshot and full signature and on the first page.

'Pyongannam-do.'

Korea stared at it while South Pyongan tried not to fidget. Then he snapped it closed, handing it back.

"Well done," he said, dipping his head.

Some tension left her shoulders as she smirked. "Got in super easy, by the way."

"Good. I won't help you get back in when you lose it."

“Good thing that’s not gonna happen.”

Korea watched her spin the card in the air, catching it between two fingers. “I give you two weeks.”

“Okay, rude,” she said indignantly. She was sure she could go at least three.

Her Countryhuman met her eyes. “Prove me wrong.”

South Pyongan wrapped her fingers around the card, pressing it to her palm. Then she tucked it back into her pocket.

“You’re on,” she said, grinning.

The corners of his mouth did something that wasn’t anywhere close to a smile, but still made her look away. Then he set off in the direction Pretty Boy had gone earlier.

South Pyongan made sure her card was tucked safely away (she *had* to make sure she didn’t lose it now), then zipped up her protective suit. She strutted a few steps away, then looked over her shoulder at her Countryhuman’s retreating back.

Part of her wanted to say something. About Guk Gun, about his book, about how him and North Pyongan had taken responsibility for her when it came to the family. About how even if he would always be Korea before anything else and needed to exist for their people, he could find ways to live for himself, too.

“Oi, Korea!”

He turned to meet her, but he was just a little too slow. Her fist took him right in the gut at full force, doubling him over. She felt one of his burns split under it.

“What the fuck is *wrong* with you?!” he gasped, glaring up at her.

Before he could straighten up and get revenge, South Pyongan danced back and away, taking off at a sprint.

“I don’t know, but I doubt you can expel me from the Party for it!”

she cackled. “C’mon, Guard Boys- keep up!”

Her guards (who were so totally glad she was back) broke into a run after her as she pelted down the road, ignoring the threats Korea shouted after her.

“I’m going to put you up against the wall!”

“You wouldn’t kill a card-carrying commie!” she yelled back.

“I’m raising your dues!”

But he didn’t give chase. He glowered after her, probably regretting ever wanting her in the Party in the first place. Hehe, sucked to be him. South Pyongan had decided she wanted to be, so now he wasn’t getting rid of her. She couldn’t wait to find ways to annoy him at the Central Committee meetings. It would make up for having to go to them now.

One last embarrassing thing, that had been the deal. She’d hit her limit and was done talking about mushy stuff for another year or seven or ever.

And Korea probably wouldn’t have listened to her anyway.

South Pyongan grinned, picking up speed. She felt motivated enough to run all the way to Anju, though she’d still get the ride Korea had waiting for her.

She had a job to do after all.

‘Therefore, confess your sins to one another so that you may be healed.’
…Why does it sound like the Bible line about confession doesn’t imply confessing to a priest or god for forgiveness, but actually sharing your sins with your fellow humans so that guilt can be dealt with and healing can be done interpersonally?

Something I ‘love’- so many websites say things like ‘most churches/temples in the DPRK were destroyed after its foundation.’

…By whom? Go on. Who destroyed the churches? Was it perhaps the same people that bombed every building over two stories into the ground and destroyed countless historical artifacts? (it was, because if you search out information specifically on those old churches and temples, they all say things like 'they were damaged heavily/destroyed in the Korean War;' they just want you to read that and fill in the blanks as 'the evil Communists stifling religious freedom by tearing down churches,' when in reality it was the 'good American Christians' that ruined all their houses of worship)

Every time someone implies Tae-min and Han-jin have a brotherly relationship, they die a little inside. But obviously they can't deny it. 'Yeah we sleep in the same bed I mean room because we're brothers. Why else would we?'
Also they aren't together. So the energy of them sleeping in the same 'bed' (straw mattress) can best be described as awkward and stiff.
lying on the very edges of the mattress so they won't touch even on accident
'…'Night Tae-min.'
'I'm going to kill myself.'

Also again can you believe I invented their part in this story literally in the first sentence they showed up in? They didn't exist until I thought 'Hm, I want North Pyongan and Liaoxi to encounter locals here,' but now North Pyongan, Liaoxi, and South Pyongan's relationships and arcs couldn't exist the same way without them. Maybe one day I will visit Ganghwa in their honour.
Wait. When this is finished I should take a huge inter-Korea tour. Go visit all the South Korean spots (the cave North and China stay in during their trip south is Yongyeon Cave, a tourist place now), then get a private tour of the North Korean spots. See if I get any questioning looks for my incredibly specific and sporadic itinerary (yes I would love to visit the Kangso Mineral Water Factory and then Sincheon). Hmmmmm.

Always Another Day

“I’ll miss you, Little Sister.”

“I’ll miss you, too.” Zhao Jingjing leaned up, wrapping her arms around China. “Be safe.”

“When am I not?” the Countryhuman asked, and the woman gave him a dry but fond look.

North lingered nearby, scanning their surroundings. They were just north of Uiju, and while there weren’t any soldiers stationed on the wide-open floodplain, there also wasn’t any cover, and they were near an airfield.

“I mean it,” Zhao Jingjing said, her husky voice slightly thick. “I want to see you come home, gege.”

“I will,” China said breezily. “When I feel like it.”

North’s shoulders hunched. He knew he could hear him. He really meant, ‘When I’m done here.’

The sun beat down with a gentle whine, and he could taste dust and year-old blood baking under it as a crow offered him its feast.

He should have been done here a long time ago.

Zhao Jingjing cupped her Countryhuman’s masked face, and her gaze went past him to North, who quickly tried to pretend he wasn’t watching.

“Comrade Korea, if it’s not too much trouble, could I ask you to look out for him?”

He shouldn't have to. China should be going home with her today.

He couldn’t say no and he didn’t want to say yes. He just dipped his chin, stiffly.

“Thank you.”

“Gege will be just fine,” China told her. “You just worry about becoming my clever little doctor for real. And help this investigation team understand what’s being done to us and our comrades.”

“I will.” The woman smiled up at China, the wrinkles at the corners of her deep brown eyes crinkling.

Would things have been any different if they had said goodbye?

Then her hand slid away, and she hoisted her bag over her shoulder, jogging over to the rest of the lab team waiting for her. She lifted her arm in a wave as they started to head for the pontoon bridge, escorted by a duo of border guards.

China watched his her go, a small smile on his face. North didn’t disturb him until the woman was on the far shore.

“How do you know her?” he finally asked, coming to stand a few paces away from him.

His comrade didn’t take his gaze off the distant smear of the medical team, like he could still see her with perfect clarity. “Your pretty province already told you, didn’t she?”

She did. And he had been right about Zhao Jingjing’s past.

North’s teeth clenched. “Why did you send her to talk to South Hamgyong?”

“I didn’t,” China said, finally taking his eyes off his ‘little sister.’ “She only told me she ran into her.”

The Korean searched his face. The only thing he found was a lingering reluctance that made him look away.

He didn’t trust him. But he would still tell South Hamgyong he didn’t think he’d had anything to do with Zhao Jingjing approaching her that day. She hadn't said anything outright, but he knew she would hate the idea that someone could have their

suspicions about her past the same way North had his suspicions about the Chinese woman's just from the way she talked.

His jaw creaked at the memory of those newspaper articles. He had been keeping his eye out for more, but there still hadn't been any since last year. But who knew how many people had seen them before they stopped being published?

He would deal with it when Reunification came, just like he would deal with it if the real reason the Pyongans had been in prison was ever exposed, though that seemed more unlikely than ever now.

He was proud of South Pyongan. Not that he was going to say that to her face, especially not after she'd split his damn burn gash again. Once she got back from her province, he was going to put that face into the steel door of the bunker. But he would make sure to take her Party membership card out of her pocket first so it wouldn't get ruined.

He was pleased with SH, too, after she had told him about the message she'd had sent, even if it carried a slight risk to whoever passed it. She proved once again that Korean women were superior to Yankee women.

"You can go," he told China tightly, realizing he was staring across the shore again.

'Go, get out of here.'

The other man shook his head, turning his back on the Amnok and the mountains across it. "And leave you to be bored during this little intermission? Perish the thought."

North had been hoping seeing Zhao Jingjing leave Korea for good might tempt him into following her. He should have known better by now.

He turned on his heel. "Come on then," he ordered. "We're wasting time."

"You didn't have to come," China pointed out.

North didn't answer. He hadn't liked the idea of the other Countryhuman heading back from the border alone. The skies were quiet enough during the day, but that didn't mean a fighter jet wouldn't decide to strafe his vehicle, or another air-drop wouldn't happen.

And there had been more pamphlets dropped on them last week- June 8th, an exact year after China had unmasked himself at Chorweon. America had a clearer photo of him now, taken from the UN trial.

And the reward had gone up. One hundred and fifty thousand American dollars. That was what China was worth now. That was the price America would pay for war with him.

North scanned the sky again, starting with towards the North Pyongan coast and ending northeast, looking up the Amnok River. He could see MiGs circling in the distance above the Supung Dam and its hydroelectric facilities, on guard against something he couldn't see.

They were supplying almost all of their power right now, more than usual with all their other power facilities being struck on a daily basis. The Supung had been remaining untargeted so far, since bombing it would be a direct attack on China's energy, too, which wouldn't look good for America when the other nations were already antsy about Korea remaining unconquered, and the possibility of the war spreading.

And Geoje.

The foreign correspondents were still banned from some of the mainland camps, but they were back on the island now, and more reports to make North grind his teeth were coming out. Mock raids on empty compounds demonstrating their might to the prisoners, and how easily they could crush them if they wanted to, the destruction of buildings when the camps were still in desperate need for housing, likely 'cleaning up' those places that had been accused of being torture chambers before anyone could stick their mouth out where they weren't supposed to, another compound that refused to be called traitors broken up and destroyed, leaving forty-

one dead and almost three hundred wounded as the Yankee prison guards and their backup smoked them out with tear gas and concussion grenades, burned down their buildings and tore the resisters open with their bayonets. The Yanks had only lost one man, killed by his own 'harmless' grenade.

The news the articles conveyed should have been filled with the sense that the reporter was breaking some horrible story, a great injustice for the world to protest. But as North had slowly worked his way through the English words of the *Associated Press,* he couldn't help but feel that the tone was decidedly gleeful.

Maybe that's why when China asked, "Do you think this little scientific commission is going to be able to do anything?" North had to bite his tongue.

"If they're any good, they'll come to the same conclusion our scientists did- germ warfare is being used in Korea." Anything that came after had nothing to do with their skill.

China's brows raised knowingly under his scarf. "Not exactly a direct answer."

"Do you?" North countered.

"I trust my Committee of Reception to assist them properly," China said, angling his head back towards his country, like he could see the medical men that had volunteered for the job. "I trust my scientists and yours to present their evidence well. And I trust my Jingjing to pass on my remarks to them. You'll notice that she never sold me out, by the way."

Not yet, anyway.

"And what about the foreigners?"

The number of necessary men for the Commission had been reached, and they were on their way to China now to begin the investigation. A Soviet and a Brazilian were part of it, but the rest were Western European men.

"I try not to mistrust scientists of any nationality," China said. "It

can be bad for the health."

"And *that's* a direct answer," North muttered.

His comrade smiled. "If I don't mistrust them, then doesn't that mean I trust them?"

He said it in a teasing tone. North hunched, walking faster.

"No."

"Hm." China kept pace as they crossed the farmland-covered floodplain for their vehicle. "I've read all their biographies. I trust that they're capable men with capable assistants. I'm choosing to trust that when they're confronted with the evidence, they will believe it. But I don't trust that it will be the tidy little conclusion to this germ warfare arc that your blood-hungry province thinks it will be."

"Don't call Kangwon that," North muttered, flinching as he saw wide eyes glimmering with tears.

'It hurts.'

He'd never seen his province cry before. With that wobbling lip and helpless expression, it made him look like-

"And it had better be," he said, his palm burns bursting as he curled his fingers in.

Or at least it better get enough attention that America's attempts would have to get subtler, and there would be less of them.

"En." China looked upstream, towards the MiGs above the Supung. "Let's hope it's the straw that topples the camel and makes our antagonist sign the armistice while we're at it."

"It won't."

North was past the stage of thinking that anyone would care even if the proof of germ weapons being used on his people was shoved in their faces. All the other nations would care about was that it

impacted their image, not that it was killing Koreans. And if they wanted to make up for their image, then they needed to be able to claim 'victory' in Korea, or at least trick their own people into thinking they had.

"Geoje *has* been disgusting them," China pointed out. "Truman's little visitation proposal getting turned down proves that."

After breaking up the other compound on the 10th, the Yankee president had invited Sweden, Switzerland, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan to send representatives to Geoje to 'offset false Communist propaganda.'

Except for Pakistan, they had all turned him down.

"They just don't want to be associated with it." It was about their reputations again, not their soldiers' lives.

"I won't argue with that," the other Countryhuman conceded. "But there's no harm in hoping that some of the nations involved in this war might decide they don't want to be associated with it badly enough that they'll turn their backs on it, regardless of the reason."

North bared his teeth at the rich soil of the floodplain.

He knew any waning of support for the war from any of their enemies or the 'neutral' nations was good, but the reason still mattered. They *knew* North and China's soldiers were being tortured and killed, that was why they didn't want to come. But they wouldn't speak out about it, wouldn't condemn it, wouldn't summon America to the UN to put him on trial the way they'd put China on trial, or Korea, without even allowing him to defend himself back when they had voted to invade him in the first place.

When this war was over, and Korea was accepted into the United Nations, how was he supposed to stand in a hall and hold debates with a room full of the countries that had made his people suffer? How was he supposed to make trade deals and forge alliances with people and nations that had tried so hard to make it so that he never could, so that Korea's people would once again be reduced to slaves whose only job was to ship Korea's resources to them?

*‘**If** they even lift the trade embargo,’* a dark voice whispered.

Even if the International Scientific Commission convinced the international community that biological weapons were being used in Korea, how was he supposed to tolerate that the rest of the world only cared once it made them look bad, not because it had killed hundreds of his people, and that *they* had killed millions?

“I know it’s unfair,” China said quietly when he didn’t respond. Then said nothing else.

It *was* unfair. Unfair that they didn’t have a ceasefire yet, even with the correspondents on Geoje calling all eighty thousand prisoners there ‘diehard Communists’ while America still insisted only seventy thousand wanted to go home. Unfair that even when his prisoners could smuggle a document out of Geoje detailing the abuses they suffered, comrades being driven towards the sea or dragged into buildings never to be seen again, promises that they would be returned north only to open fire on those who lined up for it, electrical currents ran through the people still refusing to denounce him, no one would listen. Unfair that as North struggled to make sure that the Yankee prisoners stayed fed, giving them pigs to slaughter and villages to stay in, his prisoners were living every day in fear in their own country, helpless in the hands of invaders, knowing that every day could bring a new torment, every hour could be their last.

“Would you kill them, if you could?”

North broke from his locked-jaw seething to jerk over to China. “What?”

His comrade stopped, tipping his head at him. “If you could annihilate every single Yankee, would you do it? Hypothetically, of course.”

Taken aback, North demanded, “What kind of question is that?”

“A curious one. America’s people have done yours a great injustice,” China said. “Not just his soldiers and his capitalists. His workers might be being exploited, but they’re still making more

money than our people, profiting off this war. And they're making the weapons that have wiped so many of your villages off the map. It couldn't be done without them."

North grit his teeth, looking away. It was true. There had been strikes in America, the steel workers threatening to grind the steel industry to a halt. Not because they couldn't stand to see the things they made be used to end his people's lives, but because they weren't seeing enough of the profits their bosses made from it.

"We can pretend they're just as much of victims of their ruling class as we are, but…" China looked around pointedly at the craters in the farmland and the old ruins of villages before back to him. "We both know that isn't true. And we both know they don't care about that. The truth is that every single Yankee, man, woman, and elder, is part of the machine devouring your country. And no matter how much blood spills out, they run it willingly.

"So would you do it?" China asked, tilting his head farther to the side, eyes narrowing. "If you had the chance to reverse the roles, to wipe *them* off the map, to cage and abuse *their* men, humiliate *their* women, and make sure their children never grow up the same way yours won't…"

He took a step forward, and North had to fight the urge to step back, letting China loom over him as he lowered his voice.

"Would you?"

North's eye flicked to the side, away from China's, which were too close for comfort. "...No."

"Really?" the other country asked, something that wasn't quite skepticism in his tone. "After all they've done to you?"

Even if North had wanted revenge on every single Yankee and been willing to carry it out, he wouldn't want his people to do it. America's people had chosen to destroy his without them ever having done anything to them. Korea's wouldn't stoop to their level even after being driven into the ground. They would only kill the ones here that were killing their kin and neighbours, and the

politicians that sent them, if they could. They were better than the foreigners- Koreans didn't need to grease their system with the blood of other nations. They would run it with their own power. And…

"A Countryhuman's duty is to protect his people, not destroy others'." North put a hand on China's chest, avoiding where the bullet wound was.

He had been going to shove him away since he refused to back down, but found himself grabbing his shirtfront instead, fingers digging into the rough fabric.

"But if it meant that this war would end tomorrow and my people's lives would be spared, I would eliminate every single Yankee myself." He stared coldly up at China from under his lashes. "There is *nothing* and *no one* I wouldn't destroy for my people."

He would never want to wipe out another people for revenge, even the Japanese or Americans. But if it would save the life of even one of his, he would do it. No one else would.

The other country's eyes squinched up. "Noted."

North internally winced as what he'd said sank in.

China didn't seem irritated, even though he should. "And understood. I'd do the same, after all."

North had no right for the words to make him bristle, especially when he had been the first one to say them. So he forced his hackles flat and released China's uniform, pushing him back the way he'd first intended, maybe a little harder than necessary.

China was silent the rest of the way to the truck, and it made his teeth grind.

He shouldn't have said it. He didn't know why he did. It was true, but it should go unspoken, especially around another nation. And especially with what anniversary had just passed.

He had said similar things on purpose when China first arrived, to

make sure he knew that if he overreached when it came to his role in Korea, he would regret it. But he… didn't need to do that now. China should know he would pay if he ever harmed North's people in any way. And he should know that North would never want to harm his. But still, he couldn't stop threats like that from leaving his mouth.

He should be able to. It didn't matter if China really was unaffected by them. It denigrated the spirit of his soldiers when they were still fighting so unflaggingly, and suffering the same injustices the Korean soldiers were in America's camps.

North side-eyed China, his jaw loosening. Then he pressed his teeth tight together again.

He had meant it. Anything he added would just seem like backtracking.

But as they climbed into the Jeep, North taking the driver's seat, he did ask, "What about you? Would you eliminate them?"

China smiled. "I'm putting on a performance tonight at your theatre. Would you like to come?"

North huffed. "Would *you* like to answer a simple question?"

"It's not a simple question," China countered. "I asked it first, and I don't ask simple questions."

"Says the person that spent an hour quizzing me on my favourite colour and food," North scorned.

His comrade's eyes narrowed mischievously. "I like asking all sorts of questions, just not simple ones. In the spirit of that, I'll ask another one- do you think I would want to genocide America's people the same way they want to genocide us?"

They had driven through the Gauntlet on the way here, the place where they had destroyed the US 2nd Division and their lackeys. The hills of the pass south of Anju were still cratered by artillery, no grass having dared to peek its head out of the napalm-scorched soil again, like North's feverish musings had been right and the Yankee

blood had poisoned the very earth where it spilled. He could remember the wariness that had prickled down his spine as China gleefully cut the foreign soldiers down.

And he could still hear the way he'd laughed at Chorweon, his voice ringing clear with his soldiers'.

"No."

China's lips curved higher behind his mask. "Care to explain your verdict?"

"No."

'I'll never not enjoy seeing my people create.'

North still didn't understand how combat could be creation, but he knew whatever China got out of killing on the battlefield, it wasn't quenching bloodlust. Not in a way that lent itself towards destroying an entire country just for vengeance. More like...

'We're similar people.'

He should crash the Jeep and hope it put him through the windshield.

China examined him for a moment, then looked out the glass he was fantasizing about sending him through. "Mm."

"Am I right?" North asked.

"I'm putting on a performance tonight," he repeated. "You should come watch."

The Korean grimaced, throwing the Jeep into motion, careful to keep its tires on the path out of the hills so no crops would be crushed.

'Whatever.' It was a stupid question anyways. It would be impossible for them to erase every Yankee from existence, so there was no point in knowing what he would do.

But *America* was killable. And if North could do it without consequences, he would in a heartbeat. He knew China would, too. That was what mattered.

"That was a genuine offer," China said as they drove back towards Pyongyang. "I'll be singing tonight. Alone, so don't worry about someone trying to collect that bounty."

"I don't have time to listen to music," North said irritably, distracted by checking the sky every other second. "Especially not if it's just you singing alone in a theatre. What's the point of that?"

"It's for the anniversary of the Chorweon Blocking Battle," China said softly.

North stiffened, his hands throttling the steering wheel.

"It's technically a few days late for the actual thing, but a year ago today, I sang a song for my fallen soldiers," his comrade said. "You were still unconscious then." He paused, then added, "I'd like it if you were there this year."

He was on his blind side. North turned his head slightly so he would be even more so.

"I don't care what you would like," he said gruffly. "…But I'll be there."

For Meng Yuyu and Zhang Guangqiang and all the others. For Hong Hongjun, whose body was still in enemy-held territory.

China should have been able to bring him home by now. He should have been able to bring *all* of them home.

"Thank you," his comrade said contentedly, settling back in his seat.

North didn't look his way, trusting that he would watch the sky in that direction as he looked towards the north. An enemy reconnaissance craft soared back towards the south in the distance, and with the threat gone, the MiGs banked in formation, heading to Manchuria to refuel.

Anxiety tightened his jaw. The Supung should be safe. It wasn't just the jets keeping it that way, but the political fallout if it was destroyed, and the renewed accusations that America would face about trying to start a war with China.

But he *was* trying to start a war with China. Raising the bounty while stalling the talks over the weeks since Ridgway and Turner had been replaced was proof that he hadn't given up his aspersions.

Like North's soldiers had said in the letter smuggled from Geoje, the next day was yet to come. But it *would* come.

And they could always expect some new torture.

North crept down to the Moranbong Underground Theatre around midnight, past when China had told him to. The more he thought about it, the more he didn't want to be there when he began. Or at all.

The performances had ended long ago, but the men and women that carried them out still lingered in the dark halls, listening to the strains of song seeping under the door from the main hall. They didn't even call out to North when he passed, only dipped their heads. Some didn't react at all, spellbound. As SH had told him, the performers admired 'Mao Zhilong,' enough to let him commandeer the theatre.

North already knew he would regret this before he could even make out the words China was singing. He knew he would regret it even more once he did.

"At the edge of the heavens, the corners of the earth,
My close friends have scattered, wandering in loneliness."

He grit his teeth, wanting to turn around and leave. But with eyes on him, he could only open the door to the hall and slip in.

The huge room was dark. The only light came from a flashlight on the stage that had a red scarf draped over it, casting a bloody glow that illuminated the person on stage. China, of course.

North was glad to see three shapes huddled down in front of the stage. Liaoxi, Liaotung, and North Pyongan. He… hadn't liked picturing just him and China in here.

The three looked back as he came in. He couldn't see their faces, but he knew North Pyongan was puzzled to see him.

He didn't join them, or head up to one of the boxes. He took a seat on a bench at the back, close to the door.

China's song was winding down, and his next words were the last. *"This evening, don't dream of coldness."*

They lingered in the hall, falling gently to the floor like snow, leaving a hush in their wake. North had time to hope he was done and he had missed most of it before his voice was raising again, his pitch morphing, shifting from the poignant, but unfamiliar tone to one that was definitely him, but raw and bleeding in a way North had never heard him.

"When you head through the gate, don't let it close,
Linger awhile in soft twilight.
When your feet carry you away, look over your shoulder,
Meet my eyes."

North's chest panged as he saw wide white eyes staring at him from the threshold, refusing to step over it.

He shouldn't be singing songs like this. They weren't good for morale. But North couldn't protest because there weren't actually any soldiers or civilians nearby. Just the provinces. And him.

"Even if your shadow never darkens my landscape again,
It's imprinted on my heart."

China's voice was somehow bringing memories cascading in, O-geun's hand in his, not bloody and cooling, but wrapped in a PVA mitten as he dragged him along; Bong-nam carefully splitting an apple to give him half; He Sengqi reaching for Wang Wei's milk candy, knocking them both over into the trench as they laughed; South napping on his shoulder while he practiced his characters,

South balancing their water ladle on a fingertip, diving for the floor so fast he skinned his knees as he dropped it, South laughing as he flicked him on the forehead, teasing him for being grumpy, spidering his fingers across his arm while he tried to work out, singing to him when he asked, song after song, as many as he needed, even when his voice grew raspy and started to go because that was just another thing North could tease him for to cheer him up. Memories that he hadn't forgotten, but just… hadn't been thinking about welled into his mind in an inescapable assault, dragged out by China's song, and North was horrified to find that he was about to-

"Come drink wine with me, even if it's a thousand miles away."

He rucked up his tunic, tearing his undershirt out of his pants and shoving a hand inside it, finding the burn gash on his torso, not hesitating to tear off the bandages and gouge at it with his fingers, ripping the scabs and sending a deep throb of pain through his entire body.

But it wasn't enough to drown the memories, dozens of them from dozens of people he had lost. Dan Hoon, Son Du-soon, Kim Jong-suk, Roe Chul, South, South, *South.*

"Come raise your voice, even if I can't hear you
For I heard you once, and that was enough."

'Not enough.' North's legs twitched. He wanted to leave, wanted to escape the song, to get away from the memories it was making him relive. Not because he wanted to forget, but because he didn't deserve to feel the warm glow they brought, not when he had failed the people in them. He didn't deserve the sweetness they brought.

But he did deserve the bitter. So he made himself stay, anchoring himself with the nails of one hand sunk into the bench and the others in his wound, feeling sour blood gush between his fingers, digging deeper until the pain overwhelmed the burning elsewhere in his body.

China kept singing his mourning song, heedless of North's struggle, and of his own provinces at his feet.

“No pearl has ever been so precious.”

The words left his mouth in a mix of pain and relief, like they hurt to sing, but he needed to get them out.

“I won’t let your echo fade.”

China gasped for breath, audibly drawing it in with a ragged exhale, tipping his head back to cry out the final lines.

“So don’t be afraid to let go,
You’ll still be carried home!”

He stood there, panting, in the red glow and ringing echo. North couldn’t see his eyes. But he could feel him lock gazes with him.

Then he dipped forward into a bow, sweeping his long sleeves out at his sides as Liaoxi and Liaotung started to applaud. North Pyongan did, too.

North got up, and fled from the theatre.

I couldn’t find a Chinese song with the lyrics I needed. So I made one. I found this easier than the poems as I did not have to rhyme. And somehow a song isn’t embarrassing the same way a poem is. Also the first song is Sòngbié/Farewell, which actually answers North’s earlier question. But I won’t be elaborating on that, ehe.

Cousin wants me to move to Russia and join the army. I’m not saying I wouldn’t do that, but I do think it probably would be smarter to convince me on the ‘move to Russia’ part first. Especially because she doesn’t want me to move to Moscva or somewhere nice. She wants me to move to her depressing industrial city (that I do love, it's just not a place people choose to move to). Unfortunately she’s halfway convinced me because Russians are some of the only people that can go to the DPRK right now.

Also Russia got the oil to Cuba!! They broke the blockade. It’s not a final solution, but it’s gotten Cuba a bit of power back. This why I will always love Russia and Putin, despite our

differences.

Nescitur Ignescitur

North Hamgyong didn't just hate giving speeches- he fucking hated listening to them, too.

He hadn't felt any relief after the tactical retreat was over because he'd known even if *his* serious speech-giving days were done, he'd still have to listen to a hundred Korea speeches. And he had. He could remember every fucking one, even if he didn't want to. Every assurance that they'd be in Busan a year ago, every time he said the miguk-nom would tuck their tails between their legs and sign the armistice any fucking day now, every promise that they'd still be free soon when they *weren't*.

Kim Il-sung was one of the few people he didn't mind listening to usually, but he still couldn't stand his speeches.

So it fucking sucked that Korea had chosen him to guard him today. He'd literally just headed to Jongju County in North Pyongan's province, where the Kim Chaek Polytechnical Institute had been moved, and the majority of the bombing wasn't anywhere near here. But if the Party Central Committee had their way, the General would spend all his time in their underground complex, never leaving. And if Korea had his way, he'd be locked in his office, probably in a padded chest while he was at it.

'It's not like he wasn't fighting for his fucking life with the rest of us for over thirty damn years.'

Being treated like he was suddenly made of glass must piss him off, even if he never showed it.

North Hamgyong didn't know what Korea expected him to do if the man *did* get bombed. How the fuck was he supposed to stop it? He hadn't been able to save any of the hundred people he'd lost working on the rail lines.

"It is important to educate the students to cultivate national pride

and conviction in victory.” The General’s voice boomed around the underground auditorium carved into the hills, the students and staff that packed it listening raptly. “The institute should let them know clearly that our people are sagacious and valorous, with a long history and a shining culture.”

How he managed to sound so damn boisterous when their history could end tomorrow with the press of a damn button by America, North Hamgyong didn’t know. Him and Korea really were two fish in a tin.

His lip twitched in disgust at the thought. He hated the taste of fish.

“Especially, it should educate the students by the use of the factual information which shows how our people are winning the Fatherland Liberation War by bravely fighting the US imperialists who boast of being the ‘most powerful’ in the world and the troops of their satellite countries." Unlike Korea, the General used his hands when he talked, gesturing grandly behind his podium. “This will heighten the national pride of the students and inspire them with greater confidence in victory.”

North Hamgyong bit his tongue on his *‘tch.’*

It was one thing to make sure all their engineers would be loyal to the country and Worker’s Party. If it kept them from being fucking idiots and selling out to the miguk-nom, he'd make sure they all knew how to dance ilmu. But did they have to raise an entire generation of people like South Hamgyong?

More than half of the young men and the handful of women in the hall had been at the front before being called back in order to make sure they at least had a couple people left alive that knew how to hold a wrench. They should know how fucked it was there, how fucked *they* were.

But as the General spoke animatedly about studying hard so they could lead the charge on post-war reconstruction and building a new society, they all hung to his words like a damn hangman.

"We must adhere to the principle of solving everything for ourselves even if we have to face difficulties and obstacles," he said, moving on from the teaching shortage. "The success of the Korean revolution depends on how the Korean people, its master, strive. Only when our people themselves strive to carry out their country's revolution can they receive better help from other countries. Only when a fallen man does his best to recover his legs will others have the sympathetic urge to help him get up."

'Sympathetic.' North Hamgyong did his best to hide the face he made at the word. He hated the idea of that Chinese bastard pitying them. And it was worse than that. The fucker was *smug* that they'd had to come crawling to him. He knew it from those little smirks he gave him when Korea wasn't looking.

"Our people are enjoying the assistance of the fraternal countries today," Kim Il-sung declared. "Because we are fighting heroically against the US imperialists and their lackeys, conscious of being the masters of the country. We should allow full scope to our spirit of self-reliance and make what we do not have, and find what we lack, and solve everything for ourselves."

North Hamgyong caught himself leaning forward on the bench, and irritably pressed his spine to the back of it.

"As long as there exists imperialism on the globe, we should continue to strengthen our defence capability to safeguard the country and nation."

The General went off about developing the ordnance industry towards defence once the war was over, leaving the province to grind his teeth.

There was that little bit of realism that no one else fucking picked up on. The teacher next to him hadn't even twitched at the words as he attentively wrote them down in his little notepad.

There was *always* going to be imperialism. The other nations were too pacified to ever stop it. Did anyone really still think that the Yanks who raped their women and butchered their men, then complained when they had too much sorghum to eat would one day

overthrow their own government? They were sheep, fat, selfish sheep who were so addicted to their bread and circuses that they'd never willingly give them up for someone else's sake, or even their eventual own.

He *wasn't* being a pessimist. Even Marx, Engels, and Lenin had talked about it, calling it the 'labour aristocracy.' They'd just been too hopeful about it being overcame. And they had plenty of fucking proof that it wouldn't- the Japs hadn't overthrown Japan, he'd had to *be* overthrown.

And there was no one to overthrow America.

North Hamgyong's arms crushed tighter against his torso as the talk went on. Increasing rations for the staff and students, reclaiming more fallow land for them to work to keep fed and make cash on the side, making the bathhouse bigger, building a dormitory instead of housing students in scattered farmhouses. All technical shit, but the last one made his ribs creak.

"I firmly believe that the teaching staff and students of the Kim Chaek Polytechnical Institute will carry out the Party policy of training technicians by achieving successes in education and studies with indomitable fighting spirit."

As he closed out his speech, the audience burst into applause, their cheers echoing in the hall. The General surveyed the crowd with a warm smile, before his dark eyes landed on North Hamgyong.

'Shit.'

Over the ruckus, he said, "Now, I believe Comrade North Hamgyong has a few words for you as well."

Another reason he fucking hated speeches. It was too easy for someone to drag you into one.

Korea would string him up if he did something like deny the General and their people in public, so North Hamgyong grudgingly climbed to his feet, his teeth creaking as a jolt of pain shot through his spine.

'Ssi-bal.' He'd been holding it too fucking straight. He needed a treatment (*not* a massage) from Kangwon, but he was busy with the germ warfare. And he'd been too out of it to when he went to donate blood recently. North Hamgyong wasn't going to put more bullshit on his plate by whining about a little back pain.

He tried not to hobble on his way up to the stage, waves of aches running down his spinal cord like someone was hitting the segments with a hammer. He couldn't hunch behind the podium, so he dealt with the throbbing as he forced his back straight again by gripping onto the sides of the wooden stand as he looked out at the sea of expectant faces.

'Fuck.' He hadn't known he'd be talking, so he hadn't written a speech. And this wasn't like Chongjin where he'd been able to say whatever he wanted. Not when he was dealing with a bunch of college students with the Supreme Commander lurking off to the side of the stage.

North Hamgyong tried to glare at him sideways without making it obvious. He smiled 'obliviously.'

The province internally glowered, looking back out at the audience, his gaze straying to the placard over the doors of the hall.

'Kim Chaek Polytechnical Institute.'

It'd used to be part of Kim Il-sung University, before being split off as a college for engineers and technical scientists. It had been renamed last year, after Kim Chaek's heart had given out, just like Songjin- Kimchaek now.

North Hamgyong had never got naming shit after dead people. Now every time the General saw the college campus, he'd be thinking about how his close comrade had died, the same way North Hamgyong would have to think about it every time he visited the Kim Chaek Iron and Steelworks, or passed through his birth city.

Then again, one day Kim Il-sung University would be named after a dead man. The General would die, along with every single person

he was looking at right now. Either in a few decades as their bodies failed like Kim Chaek's, or tomorrow, violently, like all the men he worked on the rail lines with.

The podium protested under his grip as another throb of agony twinged in his spine. He made himself speak before anyone could start thinking he was simple.

"Engineering is one of the most important jobs there is," he announced, internally grimacing at the contrast between his voice and the General's. "We're going to need a lot of them for when we- it's time to rebuild."

'Especially after the rest all fucking died.'

They'd barely had any engineers before Liberation. The ones trained after were mostly working-class or peasant men who'd finally had the chance to be educated under the Worker's Party. They'd been patriots. Which meant the ones that hadn't died at the front or in the air raids had been strung up by the traitors during the retreat.

"And if we ever want to say that Korea is the best when it comes to automobiles, transportation, or anything else, then you're all going to have to study hard," he told them seriously. "No slacking off or quitting when it gets difficult. You have the chance to run our country and to learn how to *keep* it running. The people before you would've killed for that."

Was that aggressive enough that Korea would get on his ass for saying it? Whatever. The crowd seemed to agree. One man was nodding to himself, and the teacher had added it to his notebook.

And it was true. North Hamgyong had worked the line with dozens of men that should've been engineers or mechanics, not breaking their backs in a Jap factory. They had the wits and the skill, just not the money or opportunity.

He'd been fucking thrilled when he was finally able to take his own night classes, to study real textbooks instead of depending on intuition and what Hwang remembered from the ones he'd read to

cobble together guns and explosives. So had everyone in the classes he'd visited.

He wondered how many of them were still alive. He didn't see any familiar faces in the thousand plus students packed into the room, or the teachers.

'Probably none.'

Gritting his teeth, he said, "So take your chance and use it to become the best damn engineers Korea's ever seen, and make our country the best the *world* has ever seen."

He thumped his fist on the podium, and everyone thought it was just for emphasis and not because his spine was fucking *killing* him. They broke out into cheers, just like they had for the General.

North Hamgyong looked out at their beaming faces and the hands clapping so fast they blurred, and wondered how many would be dead before graduation. All of them if the future dormitory got bombed.

'Don't build it aboveground!' he wanted to shout. But he kept his mouth shut. He'd bring it up to Korea later.

"Well spoken, comrade," Kim Il-sung said as he pushed away from the podium, unable to help the way his spine curled like a metal shaving.

North Hamgyong sank his teeth into the side of his cheek to stop himself from cussing him out. He had his limits. Even if the man didn't care, Korea would beat his ass.

"Did Korea put you up to this?" he grumbled under the roar of the cheers that were still going on. He was going to get a headache to match his backache.

The General didn't answer, lifting his head to look out at the auditorium. "I think there are comrades who would like to speak with us. There's Ri Byong-do. He taught you at your night classes, didn't he?"

North Hamgyong looked over to see that it really was the man making his way down through the rows. He'd been one of the few able to go to Japan for an education, and he'd brought his skills back to teach their people. And him.

Maybe a *few* of the people from the classes were still alive. But he wasn't going to search the room for more. If they were, he didn't want to know. It might just encourage someone to tell him when they died for real.

He went to ask the General if they could fuck off now, but the man was already talking to a few of the staff, one man clasping his forearm tight, his eyes shining with tears as he looked up at him.

Great. They were stuck here for at least another hour.

North Hamgyong groaned, his spine bending further.

"Comrade North Hamgyong." Ri Byong-do reached him. "Good to see you."

North Hamgyong clasped his forearm. "You too, you bastard."

Even if he would've rather not known he was alive.

'For now.'

The thirty-something man *'tsk'*ed disapprovingly. "Is that any way to talk to your teacher?"

North Hamgyong made a face. "You aren't my teacher anymore. And I have rank."

"Hmph. Well, try to watch your tongue around my current students. I don't want them picking up the audacity." Ri gestured at the group of college kids hovering by the edge of the benches, and they immediately scurried over.

'Who said I wanted to talk to them?'

But he still couldn't deny their people. If Korea hit him over the head with his boot right now, he'd crumple like a fucking tin can.

The students swarmed, crowding eagerly in to greet him, enough of them that he knew they couldn't all be Ri's.

"Comrade North Hamgyong!" a man with a shaved head chirped in Hamgyong dialect. "Hey!"

"That ain't how you greet a Provincehuman," another man said. "It's 'hello.'" From the way his thick Hwanghae accent stretched the word, it was clear he was more used to saying 'howdy' like the dokkaebi.

North Hamgyong could tell he'd been one of the soldiers at the front, and not just because of the shrapnel scars that peppered his cheek and neck. It was in the shoulders and spine. Lucky bastard could hold his perfectly straight.

"Comrade North Hamgyong doesn't mind informality." Ri gave him a pointed look, and he curled his lip in return.

He did actually. Some of his cousins might be fine with throwing away tradition, but he wasn't. Even if he talked casual with the men on the line, students just out of high school should have some respect for someone older and higher-ranked than them.

'Whatever.'

A few of the other students pressed in to greet him. He'd be especially pissed when the ones that greeted him formally died.

"Back, back." Ri shooed them. "A man is trying to show off his prodigies here." He slapped a hand on the thin shoulder of the Hamgyong man, and the other on the muscular Hwanghae man. "These here are Kim Yung-sam and Bing Man-gol."

The family name was rare enough to get a grunt of acknowledgement out of North Hamgyong.

"Mr. Ri is bragging about Comrades Kim and Bing again," another man sighed.

"Maybe if you brought me better test results, I'd brag about you, too, Mister Pak," Ri shot back. "These two have got perfect marks

on all their theoretical and practical exams."

Kim beamed and Bing shifted, his scarred cheeks tinting pink.

"Along with-" Ri stopped, looking around at the ring of students before over at the rows of benches. "Miss Oh, stop lurking and get over here."

After a few seconds, a small chick with a thick black braid and wire-rim glasses that looked like Four-Eyes' slunk out of the crowd to stand at the man's side.

"There she is," Ri said proudly. "She has the temperament of a stray dog that's taken a few too many kicks, but our Miss Oh is as clever as they come."

"Oh Jin-bok, Comrade North Hamgyong." Oh bowed deep enough that she had to push her glasses back up with one hand. The other was gripping so tight to a wrapped parcel that it looked like she was about to strain something.

"She doesn't look like much, but you know what they say about the small pepper," Ri said proudly.

The girl cringed at the attention on her, not exactly looking like the spiciest of the bunch. Unless you thought salt was spicy.

'Great.' Three more names North Hamgyong was going to have to dread hearing in Hwang's stupid fucking school obituary announcements he gave every time he came back from one.

One of them was familiar, but he refused to think about why.

"Comrade North Hamgyong!" The man from his province threw himself in front of the girl. "It's so cool you came to visit us. I've been telling people you're an engineer, too! My dad's actually met you before, he works at the Chongjin Steelworks."

'Don't fucking say it.'

But Kim's face didn't fall. "I'm really glad you said that thing about the people before us killing for a chance to have what we do

now. He always wanted to be an engineer, but he was never able to afford schooling."

Since it sounded like he was still alive, North Hamgyong said, "If he can still see and hold tools, he should become one now."

They needed as many as they could get.

"That's what I told him," Kim sighed. "But he says he's old and settled. So I'm going to pick up the flag and become the best engineer in Korea for him, like you said."

He puffed out his chest, then yelped as one of his classmates pounded on it, laughing.

"Good," North Hamgyong grunted before they could start wrestling. "Don't waste your opportunity."

For as long as he had it.

Kim's eyes gleamed. "I won't."

"Mister Bing here used to serve at the front," Ri volunteered, thumping the tall Hwanghae man's shoulder.

"What division?" Fuck. He didn't actually want to know. Fucking military talk just slipped out.

"3rd, Comrade General." Bing snapped off a salute. "Ah was in the battle for Taegu." His eyes darkened.

No shit. He was lucky he hadn't died there.

They'd fought so fucking hard to take the city. North Hamgyong didn't know how the soldiers that'd been told it was fine to abandon the hills they'd lost tens of thousands of men to take because they'd be back soon hadn't mutinied.

"Ah'd still be at the front," Bing said, fist clenching. "But they called me back."

"You were called back because you showed too much promise

with the machines, kid," Ri said. "We couldn't have you dying out there."

North Hamgyong understood the bitter look on Bing's face. It was bad enough sitting through meetings and working on the rails when he could be at the front. He couldn't stand sitting in a fucking classroom while people were dying.

But it was still important shit, so he said to the man, "Anyone can fight to defend the country. Only some people have the heads to learn the shhh- stuff we need to rebuild. If you've got one, you need to put it to use."

And not get a bullet lodged in it.

Bing nodded determinedly. "Ah am. Ah don't like it. But ah am."

North Hamgyong fielded more questions from the students, and learned info about their lives that he didn't want. He wanted to growl at them that he didn't care that their mother had sent them into engineering against their will, but now they were dedicated to it to honour her memory, or that he'd been the one to inspire them to take up the trade at one of his lectures pre-war.

He wasn't like Korea or his idiot- stupid fucking South Hamgyong. He didn't get attached to people the way they did, because he knew it was stupid to. He'd been right, hadn't he? The one-armed woman had died and Korea had moped about it. He was probably *still* moping over it. And worrying about whether or not Bang Eul-sik found his fiancée was just another thing for South Hamgyong to chase her tail over.

But it wasn't like he was a fucking emotionless monster the way she thought. The shit people said to him stuck- all the little bits of students' lives he was inflicted with lodged like metal shrapnel in him. Now he was going to have to think about crap like if Kim's dad was going to live to see him achieve his dream for them or if Bing was going to head straight back for the front once he graduated.

That was *why* he didn't want to get attached. And South Hamgyong and the others acted like that was so fucking

unreasonable.

But he couldn't tell the people around him to shut the fuck up and keep their lives to themselves. So he just tried to deflect what they told him like sheet metal, even though he knew it wouldn't fucking work. He knew because he still wondered about how Oh's wife was doing after he'd been blown to bits, or if his son was in this room somewhere.

Eventually Ri and the other teachers reined them in, allowing him to escape. The General was just about finished with his chatting, so North Hamgyong waited by the corner of the stage, ignoring the eyes still on him.

That was the worst part about being a politician. Someone was always looking at you. *To* you, like you had any idea what to fucking do. Like in Chongjin.

But he guessed it'd been that way in the past, too. The moment his or South Hamgyong's cloaks slipped, all eyes would be on their green and white skin. It was better to be looked at like someone in charge than like a piece of meat.

Thinking about her put him in a worse mood, which made him even worse at controlling his face. So he tried to stop, even though she was the worst fucking piece of shrapnel there was.

'I wish I hadn't missed.'

Yeah, he shouldn't have said that shit. But *she* shouldn't have *wanted* him to. And now even with her treating him like he didn't even fucking exist, she *still* couldn't be honest.

Two damn months and she hadn't even tried to talk to him. He really had severed their last tie.

North Hamgyong swung his head over as he caught someone sidling towards him.

It was the girl, Oh. She jumped when he looked at her, stumbling back towards the benches with her parcel in her hands.

Stray dog? More like a fucking mouse. He didn't see how someone like her was supposed to last around the male engineers, good marks or not. It was already a hard field for women.

It was South Hamgyong that should say something. But he wasn't going to her for anything. If she wanted to act like he didn't exist, then he could do the exact same thing. South Pyongan was out since she was barely a woman, and Hae didn't know shit about engineering. And the others were gone. Korea didn't know how to talk to women like women, but he could talk to them like men. But he was too busy for something like this. Not that North Hamgyong didn't think he would come if he asked. He would, because he was an idiot.

'Fucking fine.'

While the General was finishing up, North Hamgyong stomped over to the girl, who shrank down like she was thinking about running.

"U-Um, sorry for staring," she stammered, holding her parcel to her chest.

"Why are you here?" he demanded without ringing the rim. "Why do you want to be an engineer?"

She finally straightened up, a glint of defiance entering the eyes behind her thick glasses. "Because I'm good at it, and I want to use what I'm good at to improve our country. And I belong here just as much as all the men."

Satisfied that she wasn't just forcing herself because the Worker's Party said they needed more women in science, North Hamgyong growled, "Then act like it. No one here is going to think you belong with them if you scurry around like a mouse. If you're really better than most of the people in here, then make sure they damn well *know* it."

She looked a little surprised at his words, which pissed him off. It made him think of South Hamgyong making that stupid quip after Liberation, when Korea had said they needed to encourage women

to take up engineering. Something like *'Oh? You actually think women can do 'men's jobs?''* with her grating voice dripping with sarcasm.

She acted like he was one of the idiots that hated women and thought they shouldn't be allowed to do shit just because he'd been against them fighting over two fucking decades ago at the time. He'd been against women fighting because they were usually weaker than men (South Pyongan was a freak), and at risk of way worse shit happening to them than just dying. Shit that she should be *well fucking aware of.* It had been about protecting them. Even if he still thought like that, what the fuck were they supposed to need protecting from in civilian engineering?

"Sorry," Oh said, dipping her head. "I'm… a little shy."

"Shyness won't get you anywhere," North Hamgyong told her mercilessly. "An engineer needs to be able to say the shhh- stuff she needs to. Pick up your head and grow your liver."

He might not give a damn about whether engineering was a man or a woman's job, but it *was* a male-dominated one. Seven out of ten people in here were men, and that was with most of them off in the army, and the calls to bring more women in. And the types of men that took up trades like this tended to be the sort that would already have trouble respecting a woman, let alone one that didn't respect her own ability. North Hamgyong would be pissed if they lost a good engineer because she couldn't stand her fucking ground.

Oh's tanned knuckles whitened around her parcel, her lips firming. "I will."

"Good." North Hamgyong went to turn away, but she called, "W-Wait!"

Fuck, he just wanted to get out of here before his spine disintegrated.

"What?"

"There's… another reason I want to be an engineer," she said,

looking down. “My father was one. He, um, worked with you in the Railway Rehabilitation Corps.”

‘Ssi-bal.’ He’d recognized her name after all. Even though he hadn’t wanted to.

“Oh Chol-jin?” he forced through his teeth.

Her eyes lit up as he said the name, and she nodded vigorously. “You really remember him.”

Why the fuck wouldn’t he? They’d worked together for months, and he’d only died three of them ago. And he’d had to carry the fucking body for his wife.

He'd thought the kid going to engineering school to follow in his footsteps that the man always talked about was a son. Could you blame him? What kind of name was ‘Jin-bok’ for a girl?

“He taught me everything I know,” Oh’s daughter said, her eyes dipping. “I want to make him proud, even if… he’s not around to see it.”

She already had. The man had never shut up about her as they worked. North Hamgyong knew what her first damn words had been, and that she’d gone past the money, string, and everything else at her doljanchi to hug him.

“Then don’t let the bastards here steamroll you,” he said gruffly, the word slipping out.

“I won’t,” she vowed. “I’m going to be an engineer, no matter what. And, um, when mother heard you were coming today, she gave me something for you.”

The girl shyly held out the parcel.

“They’re gaetteok,” she said, making his jaw lock. “She wanted me to say sorry she never thanked you for helping her get him home. She wasn’t thinking right.”

No fucking shit. She’d been wailing over a husband she wouldn’t

have even been able to recognize if she hadn't been told who it was. North Hamgyong didn't need a damn apology for that.

"Keep your food," he grunted. "I've got rations. I don't need it."

Her arm wavered, but she didn't withdraw the box. "Father said you n-never brought anything but rice to work. That's why he always made sure mother made extra."

'That fucking bastard.'

"Fine." North Hamgyong snatched the wrapped package, feeling the dosirak inside.

Great, now he was going to have to visit her mother to hand it back, and put up with some sappy bullshit and hear more things about Oh that he didn't want to.

Whatever. He'd give the gaetteok to Hae the bottomless void. Maybe it would make her stomach stop growling for a second. *Before* Korea did something else like what he'd done back in winter.

"Comrade, are you ready to leave?"

North Hamgyong looked over to see the General approaching. He tried to find somewhere to shove the dosirak, but he was just in his general's tunic today. Grudgingly, he tucked it under his arm.

The man looked at it, smiling. "Study hard," he said to Oh's daughter. "The future is in your hands."

"Y-Yes, General." She quickly bowed, flushing as he told her he didn't mind 'Comrade Kim Il-sung.'

Vain fucking effort, like it had been from the start. Everyone liked 'the General' too much.

North Hamgyong was finally able to leave the hall, ambling after the Supreme Commander with Hyon Chol-hae tailing them. He took the chance to rub his aching back.

"I've been thinking it might be beneficial for you to lead classes

here sometimes," the General said as they made their way down the underground corridor.

North Hamgyong immediately replied, "No f- No way."

"I will admit that you don't have the most teacherly bearing." The man gave him a look that said he'd overheard him trying not to swear. "But you are one of our most talented engineers. And these aren't children- they are men and women that have fought for their country and faced innumerable hardships. They can handle a bit of tough education, so long as it isn't harsh."

"I don't want to be a teacher."

"Comrade Korea said you were excited enough when he first asked if you would be willing to teach engineering and technical courses."

North Hamgyong grimaced. When he'd been information-gathering to set up his courses for them. The courses that would be postponed for two years in a few days.

Fine. He wasn't like South Hamgyong, lying to himself about how he felt. He *had* been excited, just as excited as he'd been to take the classes himself. He'd been looking forward to having more engineers, mechanics, and electricians, ones that hadn't been trained in Japan or the Soviet Union, but Korean workers trained by Korean teachers. He'd never thought he'd see the fucking day.

But that had been before the war. Before he'd just be training kids to die.

Because that's what the students in here were being trained for. If they graduated before this war was over, they'd be sent out to the factories and rails or to the front. They might even be able to do something with their skills before they fell to a bomb or enemy bullet. If he taught Oh Jin-bok how to be an engineer worth her spice, he'd probably end up carrying her corpse back to her mom, too, just like her idiot dad.

And even if they survived this damn war, even if Korea was Reunified and everything was fucking sunshine and rainbows,

imperialism would always be out there, always waiting to try again. Even if America was beat this time, he wasn't going to make the same mistake- he'd be back with a damn vengeance. And every student North Hamgyong trained would either end up slaughtered or slaving away for the enemy. He couldn't stomach that shit.

He also couldn't say that to the General's face.

"If I have to spend all day watching people die around me on the railways, then come here to hear that dormitory got blown up, I'm going to start screaming," he said bluntly instead.

It was embarrassing to say, and he wouldn't to any of the other provinces or Korea (not that he probably wouldn't hear about this anyway), but he fucking meant it. If he had to know all of these students by name, their dislikes and likes and family lives, the way a teacher was supposed to according to Hwang, just to watch them die, then he was going to strap as many grenades as possible to himself and head south to deal with Korea's burden after all.

"The dormitory will be built safely, comrade," the General reassured. "Comrade South Pyongan and you will collaborate with the best engineers here to make sure it has adequate bomb shelters and the safest location."

"The safest location would be underground." Not built on a 'sunny hillside' like he thought it should be.

"Our students already do their learning underground." The General swept his hand at the dark classroom doors they passed. "They spend their school lives down here. They can't live their extracurricular lives as well hiding from the sun for fear of what could happen to them. Just as I couldn't avoid coming here today for fear of what could happen on the way. The students need light, they need hope to see them through this war."

That fucking word again.

North Hamgyong's teeth grated off each other. "Hope won't help if they're dead."

“And they won’t want to live if they don’t have it.” The General stopped, turning to look at him shrewdly. “You have doubts about our victory in this war, don’t you, comrade?”

Fuck. He was putting him in a tough place, if whatever he said made its way back to Korea.

Then again, maybe he needed to hear it in a way that wouldn’t end with North Hamgyong getting beat.

“And you don’t?” he challenged. “You said yourself at the start of that speech- these truce talks have been going on for almost a damn year now. It’s clear the Yank isn’t going to sign. And you said even if he did, he could invade again at any time.”

The floor swept away beneath his damn boots as it did every time the truth sank in.

Even when his cousins and Korea acted like an armistice would be the magical end to the war, that wasn’t true. Forget America invading again- he could just decide the ceasefire was off before his soldiers had even left.

And they *wouldn’t* leave. That was why he wanted their airfields to be hobbled- so he could build up his own forces, then make up some shit about them breaking the armistice the same way he’d made up them ‘invading’ the south in the first place, so he’d have an excuse to call in more reinforcements or break out his atom bomb and crush them for real.

Even if they got an armistice, this wasn’t going to end.

“I also said that as much as we’re ready to cease fire, we are also ready to continue the war,” the General said steadily. “And that no matter how desperately the enemy maneuvers, he will surrender to our people before long. And if he doesn’t, and overreaches in his drive to plunge the world into another war, then he will be destroyed. We have nothing to fear.”

“You can’t really fucking believe that.” The word slipped out in his frustration. “The only reason we have nothing to fear is because we

have nothing *left.* Our factories, our farms, our towns. They've all been *destroyed."*

Kim Il-sung was supposed to be the realist, but there hadn't been a fucking trace of despair in his voice as he said almost those exact words to the fucking students, as he looked them in the eyes and told them they had nothing more left to be destroyed. And there hadn't been a trace of it on their damn faces.

"But *we* haven't," the General said, looking down the hall as the students started to emerge, laughing and chattering excitedly about the visit. "Korea hasn't. And so long as we have hope in victory, it won't."

He started walking again, leaving North Hamgyong to bow his head with bared teeth.

Hope didn't kill the enemy, it didn't put food in their bowls or cast a shield over the Peninsula to stop an atom bomb from being dropped on it. It couldn't have kept them alive or helped them escape the Japs. So what did it fucking *matter* if he had it or not?

He stormed after the General, Hyon Chol-hae giving him a sympathetic look that he shrugged off.

"Hope doesn't win a war," he hissed.

"No. But it gives our people the drive to fight it." The General kept his strides long, staying ahead of the crowd. "Would our soldiers risk their lives defending our country if they thought there was no use? Would our students bravely leave their homes and families to become engineers if they thought there was no future in it? Would our Party members strive to feed and house our civilians if they thought they were all going to die anyway?"

He looked sideways at him with a small smile. "Why did we fight the Japanese?"

North Hamgyong had fought because there was no other choice. Either he'd follow Korea or stay rotting in that factory, or in some Jap prison Japan would throw him in. He'd wanted to kill the

bastards Occupying them, and make sure South Hamgyong didn't do anything else stupid while he was at it.

He looked away.

"And if I'm not mistaken, I saw your eyes light up when I mentioned building our own automobiles in the future," the General said as they reached the exit, Hyon Chol-hae getting the door for them, clearing the outside world as he did. "What is that if not a hopeful expectation for the future?"

Fucking fine- he had been hanging on his words, too. He always did, the same way he did with Korea's. That was why he hated their speeches so damn much. They got you wrapped up in their pretty words, thinking they were true, or that they could be. When Korea had given that damn speech on Foundation Day, screaming out at their people that they could fight for a thousand years more, for one fucking second, North Hamgyong had almost believed it.

But when they stepped away from the podium, nothing had changed. They were still being bombed to shit, the south was still being colonized, the war was still at a damn standstill that could be broken any day by the atom bomb. That one bright second where it felt like maybe that could change just made reality seem even bleaker.

That was what hope was- an illusion that left you feeling even shittier when it was shattered. His sister and Korea's was just idiot-proof.

The General took a deep breath of the stifling summer air as they stood in the mountain ravine the school was in now, smiling at the farmhouses clustered in it, not even glancing up as a recon plane buzzed overhead.

"Hope doesn't win wars," he repeated. "People do. Hope just gives them a reason to."

With that, he set off for his hidden car with a damn near skip in his step, leaving North Hamgyong to ball his hands into fists.

Even if he got what he meant about needing a reason to fight, *how* could people still have hope? It wasn't a real thing you could touch, for fuck's sake. You couldn't feed it to someone like rations or hand it out like a damn school uniform or dosirak. You couldn't maintain it like an engine. So how the fuck could the students in there or the soldiers at the front or civilians living in the ground like fucking mole people still have it?

And why the fuck had South Hamgyong needed him to give it to her in order to leave her cage? Had being raped almost every single damn day not been enough? She needed a fucking illusion to convince her?

'Stupid bitch.' He wasn't going to let her police his own damn thoughts when she wouldn't even look in his direction.

He bared his teeth at the rocky ground as he saw the look on her face after he'd told her that stupid fucking thing. Her wide eyes flashing with hurt like she believed him.

Whatever. If she wanted to keep her false hope, she could. She clearly didn't want to be any of his damn business. Even if being idiot-proof didn't mean it wouldn't shatter someday when she finally accepted what he already had, and she'd come crashing down like a bird with an arrow in it.

And did the General even think about what would happen to their country when *Korea's* shattered? When he stopped living in that bright moment and had to wake up and face the reality that-

North Hamgyong kicked at the rock of the ravine hard enough to bruise his foot, then stomped after the General, the dosirak of gaetteok crushed under his arm.

He'd keep his mouth shut. Not because of South Hamgyong's threat. He just knew no one was going to fucking listen to him.

Not until Korea came crashing down.

—

China's song had been beautiful. Not even North could deny that.

He'd known he had a good voice, but his mourning song had been... different. It was rich and sonorous, filled with a depth of emotion that was nothing like his usual airiness, a bubbling over of the low tone he sometimes dipped into, when he was looking at him over O-geun's body or telling him the photos of the 63rd Army's platoon would turn out.

No. China's song had been grieving. But it hadn't been soft. As he'd cried out on the bloody stage, he had sounded the way he did when he gave his speech to his soldiers at Chorweon. And maybe 'mourning song' wasn't the right term for it.

Like how North hadn't been able to picture him moving at anything more than a relaxed glide until he saw him in real combat for the first time, that outpouring of emotion now seemed just as natural, though he couldn't imagine why China would have wanted him to witness it.

His teeth grit. No. Again, like at Chorweon, he did.

He wished he hadn't. The song had been heartachingly beautiful, only matched by his brother's in the prison shack, the ones he was suddenly remembering too clearly. But it had affected him far more than those ever had, in a way he didn't want. China's song had threaded its way into his mind and rifled through his memories, dragging them out to the forefront.

North had spent so many years trying to block out thoughts of his brother during the Occupation. If he was alive, he would see him again, and if he wasn't… Only he would ever know.

Until one day he had realized that he couldn't remember what he sounded like when he sang. All of those nonsense, feel-good tunes about love and things they had never experienced, all the ones he'd hummed under his breath as they worked on their characters, those he sang for North while he exercised, old working songs from their common sense, or the ones he'd loudly warbled to tempt their guards to come in and beat them so they could try and escape. They were all gone. He could remember the words, but not how his brother had sang them.

Except for *'Arirang,'* like a cruel joke.

'My love, if you abandon me
Your feet will be sore before you go ten ri.'

The realization had seized inside his chest, almost suffocating him, as he had to pretend nothing was wrong as SH, Sang, and North Pyongan traded songs with the revolutionaries.

He had more songs now. South had sang after Liberation. On their way across Korea, he'd learned their guerrilla marching songs and sang them with their soldiers, and joined voices with those they met in the villages and cities. North refused to let them fade. He would hold the sound of his brother's songs close until they were one, and could sing them with a new voice.

But he still couldn't remember what it sounded like for South to sing to *him.* Not a song he wanted to hear anyway.

He could now. China's song had wrapped itself around the memories and pulled them out of the recesses of the past, along with one song in particular. The last one.

He hadn't had the strength to fight against his recuperative coma after his 'something worse' in Keijo Prison. If he had at first, he likely would have died.

But he had still been trying. When the slightest crack in the darkness came, he'd mustered every bit of strength he had to sink his nails into it like he had to Japan, to tear it open. He'd had to wake up, *he had to escape. There were people out there that needed him- Kim Byeong-ho, Pak Ok-yeon, An Gum-jin, millions of millions of people like the woman with chestnut eyes.*

But he was too weak, just like he'd been too weak to stop Japan from carving him open. He was losing his grip, sinking back under as the gap closed, when the song slipped through.

"The day after tomorrow, over Hallasan, the dawn will break."

'Tondollari,' *an old dancing song. South's version, the one where he substituted the green hills with places they'd dreamed of visiting. Another*

song North had told him to stop singing.

"The day after tomorrow, over Paektusan, the dawn will break."

Even with the cheerful tone South was trying to force, North could hear the deep yearning in the words, for Hallasan, for Paektusan, for all he places they'd never seen. He wanted to see them just as badly as North, he always had, so why had he made him stop ***fighting*** *for it? Why had North let him?*

"By the Han in Seoul, the dawn will break, by the Taedong in Pyongyang, the dawn will break."

North wanted to see it. He wanted to see the dawn on the broad river that had flowed through Pyongyang. He wanted to see the fishermen on the water and the washerwomen by the shore and the girls that went to pick flowers on Moran Hill going about their lives, not being cut down in the streets. He wanted to see the city not dyed with his people's blood. He wanted to see Korea the way he was ***meant*** *to. He wanted to wake up and* ***fight.***

"The day after tomorrow, over mountains and streams, the dawn will break, the day after tomorrow, over fields and seas, the dawn will break."

Always the day after tomorrow, always another day. If South had his way they would be free any day but today. They would never see those sights, their people would never be able to enjoy them without fear.

That feeling that had welled within him as he was pinned to the floor under Japan's boot surged up, uplifting him, and North sank his claws into the song, hauling himself towards it.

"Over the precious green hills, over the precious green hills."

His brother's voice wavered, the fear and grief for North breaking through. But for once that wasn't what kept him going, wasn't what made him force himself to keep climbing out of the dark, to not retreat from the pain creeping back into his body. Once his brother's pain and fear had seemed bigger than anything, but in the face of the March First Movement, it seemed infinitely small, and his own like nothing. What

was the pain of one person compared to the agony of a nation?

"The day after tomorrow, over you and me, the dawn will break. The day after tomorrow, over a Liberated Korea, the dawn will break."

Worn hands holding his face, blood pooling under Japan's boots, a sea of people enveloping him, clinging to him, chestnut eyes burning into his.

It wasn't their duty to be Liberated. It was their duty to ***Liberate.***

"Tondollari, tondollari, tondollariyo."

The dawn broke.

"I know you're in a hurry to get back to overworking yourself, but I'd rather *not* have you bleed out on the floor. Someone would have to clean it."

The voice snapped North out of the intrusive memory, and he instinctively bared his teeth at the person next to his chair.

Kim Yong-hwan was unimpressed. "Fine. But if you pass out from blood loss, I'm not resuscitating. Maybe you'll get some rest for once."

North looked away, ashamed. "That wasn't at you. I was distracted."

"And has nothing to do with me saying I'm going to clean your wounds whether you like it or not, I'm sure."

"Not today," North clipped, not making any effort to slow his pulse and stop how quickly the IV bag of blood was filling. "I'm busy."

CCCP *had* sent him a message about a topic he was planning on bringing up in the Security Council tomorrow, and he had to draft a letter back, but that wasn't why he was turning her down. He had only torn his burn gash open two days ago, and it couldn't heal right with him constantly being on the move. The damage was still clear. And he wasn't giving the woman another chance to call him

an idiot.

And if he had to sit still and let her touch him while that song was still rummaging through his memories…

"'Busy,' he says," Kim Yong-hwan grumbled. "You'll be 'busy' when you're dying of gangrene."

North let her grumble. The bags under her eyes were heavy, and the hands holding his intravenous line were trembling. And the streaks of grey in her hair had gotten lighter.

He would tell her to get more rest. But he knew she wouldn't listen.

The door opened, and his fingers twitched for his gun as his head shot over. Then he turned back to the wall so fast his neck cracked.

"Oh," Kangwon said awkwardly. "Hey, Korea."

North nodded coolly, burning a hole in the cabinets above the hospital counter.

"Just… here to grab some IV bags." Kangwon sidled towards those cabinets, and North turned to face Kim Yong-hwan.

She glowered at him as his province rummaged around, coming out with several clear bags.

"Tell the others I say hi, if you see them," Kangwon said at the door.

North jerked his chin in a nod, still not looking at him. He didn't look away from the nurse until the door closed.

"You two are pathetic," Kim Yong-hwan immediately announced. "Whatever the poor boy did to set you off this time, get over it so he can stop sulking around the hospital."

North wasn't the reason he was sulking. Nothing he said could stop him.

“Mind your own business,” he growled. “And he’s not a ‘boy’- he’s almost as old as you. *And* he's a Provincehuman.”

“It *is* my business when I have to take time out of my break to draw your blood when he’s just as available.”

North looked at her, alarmed. “You’re taking time out of your break?”

She *‘tch’*ed. “No. That’s why you were wandering around the hospital for ten minutes before this. But you’re still bothering me.”

North glared at her. “You clearly need to be re-educated until you remember how to speak to your country.”

“I’ll see you there while *you* learn how to communicate at all.”

Not dignifying her with an answer, North turned pointedly away, the IV still in his arm.

He wasn’t the reason for the way Kangwon was acting. He’d done what he could to stop it. It hadn’t been enough, because how could it be? His province had to overcome his weakness on his own.

And that wasn’t why he was avoiding him.

That song was still there, slithering through his mind, an invader squatting in his skull, dredging up all those memories, making him remember everyone he had ever lost. And his brother. The last person he wanted to think about right now.

‘잘못했어.’

Kangwon would still be grieving and in pain. North couldn’t stop it. He had never been able to. And if his province looked at him like he had before, pleading with those shimmering, round eyes and childish lip quiver as he said *‘It hurts’* like he thought his Countryhuman could do anything about it, while those memories writhed in his mind…

He couldn’t fucking take that.

Kim Yong-hwan was still grumbling to herself and him as she removed the IV. “Since you won’t do it for your own sake or his, at least *pretend* to get over it so I can deal with patients who won’t give me a premature heart attack instead. Or better yet, here’s an ultimatum- fix things up with him or I’ll make sure you can’t come here and drain yourself dry every day.”

North sat up straighter at her words, an idea striking.

The only way he could truly fix things was by ending the war. But he knew logically that he needed to be able to look at Kangwon again before then. America was still stalling and the International Scientific Commission would be here soon, and while he was planning to meet with them only once so he couldn’t be accused of bribing them as easily, he would be meeting with them. And obviously his top doctor and investigator had to be there.

His province wasn’t like the person from his memories. He was a medic like Kim Yong-hwan, pushing himself to the edge of his limits for others, and he was a revolutionary, like North. He knew that his struggles were nothing compared to those they were sworn to protect.

He just had to be reminded. And North could take care of a few other matters in the meantime.

Kim Yong-hwan eyed him with suspicion. “What are you scheming with that look on your face? I don’t like it.”

“I don’t care what you like.” North stood abruptly, rolling down his sleeve before she could put a patch on the track mark. The skin was already crisped anyway. “Go take another break.”

“Who died and made *you* hospital manager?” Kim Yong-hwan demanded.

North ignored her, heading out into the hallway with new purpose.

Letter to CCCP as that was time sensitive, review the situation reports on Wonsan he’d asked for again, then visit a few specific

places to prepare.

He couldn't stop thinking about his brother or get this *stupid* song out of his head. But he *could* fix Kangwon. He could make sure he knew he could. And he could make himself stop feeling that warm glow he didn't deserve to while he was at it.

He knew just how to do it.

China has found his ideal audience- guy who is so emotionally affected by his music that it makes him feel like he's losing his mind. Only matched by woman who is so affected by his dancing that she devotes herself to a life of struggle and fundamentally changes who she is as a person.

US bases leaking evil chemicals across Okinawa and nuclear soil from Fukushima being spread everywhere. If I start going weird(er), just know it's because I am becoming irradiated like a Fallout ghoul. Unfortunately I'm probably just going to get breast cancer.

I had a dream after writing the draft for this where I was infiltrating a run-down, dark, dusty house (it felt like the Staltula House in Ocarina of Time) filled with these demon dogs. I had a long thin gun and tactical gear, and I had to shoot each one six times to kill it, and it was like video game logic where I couldn't see if the bullets were leaving damage. I made my way down to the cellar, where there were two square wells in the ground. One had a dying dog on top and the other had a dying cat. I went to talk to the cat, and I can't remember what exactly was said, but the idea was that hope was trapped deep underground in this house. I couldn't hear my own thoughts in this dream, so I can't explain my rationale for what I did, but I went over to the dog and curb-stomped its skull. Then I dropped it into the very very deep hole, where it vanished. I never heard it hit anything. The cat said something like 'You're going to release hope now, aren't you?' and I stared down at the hole, then said, 'No.' And I stepped back. The cat was suddenly not dying anymore, but it still didn't move from over the other well. We had another conversation that I can't remember, then it told me to take a kitten with me

when I left. And a little kitten emerged from behind a pile of moldy boxes to reach up my leg. So I scooped it up and left. As I was ascending the stairs I started to wake up, so my waking mind was wondering what it was all about. I feel like I was sent there by someone, but I don't know who. Did I do what they wanted? Why did I kill the dog if I wasn't going to commit to killing the cat, too? The dog did feel malicious. It didn't talk, but it had an evil energy, and the demons upstairs were dogs, too. Whereas the cat at least felt neutral. Was it a Pandora's box situation? 'All the curses escaped except hope.' And then you have to ask if hope is a curse, and what keeping it trapped means. Did I suddenly realize that releasing hope might be bad for humanity? Maybe it was that hope was trapped under the house, and someone sent me to release it for humankind. And the dog spirit was preventing *any* hope from getting out, but the cat spirit was keeping it on earth because if it escaped it would leave humanity. Or at least maybe I decided that in the dream. Then maybe the kitten spirit was me bringing a piece of that hope back out into the world as a reward for my decision. I reached the top stair and the house was light and cheerful now, and as the sun hit me I woke up. This is what inspired the chapter title.

Sleep of Death

Kangwon had only been to Wonsan once after the blockade began last February. He'd been *near* it plenty of times, in the foothills where the ship cannons couldn't reach, and had followed the tunnel systems until he was underneath the outskirts, able to feel the artillery reverberating through the ground above. But he hadn't set foot on his capital's soil since last July, a week away from a year ago.

He hadn't expected to now.

Him and Korea sat in the back of a supply truck, packed in with cases of ammunition on their way to the city. Every bump sent the sharp edges jostling into his burns, making him wince. Korea had no reaction.

Kangwon didn't know what they were doing. Like Wonsan, he'd only even seen his Countryhuman once since that day he'd broke down, almost a month ago now. And it'd been that awkward interaction in the blood lab (also he'd called it that he'd start going to Kim Yong-hwan for his donations instead).

But at midnight last night, Korea had walked in on his ten-minute break and told him to put on his uniform- they were going to Wonsan.

He was glad. He'd wanted to be able to meet up with the defenders there in person again for awhile now. But he was a little nervous, too. Solo missions with Korea usually meant you were going to get a lesson in something. And even though Kangwon was feeling better than he'd been at the end of May (shocking- talking to people about your problems really *did* help; good thing that's what he'd been telling everyone else to do since forever), he wasn't sure if he was feeling resilient enough for his Countryhuman's teaching methods.

He flexed his right hand, a single brown eye burning in his mind.

He knew he wasn't.

The truck rattled over the mountain road. Kangwon shifted uncomfortably, feeling the bumps echo in his skin.

Something had happened yesterday. Something bad. He'd been in more pain than usual, and when North Pyongan had come to donate blood, he'd had to take the IV out when he suddenly cried out as more burns ate up the last good skin on his forearms. Korea wouldn't say what it'd been, but Kangwon was pretty sure it was still happening.

As they'd been leaving last night, the lights in the hospital had been flickering.

"So, the Americans are saying we should let the Red Cross come and investigate," Kangwon said over the rush of wind.

Korea might be freezing him out, but he needed to think about something other than the pain or how many patients he could lose while he was out.

They were still waiting on the United Nations Disarmament Commission to enact real anti-germ warfare measures (they were getting postponed over nuclear weapons). In the meantime, the Soviets had been pushing for the six states that hadn't ratified the Geneva Protocol of 1925, agreeing not to use biological weapons- the US, Japan, and four South American countries- to finally do it. He'd brought it up in the Security Council on the 18th, but was being blocked from turning it into a resolution.

Kangwon had to say he wasn't surprised they'd been getting pushback (because even a simple ask to sign the same thing everyone else had had to be an evil Communist plot, obviously). But he had been surprised that the Americans had suddenly suggested passing a resolution to send the Red Cross to Korea to look into the biowarfare.

Korea dipped his head to confirm, his expression blank. Just like a few days ago, he didn't look at him.

Honestly maybe he was driving Kangwon out to the coast to offer him up to the American ships. He wouldn't have to worry about seeing him cry again if he was obliterated by 38-caliber guns.

"Do you think they're actually going to bring it to a vote?" he asked, pressing on.

Kangwon had heard from Ri Pyong-nam that it was going to get discussed in a meeting on the 23rd. With the time difference between Pyongyang and New York, the Security Council meeting should be happening right now.

"America wants it to, so it will be," Korea clipped. "We are not invited."

'Of course.'

"What's going to happen?" he asked.

"If they don't agree to invite our representatives today, or whenever the draft resolution is put to a vote, CCCP is going to veto."

His tone said he didn't think they would be. And considering they hadn't been invited to the meetings to intervene in Korea in the first place, that seemed about right.

Kangwon got why that had to be vetoed. Not inviting them was normalizing violating the UN Charter and leaving Korea out in decisions involving their own fate, something that had already happened more than just once. But...

Korea finally turned to look... mostly at him, his eye narrowing. "What?"

Kangwon knew he was just going to get snapped at. But it was his job, so he had to say something.

"Maybe we should let them visit." He winced as his Countryhuman's glare turned sour.

The US had mostly ignored their germ warfare accusations last year with the smallpox, but had offered to send a World Health

Organization or Red Cross team to help back in March this year, after they'd made it clear they were going to get someone to. They'd turned them down because the WHO was part of the United Nations, which were, you know, the ones bombing them. Not exactly impartial like they claimed.

The International Committee of the Red Cross was a little more complicated. They hadn't recognized their own Red Cross branch or let them into their organization, but they did have China's and CCCP's, even if neither of them had a lot of influence. China (well, Kangwon got the sense it was more his comrades at home) had actually reached out to them at one point to see if they'd visit his country to investigate, though the foreign branches hadn't seemed as eager to when it was them asking. They weren't part of the UN, so they weren't directly the enemy.

But they *were* still made up of people from the countries that were the enemy, and the ones that supported it. It was risky to let them in when they knew America wouldn't be offering out of the goodness of his heart. China and CCCP's branches wouldn't be trusted for an investigation by America, and any delegation from another country would likely have at least one spy in it, so couldn't be entirely trusted by *them*.

"I know they've got problems," he said before Korea could take his head off. "But at least they've been a little truthful about the camps down south."

Even if those articles never made it out of French.

"We could ask that the Red Cross chapters with their countries involved in the war aren't included," he suggested. "Even the ones with just medical missions. Try to get people that are as fair as possible. Even if we have to let them cut us out of the decision again, it might be worth it to let them come investigate."

Korea's jaw feathered the same way it had when he'd told China to go ahead and invite them.

Kangwon hesitated, then said, "You don't want them to investigate."

His Countryhuman's glare dulled, and he looked out the back of the truck, sighing. "America offered to send them before because he knew we would say no. Do you know why he's trying to force this through now?"

Kangwon shook his head.

"As a distraction." He glared at the dark road behind them. "He was running out of excuses as to why he won't ratify the Geneva Protocol. And with the International Scientific Commission arriving and everything coming out of Geoje, he needs an even bigger one. If we let the Red Cross in here, they'll look at our proof, listen to the testimonies, then tell the world there isn't enough evidence. And when the ISC is done with their investigation and says there is, they will be ignored in favour of the 'impartial' one. You will have lost Gangwon for nothing."

Kangwon shifted his hands under his legs.

"Korea," he said gently. "Do you really think every single one of them would be willing to lie?"

"It's June, Kangwon." Korea's voice was bitter. "There are supposed to be insects now."

Right. It was summer again. Tomorrow would be two years since the war began in earnest. The mosquitoes and spiders and fleas and everything else were in season now.

"They waited long enough that they can say all our samples are just natural occurrences, and that the ones that don't belong here came with the foreign soldiers." Korea didn't look his way. "They'll say that's where the illnesses came from, too."

"We have witnesses." Including a foreign reporter and a handful of American POWs that had seen flies get dumped in the river near a camp at the beginning of the month.

His Countryhuman looked at him, still not quite in the eye. "Kangwon. Do you really think that they would believe a single word from a Korean's mouth, or anyone on our side or in our hands.

Did they believe *you?"*

'I can prove Gangwon's with us because he wants to be!'

It was Kangwon's turn to avoid his gaze.

"They don't need to lie," Korea said heavily. "They just need to choose not to believe it. And the rest of the world will follow because *they* don't want to believe it either."

Kangwon wrapped his arms around his legs, resting his chin on his knees as the crates of ammunition jostled around him.

Korea turned away. "If they invite us and let us give our side of the story at the vote, I will let them in. But not with that 'free movement' condition. I'm not giving the enemy access to wherever they please."

Kangwon didn't know if he meant it, or if he was just saying it for the same reason America had offered to send the Red Cross before- because he knew it wouldn't be happening.

He wondered what Korea thought about people being good or not. He knew the answer when it came to theirs, obviously. But he wondered what he'd say if he asked him about the rest of the world, whether or not he thought they were, and whether or not he'd lie if he didn't.

And how much he thought their people influenced them.

He couldn't ask. He knew himself well enough to know that his Countryhuman's opinion would influence his too much. And he wanted to come to his own conclusion.

Wonsan sat in an inlet in the broader bay, separated from the wider ocean by the Kalma Peninsula to the east, with the Masikryong Mountains pressing up against its west side, wedging it between the forested peaks and the beach. They were where Kangwon and his comrades had hid during their defense of Wonsan during the tactical retreat, before he'd turned himself in.

As the convoy of trucks crept slowly through the outskirts of the

city, the province could see that there was nowhere to hide now.

The mountains and hills were stripped bare, covered in craters from the constant air raids. And the city next to the sea was... gone.

The neat rows of apartments and older, messier huts, the schools, the factories on the edge of town, the airfield, the park in the forest in the middle of town, the forest itself. The hospital.

When he'd been here last year, his capital had been a wreck. All the military targets had been smoking holes and so had half the residential neighbourhoods, thanks to the Americans' aim. He'd thought to himself that there hadn't been a city left to defend.

He'd been wrong. There had still been *something* last year, the clinging traces of houses and stores. Now there was nothing. Nothing but a sea of jumbled wood, stone, and steel spread out along the shore, more like debris swept in from the ocean than somewhere people had lived.

Artillery pounded the islands scattered off the coast, their shore batteries firing on the ones claimed by reactionaries and the ship cannons firing on those the KPA still held, and back at the shore. It felt like Kangwon could feel the blasts hit him harder now, the way he always could when he visited his province. He didn't know if it was a Provincehuman thing or just psychological. If being able to hear the *'boom'* of the shells and see the explosions of earth just made him more aware that the land they were destroying was connected to his body.

The main roads had been cleared, but their truck tires still crunched over wood and rubble as they skirted Wonsan to park on the far east of town, hidden by the low hills that rose at the base of the Kalma Peninsula. Immediately soldiers rushed from the tunnels under them to start unloading the trucks, carrying sacks of grain and crates of ammunition into the darkness before the sun rose.

Kangwon jumped out from the back, quickly starting to help before Korea could tell him to, wincing as his legs almost buckled. He piled the ammo into a handcart, and the moment it was full the porter took off, running it for the coastal defenders. Crate after

crate, worth tens of thousands of won, just for a few days and just for this post. Most of it would end up in the ocean, fired in an unending barrage to keep the minesweepers back.

He lifted another crate, passing it to a soldier.

"Thanks, com-" The man's shadowed eyes widened as he actually saw the person holding it. "Comrade Kangwon? And Comrade Korea?"

The names rippled through their soldiers and civilian porters as they looked towards the truck. Kangwon lifted his hand in greeting.

"Finish your work," Korea ordered, not stopping as he hauled rice sacks over to the tunnel. "We aren't going anywhere."

The men launched back into action, moving with more energy now. But as the dawn got brighter, Kangwon didn't like what he saw.

Despite their vigour, they all looked exhausted. Almost every soldier had at least one bandage wrapped around his head or peeking out from his undershirt, and their uniforms had been mended repeatedly, stitches threading down their arms and torsos, marking where an injury had been. Their faces were streaked with grime and soot, almost black with it. It was caked into the lines on the hands that took the ammo from him, and the wrinkles on their faces.

It'd been bad last July. It was worse now.

"Apologies for the appearance, Comrade Kangwon." One of the men caught him looking. "We've been trying to keep up with hygiene, but the bastards've been pounding the coast all night. No time to sleep, let alone wash up."

Kangwon was alarmed to hear that his voice was a young man's. Between the deep crevasses carved into the corners of his mouth and the edges of his eyes, he'd thought he was forty at least.

"It's no problem," he assured him, even though it definitely was.

As soon as all the cargo was out, the trucks lurched into motion, speeding back towards the mountains just as the sun crested over the horizon. Kangwon looked east over the base of the peninsula.

He'd used to come here a lot after Liberation and before the war. He'd wake up at five and hike up the hills to watch the sun rise, spilling pale light over the vast East Sea. He'd watch the fishing boats set sail and the monks at Tokwon Abbey go about their morning routine, then after the land had been reclaimed from the foreigners, the students of the Wonsan Agricultural University, the first of its kind in their country.

The buildings had been bombed like everything else. They'd been built in a square ring, and while the lower parts of the seminary were still standing, the monastery-turned-teaching building had collapsed, the pointed tower spilling down into the courtyard. Cracks spiderwebbed across the brick, and holes gaped in the tile roofs. The farmland that stretched around them was almost fallow, way too close to the coast to work it, proven by the gaping craters that peppered it. Kangwon could only see a few green patches where brave peasants were trying. And they were empty right now.

He hoped they were just sheltering from the day, like the students had just moved into the hills.

"Kangwon." Korea appeared in the tunnel entrance, jerking his head, and his province realized the soldiers had almost all disappeared inside.

He quickly followed, feeling the weight of the hills press down on him. The air was filled with the smell of hundreds of soldiers packed into a small space, sweaty and human.

'Definitely better than the hospital.'

But the faint smell of blood still lurked somewhere under the funk.

Dim bulbs lit the tunnel, each one just beyond the light cast by the one before it, leaving puddles of shadow in between. They swayed as the earth shuddered around them, and Korea and Kangwon followed them to a slightly wider section of tunnel. Sturdy

wooden beams held up a ceiling of compacted dirt and stone. None of the soldiers looked up as they trembled under the assault outside.

The bare light bulbs flickered.

"Comrades Korea and Kangwon," a man rasped, stepping out of the throng to salute. "Officer Kim Heung-su. What brings you here?"

A few other unit commanders came to stand next to him. This wasn't one of the main complexes, so there were no generals or lieutenant-generals here.

Korea wasn't answering, so Kangwon guessed it was up to him.

"We came to see how our coastal defenders are doing," he said, and got a nod from his Countryhuman.

Kim Heung-su exchanged dull-eyed looks with the men around him. "We're doing, comrades."

It was clear by the fact that he couldn't even act upbeat for his country and province that they weren't doing *well.*

"Tell me about it," Kangwon said, looking around at all the bandages and cuts. "I'll perform some check-ups while you do."

He set up in the tunnel with the medical kit he'd brought, and the new supplies that had came in with the convoy, tending to the worst injuries and making sure the soldiers and civilians were healthy. Crammed together in the tunnels like this, even a natural minor cold could be trouble.

While he worked, Korea walked away with Kim Heung-su to ask about the military situation. And maybe so their comrades wouldn't realize that he still couldn't look at Kangwon.

Some of the men weren't that badly injured, but they came up to him anyways. Kangwon didn't tell them they didn't need treatment, he just used the boiled water they'd brought to clean their scrapes, giving them a chance to feel cared for while he asked how they were holding up.

"I won't lie," the man he was cleaning- Pak Jung-hwi- rasped, his voice thick with exhaustion. "It's tough out here, comrade. The damn ships never let up for a second."

"Day and night, nothing but that damned blastin'," another soldier with deep shadows under his wild eyes said, his voice cracking. "A man can't even fuckin' *sleep."*

Even in here, they could hear the dull booming of the guns outside, shaking dirt from the ceiling. Kangwon knew from the front that the sound could get maddeningly repetitive. Inescapable, the same way he'd started to feel about the sterile hospital smell and the stench of sickness. Combined with not letting them rest, it was basically psychological torture.

Another single eye burned in his mind, dark and hopeless as it stared out at him, the other one covered in bandages.

'If we sleep, we die.'

"And we can't shoot at them half the time," another soldier growled, stitching a tear in his jacket in the corner. "They just *float* out there. And even when they come close enough, the field artillery barely leaves a scratch. Every time we manage to hit one, it sails back to Japan and is back in a month."

That's why they had to concentrate fire on the enemy-occupied islands, as Kangwon heard. They didn't have the equipment to permanently eliminate the ships, so mines were stealthily laid in the bay by sampan to keep them out while they focused on trying to force the southern army off their batteries on the islands.

"And if it's not them, it's the reactionaries shipping landing parties in at night," Pak Jung-hwi said. "You think they're focusing on the other side of the harbour, and you can finally get some shut-eye, then you wake up with a traitor on top of you."

"Are they sending infiltrators?" Kangwon asked to keep them talking, even though he knew.

Most of them were caught on the shores by their batteries. The

landing missions were dangerous. It was why the Americans sent the 'expendable' soldiers from Rhee's army, or the KPA's POWs. But some made it through to sabotage communications and supply dumps, or railway tunnels, blowing them up so their trains couldn't shelter from the barrage, and supplies couldn't make it into the city.

The man nodded grimly. "The Yanks send 'em in with socks and soap, things the civs need, and try to bribe 'em for intelligence."

"One offered me half a bag of rice," one of the civilian porters volunteered. "I turned him over. But people around here are desperate. They won't even let us fish the waters."

"They target our boats!" a woman cried, her voice high and warbling. "They send their whalers out to sink them, then take our fishers on board their big destroyers and make them spill what they know. They took my father and he never came back!"

"I'm so sorry," Kangwon murmured, wiping soot from the creases around Pak Jung-hwi's mouth. "I've heard you can't do any fishing at all now. Is that right?"

"None," she said, her eyes glistening. "Some of the stubborn folk still try, but it isn't worth it. They almost never make it back."

The ocean right on their doorstep, and they couldn't even eat what it provided. If the rations didn't come in time, they'd starve.

"I'm sorry to say it about my birth city," Pak Jung-hwi said tiredly, looking Kangwon in the eyes. "But right now, Wonsan is hell on earth, Comrade Kangwon."

Kangwon's heart panged. "How long have you been on duty?"

"Two months," he said, and some of the other units chimed in with theirs.

One month, two, a little longer for the more experienced officers in logistical roles. None of them were over that. All of them looked like they'd been here since the siege began. The civilians had been.

They had more divisions in reserve, around eighty thousand

people when you added China's. But they couldn't afford to rotate coastline duty as often as they should. They had to keep those reserves fresh in case there was another landing like there'd been at Incheon. If the Americans managed to take Wonsan, they'd have a direct inroad to Pyongyang, like during the landing here in the first year. They could easily cut off the eastern part of the frontline, and even if they couldn't make it all the way to the capital, it would let them seize even more territory for the ceasefire, half of Kangwon's province.

And they couldn't afford to take the soldiers with experience in combatting the blockade off the line. They needed it held.

"You're all very brave." Kangwon wiped the last bit of grime from Pak Jung-hwi's face and stood, looking around the room. "All of you comrades protecting our coasts from the enemy are the most courageous soldiers we have. Even the ones without a uniform." He nodded to the civilian porters.

"Pardon me for saying, Comrade Kangwon," the woman in the corner said quietly. "But I don't feel very brave. I just don't have anywhere else to go. This is my home."

"And you could've left it, or just hunkered down in the hills," Kangwon said. "But you've stayed since the tactical retreat."

She blinked in surprise. "I didn't think you recognized me."

"Of course."

The defense of Wonsan had been a blur of blood, dust, and chaos, but Kangwon hadn't forgotten the faces that helped him and the militia.

"I remember all of Korea's defenders," he told her. "And you're one of them. You aren't battening down and hoping you make it through this- you're helping make sure our army gets *everyone* through it, and keeps the enemy from taking our city again. That's pretty brave to me, comrade."

"It's- It's what my father would want," she whispered.

"I'm sure it is," he said. "If the Americans didn't send him back, it means he stayed loyal to the end, even surrounded by the enemy. What's your name, by the way? Since no one can mind-control it out of me now."

America had made South try. Luckily Kangwon had made sure the civilians knew not to tell him who they were.

The woman looked down, the tears in her eyes spilling over. "K-Kim Ju-kyu."

Kangwon nodded, looking around at the tunnel full of soldiers, uniformed and not. "If it wasn't for people like Comrade Kim and our militia members, we wouldn't've been able to keep the Americans from landing as long as we did during the tactical withdrawal. They would've flanked Pyongyang and taken Hamhung even sooner, or hobbled our Second Corps and kept them from entrenching in the Liberated zone."

Thinking of the Second Corps made him want to gnaw his nails, hoping Choe Kang-ok was still okay down at the front. But he kept them at his sides.

"They could've even cut off our army's retreat in the east entirely, and crushed half of our divisions," he told his comrades soberly. "If it wasn't for you, they could do the same thing now. But because you're here, our soldiers at the front can trust that their backs are guarded. And I can focus on keeping our country healthy.

"I know it's hard." He wished he had a better word that could show how difficult he knew it really was, so they could understand how much he was aching for them. "But we couldn't keep fighting this war without you."

He took off his medical glove and smiled down at Pak Jung-hwi, holding out his hand. After a moment, the man took it, letting him pull him to his feet.

"Right now, everyone in Korea knows our coastal defenders are fighting for them," he told his soldiers. "And Kangwon province is proud of all of you for it."

Pak Jung-hwi took a shaky breath, and Kim Ju-kyu started to sob. Kangwon could see more than a few people in the crowd of dozens duck their heads and flush the way he did when Korea praised him (not common lately), which was what he'd been hoping for.

"And so is Korea." Korea strode back down the tunnel with Kim Heung-su in tow. He went straight for Kangwon, pulling a stack of cheap papers from his bag and putting them in his hand.

Kangwon looked at him, hoping for a message in their silent language, but he was still refusing to look at him. Hurriedly, he glanced at the first paper and saw it was a letter. So was the one under it. When he saw the address written in clumsy, childish characters, he got it.

"I meant it when I said everyone knows you're fighting for us," he said, holding up the paper. "The students at the Mangyongdae School and the Pyongyang orphanage wrote some letters for us to bring you."

The soldiers' eyes widened, and as Pak Jung-hwi took the one Kangwon offered, opening it to read, his filled with tears.

Kangwon handed out the rest of the letters as his comrades crowded in, eager to read the words written for them. From the snatches he caught as some were read out loud, there were calls to kill the Yankee invaders from the older students, and cheers from the younger.

Kangwon opened the last one in his hands, one of the ones from the orphanage. *'Do your best!'* it ordered, scribbled next to a doodle of a small girl in a rainbow choson-ot holding hands with a man in uniform. They both had huge smiles on their faces.

He smiled to himself, unforced for the first time in awhile, and handed it to the soldier who'd been on the verge of breaking down earlier. His haggard face crumpled as he read it, before he carefully folded and tucked it into his pocket like it was sacred treasure.

Korea stepped into the center of the tunnel, raising his voice. "Our orphans at the Mangyongdae School For Bereaved Family of

Revolutionaries know that you here in Wonsan are carrying on the noble tradition of their parents who gave their lives fighting to Liberate our nation! They wanted us to pass on to you their fervent desire for you to avenge their fallen kin and keep the enemy from ever setting foot on our shores again."

"We will," a soldier vowed, crushing a letter to his chest.

"I know the post has difficulty getting in to the city right now," Korea said, pulling another sheath of papers from his bag. "With that in mind, if you have a letter you would like to write for those who have placed their hopes in you, or your own families, Comrade Kangwon and I will make sure it gets where it needs to."

'Smart.' His cousins were probably included in that. They had to travel a lot for the germ warfare, gathering any last evidence they could before the Commission showed up, and keeping hygiene protocols in place.

Korea had been keeping him near Pyongyang ever since he'd caught him crying, so Kangwon wondered if that meant he'd be going out in the field again soon.

The thought filled him with dread. It'd be a relief to get away from the sickness smell for longer, but... He was more likely to find people it was already too late to save while investigating, like Choi Ki-tak's family.

Some of the soldiers hustled over to take paper from Korea, and the few pencils and charcoal stubs he offered them, passing them around so they could write home or reply to the kids.

That was good. It'd mean almost as much to the orphans as it did to the soldiers to have a pen pal. And giving them the choice to write to the kids made sure the people with no family left wouldn't be left out.

Kangwon knew it was just how Korea was, but sometimes it hurt a little that he could be so thoughtful with their people, then turn around and slam the door on him when he cried.

He looked over at his Countryhuman, who scanned the room, nodding in satisfaction to himself. Then he tilted his head, and Kangwon followed him out of the gathering area, through the tunnels, passing offshoots to medical areas and barracks. They exited the underground a few times, only to plunge into another tunnel, until they were on the other side of the hills.

Sunlight streamed in through the exit, and Korea stopped just inside. Kangwon looked out, and felt the little bit of lightness he'd managed to feel over the letters get crushed by the pressure again.

The ship cannons were louder here, roaring like bears, or more like one of the folklore creatures he dreaded meeting in the dark. The sound as their rounds slammed into the shore only a hundred metres away was deafening. They struck the Kalma beaches, sending sprays of sand and stone into the sky, and shrieked over the peninsula to smash into Wonsan, fracturing the debris, reducing it to dust. More rounds arced between Hwangto Island and the mainland, coming from the reactionary artillery and their own shore batteries ferreted away in dug-outs and the hills across the river.

As Kangwon watched, fighter-bombers lifted off from the airfield the Americans had built on Ryo Island, soaring over Wonsan. Their bellies opened, dropping bombs on the remains of the railway repair station, the fishery, the petroleum factory and anything else they could find. His capital was already a morass of destruction, but somehow as Kangwon watched, the ruins were reduced to rubble. There were no landmarks left, no homes. Nothing but destruction.

His skin burned. The lights behind them flickered.

The sea swarmed with ships- dozens of whaling boats, small motorboats, and landing craft sitting farther out. But too close to shore were three huge destroyers flanking four smaller minesweepers like hulking black blades. Guns bristled from their decks, firing the unending bombardment. As Kangwon watched, white clouds bloomed over the Kalma Peninsula.

"White phosphorus," he observed, the blisters on his chest popping with a sound he could hear.

"Always," one of the soldiers watching said tiredly. "Always always always al-"

"Mun," one of the men with him cut him off sharply. He put a hand on his thin shoulder and said more gently, "Go inside."

Mun gave him a despairing look, then staggered back into the dimly-lit tunnel.

"Sorry about him," the other man said. "We were on last shore battery duty. He hasn't slept in a couple days."

Kangwon suddenly recognized the voice and tore his eyes away from the destruction of Wonsan.

"Comrade Heung?"

The militiaman smiled tiredly. "Hey, Comrade Kangwon."

Relief washed through him. The last time he'd seen the man, he'd been heading off into the hills with the less-injured militiamen during the defense of Wonsan. He'd made sure to find out that he was alive, but that had been two Januaries ago.

"It's good to see you," he said over the bombardment, clasping his forearm. "You're with the KPA now?"

"The army needed soldiers," he replied, voice raw as he shouted to be heard. "And I needed to kill traitors."

"How'd your arm heal?"

Heung In-kun put a hand on his shoulder, rolling it. "Still aches in winter. But I'm alive, thanks to you."

"You're the one who got our comrades away."

"Because you bought us time," he countered. "I heard about you letting yourself get captured. You shouldn't've done that."

Kangwon cringed internally, feeling Korea's glare on his back. "Yeah, probably not. But things worked out."

"Yeah." Heung In-kun turned back to the sea. "Yeah."

The water was dark, filled with dirty chemical foam and the oily rainbow sheen of gasoline from punctured boat tanks. The smell of brine and fish was completely covered by gunpowder and more acrid, worse scents. Kangwon could see the shrapnel from shells glinting dully as it washed up against the sandy shore.

Another ecological disaster in the making. Even if one day the waters were clear of enemy ships, there still wouldn't be any fishing in Wonsan for a long time.

"How many ships have you taken out?" Kangwon asked.

The lines in Heung In-kun's face deepened. "Major ones? Four. All from the mines."

The number hadn't changed in months. Four. In the two years since the war began.

What had North Pyongan told him after his Guk Island mission? That four was pretty much already a miracle. They were up against the most powerful navy in the world without one of their own, almost no real anti-ship guns, and no planes. When you thought about it like that, it *was* pretty miraculous that they'd managed to even take that many out.

But when he was looking at the place where his capital had once stood, the number felt very small. A city for four ships. Not exactly an equal trade.

As Kangwon watched, the planes soared back over, more bombs tumbling from them, more destruction following. A trumpet bungled as the shore batteries towards the city went quiet for a long moment before resuming, less of them now. Heung Ik-kun flinched like he could feel what his Provincehuman felt.

Back when American pilots had shot and killed that twelve-year old boy at Kaesong, Ridgway had apologized. He'd stood up and said that he was so pained because the prime objective of the UN had always been to avoid the loss of life and destruction of property

of Korean non-combatants.

Kangwon had travelled across the country searching for proof of America's germ warfare. He'd seen Hungnam and Chongjin. He'd seen the toppled smokestacks and shattered piers, the piles of tinder and ash that had once been people's homes. He'd seen the fields of Sinuiju pocked with craters. He'd seen every single one of their capitals reduced to nothing, entire villages, houses, wells, barns, medical stations, burnt to the ground with only dead earth left. He'd held an old woman so covered with blisters her skin had looked like a plucked chicken as she hacked bloody spittle while smallpox ravaged her fragile frame. He'd held a little girl's hand while she miscarried a baby forced on her by foreign men, and he'd held a boy's as he stared at him with an eye that knew more pain than anyone should have ever felt, let alone a child.

He'd seen Wonsan before. And he had seen it now. If this was what avoiding a loss of property and life looked like, then he didn't want to know what aiming for it would.

"How are you holding up?" he asked Heung past the lump in his throat. His comrade was less talkative than he remembered him.

The man stared out at the sea, his dark eyes unfocused. "The well-being of the Republic is more important than life itself."

Kangwon clapped him on the shoulder, leaving his hand there.

The day had arrived hot and sticky, making his uniform cling to his ravaged flesh, sweat soaking his burns. Soldiers came to stand by them, the ones that still couldn't find sleep, hounded by the guns. They watched from the cooler shadows with haunted eyes as their comrades fired uselessly back on the guns.

A round soared straight for a destroyer that had drifted closer, slamming into the side, bursting with a flash of light and a roar.

The only thing it left on the armour was a scorch mark.

The guns on the destroyer started to blast, firing on the Kalma Peninsula, round after round after round, a monotonous stream of

'thoom thoom thoom thoom thoom' that obscured the entire side of the peninsula in clouds of sand and smoke and poisonous white phosphorous. A slow and steady annihilation.

When they stopped, the air felt too quiet. No cannons, no jets, no artillery. Just for a moment, there was no sound except the ringing in Kangwon's throbbing skull.

Then the planes soared back in with another high-pitched whine and the ship guns started to blast again.

Their own guns stayed silent.

A trumpet blew from the direction of the Peninsula and Heung cursed, lurching forward.

"Battery went dead and I'm not seeing the reserves, we need replacements on those now!"

Footsteps were already pounding in the tunnel, and men burst past Kangwon, shrugging on their uniform jackets, woken up from half-sleep or interrupted in the middle of a meal. One boy rushed past with his rifle clutched tightly in his hands, even though there was nothing he could do with it, and a grain of rice on the corner of his mouth.

Kangwon felt the inane urge to stop him and wipe his face, but he let him run past.

"Get more men ready for when we fall," Kim Heung-su ordered, charging by with his unit, and a soldier ran inside to do it.

Heung Ik-kun went to follow the men, and Kangwon tried to go with him.

But his comrade whirled around. "Comrade Kangwon, stay here."

"You need-"

"This isn't like the tactical withdraw." The man's face was grim. "This isn't for you."

'When we fall.' Not if. When.

Kangwon looked back at Korea, asking for help.

His Countryhuman stared back at him, finally in the eye.

'We can't afford to lose you.'

So he couldn't afford to put his emotions above their fight.

Kangwon closed his eyes. This was a lesson after all, Korea trying to make sure the one from all those years ago would finally stick.

Kangwon turned to Heung Ik-kun, jaw clenched. And he raised the edge of his hand to his brow.

His comrade's face didn't waver. He saluted back. "Long live Korea."

"Long live the Korean people," Kangwon managed to respond with their Countryhuman.

Heung nodded soberly and turned to run with the other soldiers, charging for the peninsula as the destroyer's guns turned their black eyes on them.

"LONG LIVE KOREA!" Heung screamed as the shore disappeared under clouds of black and white.

"LONG LIVE KOREA! LONG LIVE KOREA!" The cry continued to echo from the fog. Kangwon couldn't tell if his comrade was still one of the people giving it.

More soldiers streamed by them, clearly exhausted, more than anyone should be, worn and haggard and beaten down. But they still went, throwing themselves into the fog to reach the guns their dead comrades had been manning. Not to sink the destroyers or wipe the reactionaries off of Hwangto Island. Not to win. Just to keep the counterfire up for the possibility of a landing, and to show that they still could.

A young man burst from the tunnel, looking around wildly before

his eyes landed on Kangwon and he threw himself at him.

"I- I din't know what to say," he babbled, the cheap paper Korea had given him clutched in his hand. "I din't know what to tell her, I din't and now- Do you have another pencil, please tell me you have another pencil!"

Kangwon looked to Korea, who shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said.

The man's eyes filled with despair, and before Kangwon could stop him, he'd whipped out his military blade and almost severed the tip of his finger. He dropped to his knees, spreading the paper over them with shaking hands, using his blood to write sloppy characters.

He stood, shoving the letter into Kangwon's hands. "Kim Sanhyang, in Chaeryong, I don't even know if she's still alive, but please, *please* give this to her."

Kangwon held the letter flat, careful not to smear the blood. "I will," he promised past the lump in his throat.

Relief filled the man's watery brown eyes, fading as he turned to stare into the barrage of death on the shore. He took a step back, towards safety. Then his jaw firmed, and he ran forward, vanishing into the clouds of smoke and sand, letting out a battle cry.

The guns blasted, and it cut short.

Kangwon looked down at the letter in his hands. '사랑해,' it read.

'I love you.'

The smoke had started to clear as the guns shifted farther down the peninsula. Their artillery had picked up again, firing back at the destroyer and Hwangto Island. At least some of their soldiers had made it.

The rest were spread out between the hills and the shore, ripped clothes and flesh still smoking, limbs torn from bodies in sudden and violent amputations. Kangwon saw a man on the edge of a

crater twitch, and went to go help.

Then he stopped, looking back at Korea. His Countryhuman stared into his eyes, then out at the shore, his shoulders straight as he watched the peninsula, more guns picking up and more falling silent.

Kangwon knew he shouldn't have handed himself over back then. He'd been putting too important a piece in the enemy's hands, especially when they didn't know the full extent of how the Commands worked. And while he'd managed to keep the injured militiamen alive until Seoul...

He'd read the document smuggled out of Geoje. He didn't think he'd saved them for long.

He couldn't risk getting sent into a recuperative coma now. If Korea had needed him last year, he needed him now more than ever. For the germ warfare, for the casualties after this battle, for keeping their unit healthy. For the well-being of the Republic.

Kangwon wasn't any more important than any of their soldiers. But Kangwon *province* was. Even if he hated to say it. Even if he had to curl his fingers so tight into his palms that the burns there burst to stop himself from going to help.

Even if he knew if he wasn't here, Korea would be down there.

The stretcher platoon eventually ran past him, hurrying down to the shore, taking advantage of the ship being trained on the artillery to look for survivors. But the man on the edge of the crater had already stopped moving.

Two months was the average for a post in Wonsan, even when they didn't have enough active-duty soldiers to rotate them that often. Not because they were moved to other posts. Because they didn't survive longer than that.

One hundred thousand people had lived in his capital before the war. Fishermen, washerwomen, factory and rail workers, children that spent their days playing by the docks, getting underfoot and

jumping into the deep blue waters.

Now there were only soldiers. And they weren't here to live.

'A city of death,' an American admiral had called Wonsan on the 100th day of the seige. Today was the 494th.

He stood with Korea, watching the corpse of their city be desecrated and their people die. His Countryhuman's face was expressionless, his arms folded tight behind his back.

This felt like some kind of punishment. But Kangwon knew it was a twisted attempt to make him feel better. Korea was trying to show him that as badly as he was hurting, as stressed as he was, their people were worse off. He wanted him to realize there wasn't any reason for him to cry when others were suffering far worse.

Kangwon couldn't feel that way. They were all in pain. It didn't matter who was in more of it.

But still, in a twisted way, he *did* feel better. As the shouts and screams of his soldiers echoed over the shore, as the stretcher women hauled dying and dead men back into the tunnels, as more people came to stand next to them, poised and ready to die next as the sky filled with toxic smog, something inside of Kangwon settled.

These soldiers, *his* soldiers, from Muncheon and Anbyon and Incheon and here, Wonsan, and all across the country, knew this posting was a near death sentence. That was what they were- suicide squads. They were here to keep the guns going and keep the enemy from their shores, and to almost definitely die and be replaced.

But still they came, and they fought. Even when some broke and surrendered to the enemy or accepted the bribes, the majority charged forward to make sure the defense wouldn't slacken for even a second, so that their reserves wouldn't have to repel an invasion, so that the Americans and Rhee's men couldn't rape and slaughter their way across Korea again. They gave their lives so that the children in the Mangyongdae School and the orphanages across the north could scrape some semblance of a normal life out of the war,

to protect children like Yun Jin-suk and the boy whose hand he'd held.

They sacrificed so that he and all their people could remain free. And he let them, so that he could save those they were protecting.

He knew he'd never get a real answer on if people naturally tended towards good or not, or how they affected him and the others. But he could say confidently that *his* people *were* good. Not perfect and incapable of being selfish or cruel or any of the other things that people could be. But good.

And if he really was a half-formed lump of clay on the potter's wheel, how could he worry about what he could be shaped into when these were the hands doing it? How could he worry about what Korea could be? All he had to do was help Liberate their country and make sure the nurture they received would turn out more people like them.

'Our people.'

Kangwon's head throbbed with the empathetic fever and his stomach hollowed out with the empathetic hunger, but his heart swelled, aching and tender as his body burned with his people's. The earth underneath his boots trembled in time with the artillery and cannons, and as a round slammed directly into a dug-out and the ground exploded, he felt a pain somewhere deeper than his skin or flesh, sharp and hot, like the moment a candle flame flared as you blew it out. It felt like if he grasped under his ribs, somewhere beyond what you could reach with a scalpel, he could seize a fear, a grief, a burning, poignant triumph that weren't quite his yet belonged to him more than any of the paper-thin emotions he'd ever felt before.

"Manse," he murmured at the same time as Korea did, burns crawling over them both, reaching up from the bandages on his Countryhuman's neck.

Then the flame went dark, and all he was left with was the grief he couldn't imagine ever thinking was paper-thin, and the sight of a new soldier rushing to take up the howitzer.

Kangwon's eyes burned and his feet itched. But he kept them open, and he stayed still.

After all, war wasn't won without sacrifices.

—

As North watched the decimation of Wonsan and the sacrifice of their people, the song that haunted him grew quieter. Not slithering out of his mind, but settling among the names from today, wrapping itself gently around them, less of an invader now. More like it belonged. Not in the way he'd wanted, but... good enough.

As Kangwon breathed "Manse" at the same time he did, he knew he was feeling the same great ache North always did. He chanced to look over at him.

His province was watching the ships and enemy batteries bombard the peninsula, ravaging sand and bodies, unblinking. Like North, he didn't flinch as a round rocketed into the hills, making the earth above them quake as rocks and soil rained down.

His expression was sorrowed, but there wasn't a single trace of despair. His lips held a sad set, not trembling in fear or agony, and his heavy-lidded eyes shone, not with tears, but love, and that deeper feeling. It swallowed up the pain.

North felt the tension leave his shoulders.

He didn't look like South anymore.

His skin hadn't stopped burning for a second, but now it grew worse. He felt the burn gash that had just healed split open again, hot blood soaking the bandages on his stomach.

Behind them, the flickering lights finally went out, plunging the entire tunnel into darkness. Confused cries and exasperated sighs echoed from down it.

"Odd," one of the soldiers with them murmured. "Cables were just serviced. And we've taken worse hits than that without them getting cut before."

"It wasn't your cables," North said with none of the heaviness he felt inside, eye still fixed on the ruins of Wonsan.

He knew every tunnel and dug-out in it would have just gone dark, along with nearly every light in Korea. America had finally finished eliminating the target he had been trying to since yesterday.

"They just destroyed the Supung."

'In Wonsan, you cannot walk on the streets. You cannot sleep any time in the 24 hours unless it is the sleep of death. Today marks the 100th day of the siege. It is a city of death.'

By the way, everything about kidnapping fishermen and sending Rhee troops in to bribe civilians and sabotage rail tunnels is openly admitted to by the US. They are very proud of it. They're also very proud about the literal hundreds of millions of dollars they spent on ordnance to continually fire on the city (thousands of shells in each salvo) while their civilians at home didn't have free healthcare or schooling. They talk very highly of it.

Also obligatory I hate the UN rant where I go insane.
Soviet representative: Hey guys, the UN doesn't have anything explicitly condemning biowarfare, and there's a few states that never ratified the Geneva Protocol against it, so here's a proposal for a resolution for them to ratify it and for the UN to condemn biowarfare while the Disarmament Commission works on the methods for limiting it.
American representative: This is actually a very sensitive subject for my people because we are NOT using biowarfare in Korea. Honestly only a historian would care about why we didn't ratify them. Also I think we as a society have moved beyond the Geneva Protocol. Also when you said if a state that didn't ratify the Geneva Protocol ever used those weapons against you, you could use them to retaliate (which the other major states also said) that clearly meant that you can use those weapons *first* on anyone you want. Since anyone could really use germ weapons anyway there's really no point in signing anything at all. We need to eliminate aggression, not

the methods of aggression.

...YOU INVADED KOREA. IF YOU AREN'T GOING TO BE PART OF ELIMINATING AGGRESSION, WHY CAN'T YOU JUST SIGN THE THING AGREEING NOT TO USE THE WORST METHODS IN THE MEANTIME.

Also not a word in the resolution about Korea. Mr. Malik didn't mention the war at all. Not a single sentence that could be used to imply that anyone agreeing to the resolution has used biowarfare or will stop using it. And since the Soviets already had the 'If a state that has not signed it uses germ warfare on us, we will retaliate' clause, it wasn't like it would be opening the way for them to say 'we know you're using germ warfare in Korea, so we can now attack you.' It had to be germ warfare used on *them,* and even if it was, they could already do that. Same for China and Korea, since their current governments hadn't been around to ratify it and weren't part of the UN. It was just a simple request that the six UN states that didn't ratify the Protocol ratify it. And the US jumps through hoops just to justify that no, they will not say they won't commit germ warfare, thank you very much. And then the other right-wing states (no Socialists or anti-Imperialists at all in the Security Council at the time) dogpile him and go 'Oh it's just propaganda, why should the US ratify at all when it's not like words would actually stop anyone, we need a better anti-germ warfare thing to come along eventually.' WHY CAN'T THEY JUST RATIFY IT ANYWAY. WHO CARES IF IT CAN'T ACTUALLY DO ANYTHING. THERE'S NO WORDPLAY TRICK IT'S LITERALLY JUST 'HEY CAN YOU SAY YOU WON'T USE GERM WARFARE LIKE THE REST OF US.' YES THERE NEEDS TO BE SOMETHING MORE BINDING AND COMPREHENSIVE BUT IN THE MEANTIME WHY CAN'T EVERYONE BE ON THE SAME PLAYING FIELD OF 'I PROMISE NOT TO USE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS.' Genuinely if I was alive back then and I didn't think the US was using germ warfare in Korea, the fact that they were in the UN moving mountains to justify avoiding ratifying the 'we won't use germ weapons' protocol would change my mind. The Chilean representative says the Soviets are suffering from psychosis PSYCHOSIS for even suggesting it. ????????

Then in another place fucking *Jebb* starts implying that the idea of germ-infected chicken feathers is not only foolish but insane, like feathers aren't proven vectors for germ carrying. They are gaslighting Comrade Malik. UN meetings in the 1950s were about putting Yakov Malik on the floor and mass gaslighting him.

I would bring a weapon to work if I worked at the UN. Mr Kyrou of Greece and Chile man and fucking Gladwyn Jebb you better hope you're dead and rotting. I am not exaggerating when I say the average UN representative during this time deserved an awful fate. I know this seems like an overreaction but the Turkish rep says the UN Charter was formed to keep friendly relations between nations and the CCCP is turning them bitter by accusing the US of germ warfare, and Jebb says the Soviet Union should stop its 'hate campaign' and agree to 'reasonable political settlements' so the world can have peace and recover from the Nazis.
YOU ARE BOMBING KOREA. KOREANS CAN'T HAVE PEACE BECAUSE YOU HAVE RAZED THEIR HOMES TO THE GROUND AND ARE MURDERING THEM BY THE MILLIONS. YOUR 'ALLY' IS REFUSING TO SETTLE THE POW ISSUE TO END THE WAR AND ALREADY HID THE FACT THEY WERE USING NAPALM FROM YOU. AND NOW YOU ARE HIDING THAT THEY'RE USING NAPALM FROM YOUR OWN PEOPLE. YOU BROKE INTERNATIONAL LAW AND THE UN CHARTER AND *YOU* ARE COMMITTING THE NEW ORGY OF SLAUGHTER. DO KOREANS NOT DESERVE PEACE. IS KOREA NOT OF THE WORLD. I hate reading UN records I hate reading UN records I hate reading

Anyway Mr. Malik does absolutely destroy the US by being like *'You* want a free world? Бггг, you voted against giving women equal pay and workplace rights, and the guarantee that people should enjoy human rights without distinction against race, property, religion, and etcetera. If that's a free world, then we don't want any part of that.'

As Long As I Can Feel It

1919

Thunder roared, lightning crashed, and Kangwon hid under his blanket.

The trees thrashed, their leaves clashing like knives as Mother Nature tried to shake them bare. The rain pounded down and down as if it would never end, filling the mouth of the sloped cave with water, attempting to wash away the world.

Kangwon wasn't afraid of storms. He liked the melody of rain and trees mixing with the roaring and crashing of the clouds.

What he hated were storms like these. Ones that came out of nowhere, when the sky had been blue. Ones that filled the air with the smell of ozone and a strange, tense energy. Where he could look out into the torrent of sheeting rain and swear he saw figures dancing in it. When the roll of thunder sounded less natural and more like shamanistic drums being beat in some dark ritual.

Which was silly. Shamans were regular people, ones who carried a important role in Korean tradition. He'd even met a shaman, once, when he was sick with a fever. She'd been kind, and told him about some herbs growing nearby that could help, getting him started on his medicine path.

But when the mouth of the cave was filled with darkness, and he was alone in it, it was hard to be comforted by that.

There was a low sound, and he jolted, terrified, before he remembered himself.

Right. He wasn't alone anymore. Korea was here.

He was unconscious, and badly wounded, but he was here.

"South."

Kangwon froze. “Korea?”

He didn’t say anything else, but Kangwon could hear him moving restlessly before it was drowned out by a lightning strike, thunder pounding immediately on its heels.

When it faded, he could still hear Korea moving, thrashing now as he murmured to himself. He was going to break his stitches.

Kangwon closed his eyes tight, wanting to stay safely huddled under the blanket. But he had to help him.

He sat up, his protection falling away, trying not to look towards the mouth of the cave as he crawled towards the other boy.

“Korea-ssi?” he tried, before confirming it was only feverish sleep-talking.

Korea’s white face was still flushed, heat palpable before Kangwon’s hand could even touch his skin. The lightning showed that his bruises were stark against it, purple, yellow, green, black, blending together with the colours on his flag.

Kangwon sighed, chewing on a nail. Was he healing? Had he done enough? Was there anything else he could do but keep disinfecting him and hoping that his body would heal itself?

Lightning flashed again, brighter this time, sheets and sheets of it. Kangwon looked up instinctively, freezing as the darkness beyond the cave illuminated white.

What was that figure? A tree? It looked like it was between the forest and the cave. But there shouldn’t’ve been anything there.

He scuttled back for his blanket, eyes squeezed shut, but froze when Korea murmured again, louder.

“South.”

South? Could he hear the rain? Was he worried for their people along the coasts?

The province hesitated, then crept back over, still not looking at the cave mouth.

"I-It's actually heading n-north," he said quietly, hoping that Korea would hear him and be comforted. "N-N-"

He squeezed his eyes shut as lightning painted them again.

"Northeast," he finished. "It might even hit Japan."

He wondered if Korea would mind his occasional nervous stutter when he woke up. If he woke up. If Kangwon hadn't made him worse somehow. If he was doing enough.

"Please wake up," he whispered, thunder making his words inaudible.

"South!" Korea said again, a cry this time. He started to thrash, and Kangwon grabbed his shoulders as gently as he could, though there wasn't an inch on his country that wasn't covered in wounds.

"North," he corrected soothingly. "It's heading north. It's okay."

The storm howled and roared, and he swore he could hear wailing out in it, an unearthly ululation that sent the hair on his arms straight up. It jittered through his body, and he wanted to turn to the cave mouth, to see what was out there, crying in the rain.

Whatever it was, he knew it would send him running for the covers again. Instead, he clung to Korea, closing his eyes as tightly as his fever-stricken Countryhuman's as he leaned over him, keeping him from hurting himself as he struggled, murmuring gibberish under his breath. Kangwon tried to decipher it, but the only clear thing was the direction 'south.'

Had he come from there? Did he want to go there? There was no way for Kangwon to know. Not unless he woke up.

Lightning *'boom'*ed nearby, splitting a tree, and Kangwon shook, whispering, "We're going to be okay," half to himself and half to the feverish boy he was holding.

Korea’s movements grew weaker, and Kangwon pressed his head lightly to his chest, careful of the thick mass of bandages, but needing to make sure his heart was still beating.

It was. Fast, unsteady, but strong.

He sighed, too relieved to flinch at the next lightning strike. “You’re going to be okay,” he assured him.

He was going to make sure of it.

Kangwon held onto Korea until he’d stopped moving, his heart rate slowing somewhat as he slid back into the waters of deeper unconsciousness.

The thunder that rumbled came almost a minute after the last flash of light, and the rain started to sound more like rain and less like a waterfall sent from above to scourge them away. Kangwon knew if he looked out the cave mouth, he would see the next distant lightning strike illuminate the small apple sapling he’d planted on the edge of the trees.

He still didn't look.

Finally letting go of Korea (giving a little apologetic bow as he did), he slid back to his own straw mat.

He hesitated, looking back over his shoulder at the slightly darker shape of Korea. He tugged his blanket over, then inched back to him.

Was it okay for him to do this?

Lightning flashed again, less furiously this time, but still enough to make his mind up for him.

He tucked his blanket over Korea, careful not to disturb his injuries, then lay down next to him, scooching over until his back was lightly pressed to the other boy’s side. He was warm, solid, even though he was incredibly malnourished. The province held still, making sure he could feel his heart like this. He could.

Kangwon sighed in relief, tugging the edge of his blanket over himself.

“South,” Korea murmured again, voice fading along with the storm.

Kangwon closed his eyes, feeling his country’s heartbeat against his back.

“We’re okay,” he murmured. “I’ll heal you, Korea, I promise.”

Hopefully his country could hear him.

—

1952

They didn’t head back to Pyongyang right away, even though Kangwon knew Korea was anxious to deal with the power situation.

He was, too. They had people on life support.

But they stayed in Wonsan the entire day, helping their soldiers make torches and start the generator, and Kangwon helped cook rations for the men manning the shore batteries. And prepared blood for them, as much as he could give. More than he should've.

They didn’t come back until nightfall, limping in under the cover of darkness after new units went to replace them. Bloodied, worn down to the bone, and with far fewer than had left.

Heung In-kun was there, and even though Kangwon had to pull long shards of metal from an exploded gun out of his chest, he should live.

Pak Jung-hwi wasn’t. Kangwon held the letter he’d written back to the little boy from the orphanage close with the bloody love letter, vowing to make sure it got where it needed to, and glad that he’d been able to give him a bit of care before he went.

The man that had shoved the confession into Kangwon’s hands wasn’t there either. Almost a quarter of the letters no longer had

senders. The kids didn't have to know, but Kangwon would have to make sure he wrote letters of condolence for all the family members, letting them know they'd be personally honoured by him.

After all, he was one of the things they had sacrificed themselves for here.

They huddled with their soldiers in the dim flashlight glow in a side tunnel, packed together like pills in a bottle. Their comrades were scarfing down their rations or curled up, too tired to eat, even with the blood in them. They'd offered them some of their food, and for once Kangwon was able to get Korea to agree.

They had limited supplies, and the rail lines were being cut by bombs every day, and at risk of enemy sabotage, making sure there would be even less food for the defenders of Wonsan. But he could feel that their soldiers needed to share a meal with them.

Korea watched them eat their rice and pork, the State going through every expense to get the best rations possible to the soldiers protecting their nation. But even the meat wasn't enough to fully lift their spirits.

He eyed the man that had slumped against his side and was nuzzling his head into his shoulder, too exhausted to realize what he was doing to his Countryhuman, just seeking a bit of warmth and confront.

Kangwon watched their country rub his wrist, where he'd made his province stick a needle into the burnt skin to harvest his blood. Subtly, thinking no one was looking, he used his chopsticks to push his untouched plain rice into the man's empty bowl.

He thought about what China had said about choosing to be worshiped or devoured, and yeah- he was *really* glad he'd made the call to ask him not to tell Korea that drinking their blood provided the same benefits as the transfusions. He'd clearly kept his word.

Though honestly, when he looked around at his soldiers, the bit of life his blood had brought back to their eyes already fading…

Well, he knew what he'd choose, too. But not with Korea here.

They didn't leave until long after dark. As Kangwon stood outside the tunnel, his soldiers surrounding him, some even leaving the sick bay or waking up from a hard-fought-for sleep to see them off, he knew he had to do something to show them he didn't take their sacrifices for granted, and how much they meant to him. That his life had to be more important, but he still saw them as equals.

He didn't look over at Korea as he unbuttoned his tunic. His Countryhuman didn't want them exposing their wounds to their people, letting them see just how badly the war was affecting them. He wanted the provinces to keep up the appearance of being untouchable for them, so they wouldn't be afraid.

Kangwon's fingers fumbled with the buttons on his undershirt, glancing over at Korea. He'd pulled his collar up to his chin, covering the burns that had spread past the bandages.

'Oh.'

But vulnerability could be good. If he hadn't ended up crying for once, he wouldn't've had that talk with North Pyongan, and he probably would have broke down worse by now.

He'd say it was always better than the opposite, but he did know that, in the end, they weren't human. The proof was in their blood and flesh- they were representations of their country. And if their people could see the burns the American bombs had left on their land in their skin, they might start to wonder how much more it would take before they turned into cracks.

They wouldn't. For all the open sores and third-degree burns, and that worrying chasm that'd eaten down into Korea's torso, there wasn't a single crack on him or any of his cousins. He hadn't been able to look at Korea personally in awhile, but China changed in the same room as him sometimes, and he'd mentioned offhandedly that 'Your people's will must be just as strong as mine during my civil war. Your Countryhuman doesn't have a single crack on him.' Which was reassuring, and also maybe meant Kangwon was forgiven for not listening to his warning about Oslo.

He didn't expect Korea to crack. A Countryhuman only started to when its people's faith in them and their principles started to dissolve, or possibly their own. A civil war could do it, even if it didn't make them crumble completely, but after being here in Wonsan, Kangwon was sure that wasn't happening, and wouldn't. And he knew Korea's commitment to their country would never waver.

But if civilians saw the sheer amount of damage done to their Countryhuman and Provincehumans' bodies, and realized what that meant for their land, they might start to *think* about them cracking, and fearing it. And that was what could lead to cracking for real.

But the people here knew what was being done to them. They lived with it every day, without even sleep to help them forget for a moment. And they were still fighting. The most Kangwon could do for them was show them that he shared their pain, that it belonged to them equally, just like his blood.

He shrugged off his uniform shirts, keeping the sleeves on just his wrists as he let them slide down his back. He didn't remove all his bandages, just the one wrapped around his upper chest, undoing the clip and prying the fibres away from his sticky flesh. That was enough.

His soldiers and civilians stared soberly at the mess of third-degree burns that spread across his collarbones and pectorals, and down his arms. They couldn't see the dozens of track marks from his blood donations through the charred skin, but they knew what the patches covering him from his cubital fossa to his wrists meant. He'd put a few of them on today.

Kangwon didn't have much good skin left. Only little russet patches that didn't stick out much from the raw red with crisp black edges. And a stubborn patch that spread over his right hindquarters and down the back of his thigh that no one could see.

His soldiers looked at the bandages and dressings on his face with new eyes, seeing the burns under them that echoed those around them. The artillery and guns still fired over the hills, the worst ones deepening their wounds. As the B-29 bombers came in to finish off

the petroleum plant, another patch of good skin was eaten up, connecting the burns on the left side of his chest to the ones on his ribs.

The defenders of Wonsan watched it spread, and understood what he was trying to say. Slowly, Heung In-kun raised his hand to his bandaged brow, followed by the rest of them, soldier and civilian alike, saluting. Kangwon slid his arm out of his sleeve, and saluted back.

Korea pulled his collar tighter around his throat.

The ride back to Pyongyang was quiet. His Countryhuman refused to answer his questions about the Supung, saying he'd do it tomorrow.

He was looking at him again, but too much now. His eye kept straying back to Kangwon's chest, covered by his uniform.

The province wished he hadn't had to show him, too. Like with his tears, he knew he'd see each patch of burned skin as his fault, even when it wasn't. He was making himself look at Kangwon because he felt like he wasn't allowed to look away, the same way he'd used to stare at Bong-nam's healing lash wounds in the cave when he thought they didn't see.

His province couldn't muster a smile, but he dimpled the edges of his lips at him. Korea turned his head.

Back in Pyongyang, surprisingly he had the truck take them to the muster point instead of any of the hospitals, where China was waiting with the camouflaged Jeep, along with… the Premier.

Korea's shoulders hunched as he saw him waiting, but the back of the truck was empty, so there was nowhere to hide. Kangwon watched their Premier take him to the side, and after a brief, hushed conversation (that he got the sense relieved and irritated Korea), his Countryhuman stomped back over, wordlessly snatching the Jeep keys from China and throwing himself into the driver's seat.

Kim Il-sung smiled at Kangwon, inclining his head before heading to his own vehicle.

'Good.' Korea was just as sleep-deprived and low on blood as he was. There wasn't anything he could do about the Supung tonight. If it wasn't still being bombed, they probably already had an engineering team on it.

Kangwon *really* hoped it was just the power facilities that were destroyed and not the dam itself. All that water…

"Good trip?" China asked as Korea hit the gas. When he didn't answer, he said, "You seem a bit light-headed. Should you be driving?"

Kangwon was surprised again when his Countryhuman headed straight for the bunker, still not taking him to the hospital. He guessed he thought he'd done good today.

That warmed him, even if he wanted to get back to the hospitals and do damage control. They had generators, but they'd have difficulties powering everything, and required too much fuel.

But like sharing rations with their soldiers, he got the sense he needed to sleep in the bunker tonight.

Pyongyang was always dark at night, just like everywhere else in Korea. But as they drove through the ruins, it felt even darker.

Now Kangwon was in his bunk, thinking. Even with the sound of his cousins sleeping peacefully around him, he still couldn't close his eyes. The phantom echoes of the guns in Wonsan kept him up, pounding in his flesh.

Were Heung In-kun and Kim Ju-kyu alright? How many of his soldiers had already given up their lives in the time it'd taken to drive back here? How many would be gone when he visited next time?

After awhile, he got up, making his way down the hall to Korea's room, pushing the door open with as little noise as possible.

"Korea," he said quietly, knowing he'd still be awake. "Can I sleep in here tonight? I'll leave before China wakes up."

He was counting on his Countryhuman to get up before everyone else to 'borrow' the Jeep, and get him back to the hospital as soon as possible.

Korea didn't answer, but he heard his clothes rustle as he rolled onto his side. Kangwon slid in, carefully closing the heavy steel door and creeping over, lying down on the edge of his bedroll, turning his back to his.

When he'd first met Korea, his breathing had been either too quiet or too loud, rattling wetly in his lungs with each jagged gasp or fading to a faint, shaky tempo. Both made Kangwon get up to check him every minute, convinced he'd screwed up and was about to lose him. Now he couldn't hear him at all. But the silence comforted him. He could still feel him there. His familiar presence was like a poultice, even if it was cold and made of bitter herbs.

"I'm not like you or China," he said after awhile, keeping his voice low. "I can't think the world is against us. I won't."

He had to believe that the Westerners and the people in the nations that followed them were just as capable of being good as their people. That his workers and soldiers had more in common with American workers than Korean capitalists. That the class divide, was the deepest divide, not race or nationality or anything else, and that one day it would be erased.

Korea didn't answer, and he inhaled deep.

"But you're right," Kangwon murmured, pressing his fist to his chest, feeling the burns there. "We can't trust them."

It didn't matter what had made America the way he was. If his people shaped him or him and his beliefs had shaped them. They were the way they were. Like CCCP said, they'd made their choices. Kangwon's people chose to give their lives just to keep guns firing for someone else's sake, and America's couldn't even choose to refuse to kill for their own. It wasn't nature that had made them

that way, some immutable law that couldn't be changed- it was nurture. The twisted 'nurture' of capitalism and imperialism that had been breeding in America for over three hundred years.

But that *was* the way they'd been grown. Just like the other Imperialists and monarchists, Japan, Britain, Norway. Decades of nurture couldn't be overcome easily, let alone centuries, especially when you didn't even want to try. And from America's mad-dog grin, Oslo's icy disaffected stare and crown of bronze, and the glimpses of Japan's cold feline eyes he'd seen on Paektusan, he knew none of them ever would. Their roots were too deep, too twisted, watered by years of conquest and being treated like gods and kings. Their natures grew in their societies, choking their people, suffocating them like mint overrunning an herb patch, making sure any nurture they received came filtered through shade and from soil that they leeched every bit of nutrients out of, turning them stunted.

Kangwon believed in people. He believed that the Americans and Japanese and Norwegians could overcome their country's natures. They could find better ways to grow, out of the dark and into the light, like them.

But he didn't believe in their nations. He didn't believe that the Countryhumans and provinces that had spent centuries directing how their people were formed would ever tolerate them pruning back their leaves and changing the way they grew.

Some countries had gaping wounds carved into them by colonization and exploitation, and once they were cauterized, their societies could start to heal. But others had blighted roots, rot that went all the way down and couldn't be fixed until their Countryhuman put a gun to his head in a private bunker.

And *they* could only be uprooted. The way Korea would've had to be if Joseon had never been dissolved.

"If they actually invite us to the vote, we should let the Red Cross in," Kangwon said. It'd just give America fuel to say they were lying if they didn't. "But I don't want them here."

America and all his puppets needed to have their roots torn out of the ground and burned, with new seeds planted before Kangwon could ever trust their people as a whole. He knew there wouldn't be anyone like Adolfo or Jepp on the Red Cross investigation team. They would be people like Gillies from the POW holding camp, or South's American guards, or the ship captains that sent reactionaries in with the supplies *they* were depriving their people of, trying to make them turn.

Or worse, like the pilots that brought sickness into their country, knowingly or not.

He didn't want them on his soil, bringing information back to America so he'd know how to poison them better or talking over the ISC after they risked their reputations to investigate. Whether they lied or just didn't want to believe it, he didn't want to give them a chance to let the rest of the world pretend there was nothing happening in Korea, that Kangwon and his comrades weren't working themselves to the bone in the hospitals and military units to keep people healthy, that he hadn't had to watch hundreds of people waste away and hold them down as they struggled and hold their hands as they died for the past year.

He didn't want to have lost his brother for nothing.

"I don't think we're the only ones we can trust," he whispered to Korea, closing his eyes tight. "But we are the only ones we can depend on."

He trusted China and CCCP and all their comrades. But it was different. The only ones he trusted with the future of their country were Korea, his cousins, and their people. And himself.

Korea still didn't say anything, but Kangwon thought his silence felt proud. And maybe a little sad. Or maybe those were both just wishful thinking.

It was past midnight now. June 25th. Two years ago, SH had given the star eyepatch he'd made for Korea to him. Two years ago they'd been sleeping in the barracks with their soldiers at Ongjin when Rhee had launched his attack across the 38th Parallel. Two years

ago, war had came to Korea for real. Two years later and it was still here.

Kangwon hesitated, then carefully shifted back on the bedroll. Korea tensed as his shoulder blades touched his, but he didn't move away. So after a second, Kangwon moved closer, pressing their backs together. Korea's spine quivered against his, then went limp.

Kangwon's screwed shut eyelids relaxed, and he let out a breath.

It didn't matter what had made South turn out so different than his Korea either. Kangwon knew when their country was Reunified, their people would rebirth him. The traitors didn't have the will of their nation, nothing they did could change Korea at his core. And even if something in South did, Kangwon would be here for him.

He was *never* going to lose his Korea.

He'd show him that he had someone to depend on, too. That he was reliable and wouldn't ever crack. That no vulnerability his Countryhuman showed could ever make him lose faith in him, or in their victory.

Maybe then he'd let Kangwon take care of him again.

The deep sleep he'd been hunting for months came easily tonight. He fell asleep with his back pressed to his Countryhuman's, feeling their burns spread, and his heart beat against him.

(You)

Matching North flashback POV was at the end of the Pestilence and Plague chapter, if you want to read that with new eyes. Ehe. ^^

Also for the shaman in Kangwon's backstory, I like to believe she was a ghost. You could consider her a living person or maybe a feverish manifestation of his common sense telling him about medicinal herbs, but I *really* like to think she was a ghost. He's terrified of spirits, but he's actually met one before and she was literally the person that got him started on his path of saving people.

Modern day North doesn't let anyone sleep with him, so this would take place from the 60s to 80s.
South Pyongan telling Hae she's the favourite and gets special privileges
Hae: 'Well, ah *am* the fav'rit, but ah don't get special privileges. Korea treats us all equal.'
South Pyongan: 'Oh yeah? So he'd just let anyone sleep in his bed, right?'
Hae: 'He would. Y'all just never ask.'
Kangwon, knowing North would kill him if he ever told them about this: '...'
South Pyongan: Okay, bet. *mischievous look towards Chagang*
Middle of the night, knock on North's door.
North: What?
Chagang opens it, standing there with a blank expression
'Can I sleep in here?'
North: '...Fine?' *baffled*
North and Chagang lying on opposite sides of the futon, both in their 'military' (man dyingoftuberculosis) position, both with eyes wide open

Lights Out

Six hundred and seventy planes. One thousand five hundred and fourteen sorties. That was what it had taken to wipe out Korea's power.

North had six hydroelectric power systems, counting the Supung. Between June 23rd and June 27th, four of them had been destroyed entirely.

And it hadn't stopped there. Yuchon, Chaeryong, Haeju, Changyon, Naemokbang, Chungdae-ri, Mangyo-ri, transformer stations all across their country had been fully eliminated, systematically wiping out their power grid. Out of their thirteen power plants, only two were even capable of functioning anymore.

Over ninety percent of their electricity, the lights in their factories, in their military complexes, their communication hubs, their homes, their hospitals, gone. Extinguished.

They needed the factories to keep turning out ammunition for the army to keep the enemy away, to repair the few tractors they had that were needed to work the fields and the trucks and trains needed to get supplies to the front and places like Wonsan. They needed their telegraphs and phone lines to communicate across the country to give divisions their orders and keep people calm. They needed electricity to operate the purification stations for their drinking water and the pumping systems themselves and the life support systems in the hospital and keep their people from living in complete darkness. They needed it to *live*.

They had generators in the important places, hospitals and munitions factories, but not enough, not powerful enough, and if they broke they needed parts to replace them, parts they couldn't get if the machines in the factories couldn't run. And they ate through fuel they couldn't process right now because all of their refinement stations had been destroyed too, which meant they had to import it from China and CCCP because they weren't allowed to

trade with anyone else, which meant the already enormous number always lurking in the back of North's mind was going to shoot higher, to astronomical proportions, above the reach of any bird or bullet or stupid *fucking* fighter-bomber.

As he stood on the hill above the Supung Dam with his pulse pounding in his temples, looking down at the cratered ruins of the hydroelectric station at its base, the warped and unmoving turbine blades, the twisted steel beams and scattered machinery of the transformer yards, his chest tightened, rising and falling in shallow pants, too shallow to get oxygen in. His skin itched under the burns like there were insects in it, but he knew if he scratched at it, it would slough off under his nails. There was a dreadful burning inside him, a heat forcing its way up his throat, and he felt like he was going to-

"Korea."

A hand touched his shoulder and he flinched away, spinning to stare at SH with a wide eye.

Her gaze was concerned but he couldn't see if the rest of her face was because she was swaddled in bandages, *cocooned* in them. The other three hydroelectric plants had all been in her province, and her entire face had become an awful blackened crisp, a death mask like any one of the tens of thousands of their people burnt to death by the napalm.

She blamed him, he could see it past the fake worry, the cold accusation in her eyes that he had promised this would be over by now, that they would be in Busan two years ago, before millions of their people had been murdered, before all of their power could be wiped out, before she knew what it felt like to truly burn alive.

"Don't touch me!" he snarled at her, his heartbeat shaking his entire body.

Two years and three days ago the war had began and two years and three days later they were still fighting it. Two years. Two years two years two years two-

"Korea." SH put her hand on his shoulder again, not letting him shrug her off, even when he bared his fangs at her.

"It's okay," she said, smiling. "We'll fix it."

As the smile pushed her cheeks up, they broke open. North watched watery red flowers bloom over the bandages that covered her crimson magnolia, and his teeth locked down.

"Look at the bright side," she said, gesturing down the hill with her other hand, the fingers all thickly wrapped. "They didn't break the dam."

North looked away from her smile, down at the Supung.

It was true. There were blast marks on the barrier that held back hundreds of thousands of tons of the Amnok River, chips and divots in the grey surface. But none of the bombs had been strong enough to penetrate the ninety-seven metre thick concrete.

Relief flooded his body so forcefully he almost shook as he finally let himself accept that the thing he'd feared most when the lights had went out in Wonsan hadn't happened.

The Supung Dam was unbroken.

The towns and dug-outs and border crossings downstream were safe. The POW camps were safe, even if the thought only eased his tension because they were held in villages next to those his civilians lived in, and his guards were there. And the farmland was safe, too.

Right. It was just electricity. Korea had survived without electricity for most of its existence, and so had they. They could fix it.

That choking feeling left his throat, melting and running back into his chest. He shrugged off SH's hand, less aggressively this time, and she let him.

"*What* fucking bright side?" North Hamgyong grunted from his other side. "The entire damn country's gone dark. And who's 'we?' Me and the god-lover are the ones getting sent down there." He

jerked his head at North Pyongan, who was looking sadly down at the dam.

"If you like, I could help you get down there faster," China offered from a few paces away on the mountainside.

"Why the fuck are you even here?" North Hamgyong snapped.

"I'll remind you that this plant also supplied over twenty percent of the power we use in my northeast," the other country said placidly. "This is very much a joint issue."

North grit his teeth.

Liaoxi nodded, looking to Liaotung, who said for her, "We have a lot of industry in our provinces. We need this plant running again as soon as possible."

Clearly not able to resist rhyming for long, her sister added, "And even if we did not, for our comrades' sake, we would take a shot."

"And we're very grateful," SH assured her, not looking over at her brother.

"Grateful for what?" North Hamgyong growled. "The miguk-nom only targeted the dam now because they want to go to war with *him."* He flung a hand at China, who waved.

SH smiled at North. "Korea, tell him that since they know they can't beat us, they also want to force us to sign a ceasefire against our own interests, so this probably would have happened anyway."

A vein throbbed in North's temple and he snarled, "I'm not in the mood for *either* of you's nonsense! South Hamgyong, talk to him like a damn person. And you-"

He whirled to North Hamgyong.

"We wouldn't be where we are without the Chinese army," he growled, hating the words but unable to allow him to slander their comrades. "And we wouldn't be at war at all if it wasn't for America. *He* is the one that destroyed the Supung and our other

plants and *he* is the one to blame. Not the people helping us win. This is the last time I'm going to tell you that."

Liaotung looked smug, and he resisted the urge to snap at her, too.

North Hamgyong's upper lip curled. "How do you think we can still win? They just hit *all* our fucking power plants. This thing powered our shit, but the Hamgyong ones powered the damn *Soviets.* That's why the Yanks spent so long being too pussy to hit them properly."

"Let's not use that word," SH said tightly.

"So now you can fucking talk to me?" her brother demanded before jerking back to North. "Vladivostok is a major Ruski hub and the Yanks just targeted part of its power supply. All bets are off the table."

He glared at North. *'You know what that means.'*

He did.

"All of you, leave," North demanded, not taking his eye off his province. "North Pyongan, Liaoxi, Liaotung- down to the dam. South Hamgyong, go with them."

"But-"

"Now," he growled at her. The last thing he needed was the Hamgyongs' bullshit making him lose his temper more than he already had. He didn't even know why she had come when she clearly couldn't stand being around her brother anymore.

"Yes, Korea." He felt her glare at North Hamgyong before following the others down to meet their bodyguards

"You too, down the hill. I *mean* it."

China sighed, reluctantly following them down.

As soon as they were gone, North lashed out, grabbing North Hamgyong by the collar of his tunic and yanking him towards him.

"Quit your fucking fatalistic *bullshit* when we are around the Chinese," he growled in his province's face. "If you have a problem, take it up with me in private."

"You don't fucking listen to anything I say," North Hamgyong spat back.

"I listen," North dismissed. "I just don't agree."

"Then listen to me when I say if the Yanks are willing to bomb the Supung and destroy the Hamgyong plants, they're willing to do worse," the taller man growled. "You *know* they are."

"I do."

North read every foreign newspaper he could, every American sabre-rattling press release from Washington to Tokyo, received the reports of every fake nuclear run in the country. He felt the shadow of the atom bomb looming over him every day, far more keenly than his provinces and especially more than *this* one who barely read their own news.

"I am far more aware of our situation than you will *ever* be," he growled, tightening his hold hard enough to make North Hamgyong choke as he scoffed at him. "And I *know* they are getting desperate. That's why they would resort to this."

As much as those two years and three days burned for him, he knew they burned for America, too. North was aware that they were technologically outclassed, he had been from the start. When he'd heard the Americans had entered the war, he had known every step towards Busan would just get harder.

But the Yankee had came expecting an easy win. He'd expected them to get caught up at Osan, the moment they first engaged American forces, and if not there, then at Taejon or the Raktong.

But the Korean People's Army *hadn't* stopped. They'd crossed the river and almost made it to his last stronghold. They had retreated too fast for him to wipe them out the way he planned, and when they came back, they came back with a *vengeance.* Even if they

could share the credit with the PVA, they had still Liberated Seoul again, still came back after it had fallen. They had managed to draw out a war that should have been over in a month if you looked solely at their economies, military technology, and numbers to two years and three days, and they could draw it out even longer, electricity be damned.

North had expected to struggle. America had expected to win. And only one of their expectations had been fulfilled. Now the Yankee either needed his 'easy' war with China or to settle Korea permanently in a way that made them capitulate enough to say he had won. And he needed it *now*.

"They aren't getting desperate," North Hamgyong retorted, choked by his fist. "They're getting *tired* of this shit."

"Same thing."

"And they both end up with us getting nuked."

North Hamgyong grabbed his wrist and something in North spiked, almost hoping he'd try and tear him off so they could brawl and he could get rid of the tightness still constricting his chest. But he just crushed it in his grip.

"Korea, what use does rebuilding the plants do when they're just going to get bombed again?" he asked, eyes flashing desperately. "We know they're willing to hit them now, so we know they'll do it again."

"What use does rebuilding the rail lines or the factories do when we know *they're* just going to get bombed again?" North challenged, tightening his hold in retaliation.

"The power plants aren't the same," his province said through gritted teeth. "We can't hide them in rail tunnels or build them underground. That's why they've been getting so fucked up, even before this. The Supung plant is always going to be part of the dam, it's *always* going to be a static target. And the next time the Yanks come for it, they're going to split the fucking dam."

“Then we’ll fix that, too.”

“And then it gets fucking bombed again!” his province cried, his bones grinding in his grasp. "Just like the rails!"

North welcomed the pain as his burns crackled.

“Then what do you propose we do?” he demanded, frustration peaking. “Give up?”

North Hamgyong didn’t answer, gritting his teeth.

He lowered his voice. “Do you want us to give up, North Hamgyong?”

“No!” he snapped.

“That’s right, I *know* you don’t.” North released his collar, wrenching his wrist free, ignoring the way the burnt skin degloved. “You never gave up against the Japanese or during the tactical retreat. I know you don’t want to see these damn Yanks or Rhee and his sell-outs running our country. So what the fuck do you want to *do?* Because those are our options- rebuild the power plants, get our power back, and keep fighting, or give up. There is no third option, there is no other way out."

‘None.’

“Unless you want to kill yourself,” he aggressively offered. “And if you do that, I’ll erase your province and give it all to South Hamgyong.”

“No fucking way,” his province growled, eyes flaring. “She doesn’t know how to manage Chongjin.”

“Then those are our only choices,” North repeated, fingers stabbing into his bleeding palms. “Keep fighting or lay down and roll over.”

North Hamgyong bared his teeth at him, spinning to kick at a rock before spinning. “I don’t want to give up. I’d rather we all die fucking screaming than live on our damn knees.”

“Then what’s the point of saying the things you do?” North demanded, frustrated. “What’s the fucking point of acting like it’s hopeless if you’re not going to give up?”

If South had acted the way North Hamgyong did in their prison shack, constantly moaning about how they would never be free and were going to waste away and die in there, it would have driven him *crazy*.

Listening to him talk about how they would make it out without ever trying almost had.

But they *were* trying. Every single man, woman, and child in Korea, every worker, soldier, peasant, patriotic petty bourgeois, was *trying*. *He* was trying. He had to. He had to *keep* trying, no matter what.

So what was the point in saying it was all useless?

North Hamgyong showed his teeth, fists clenching. Blood stained the bandages around them.

North waited, but he didn’t say anything. “If you don’t have an answer, then shut the fuck up. If you really believe this ends with us all getting murdered by an atom bomb, I don’t care. But I don’t want your incorrect views rubbing off on our people.”

Of course, he would rather his province *didn’t* believe that. But he had been fighting this same battle with him for over three decades now, and he wasn't in the mood to waste breath when their entire country was in a blackout and his skin was still prickling unbearably.

He spun on his heel, but before he could go down, North Hamgyong demanded, “*You’re* telling me you can look at this knowing we’re never going to be able to get our power production back up while this war is going on and not feel like we’re fucked?”

North looked down at the scorched dam and the decimated hydroelectric station. He could see almost the exact amounts they would need to replace it- the new turbines, the transformers, the

building materials and import costs. Even with China and CCCP's engineers working for free on his end, and the soldier-builders and civilian volunteers, it was going to cost hundreds of thousands of won. Just for this one plant. And no matter how fast they worked, they could expect the blackout to last for a couple weeks. And even when it was over, their power wouldn't be anywhere close to what it had been before.

And as soon as they were finished, America could just knock it all back down.

"Yes," he said bluntly.

"Bullshit," North Hamgyong growled. "I *saw* the look on your face. If South Hamgyong hadn't been here to talk you down, you would've lost your shit."

North shouldn't have lost control. If he had noticed, China almost definitely had, too. And out of all his provinces, North Hamgyong was the one he needed to project firm belief in victory to the most.

"I was angry," North said coolly. "South Hamgyong stopped me from losing face in front of our comrades. That is all."

His province scowled. North didn't respond, keeping his shoulders back and straight, the image of unflinching confidence.

"Now if you're done with your temper tantrum, our engineers need to see us on the ground."

North Hamgyong's scowl turned to a glower. But his eyes said he still wanted to stay something.

"What?"

His province *'tch'*ed, breaking eye contact. "Fucking nothing."

"Then get to work. We have a power grid to fix."

North turned and marched away, not waiting for his province to follow.

He wasn't as skilled in engineering or maintenance as he could be, he needed more classes. He was just here to assess the situation in person and reassure any civilians in the area, and their soldiers and plant workers. Their handful of trained engineers and the foreign ones had it handled, but he needed to do *something.* He couldn't just sit in his office and read the reports coming in by lamplight.

Ssi-bal. Until they got the telegraphs working again, they'd be dependent on radio, which was too easily intercepted, or letters, which meant they would need to produce more paper, which was already difficult when almost all their mills were gone. He should get South Hamgyong and Hwang to conduct information work to get the peasants to start producing their own paper to sell. Hanji took longer to make than modern methods, but the craftsmen were harder to target in an airstrike than a paper mill. But with the damage to their forests, mulberry trees were getting scarce and-

"Korea." North Hamgyong caught up to him, and his voice was low enough that North's teeth scraped together.

"I don't want to hear it."

"I thought you fucking listened to me," his province grumbled.

North abruptly spin to face him. *"What?"*

He looked around before saying lowly, "You know the Yank targeted the dam to get to China. He wants war with him."

North resisted the urge to look around the mountainside. "And he won't get it," he said stoically. "Even if he did, he would be back for Korea."

North Hamgyong's jaw worked, then he nodded grimly. "So you do know he's never going to give up on us."

"I know we have a hydroelectric plant to repair. Don't open your mouth again until we're at the dam."

"Is that a Command?" his province asked acidicly.

"It will be." North outsped him, stretching his legs until the burns

tore to keep ahead as they descended towards the Supung.

Before he'd gone far, someone said, "There you are."

North jolted as China appeared from nowhere, even though the hillside was scorched bare, almost completely devoid of trees or undergrowth. Had he crawled out of one of the damn craters?

'Ssi-bal.' Had he been eavesdropping? North hated that he might have overheard his province's weakness, or understood what he'd been implying after.

He couldn't begrudge North Hamgyong's lack of camaraderie. He was just looking out for their people first, the way it should be. But he wasn't going to entertain it.

"I told you to head down," he said to China, keeping his voice neutral.

He shouldn't have lost his temper. It was childish and accomplished nothing. And even though he didn't need to keep his spine straight for the foreigner the way he did for his provinces, he still had to. If your ally was weak and mewling, you wouldn't want to keep helping them.

He didn't need China's help. But his people did, even if it made his teeth ache. This blackout was going to cripple their livelihoods even more.

"I did head down," his comrade said, smiling. "We were up there, and now I'm down here."

North tried to unobtrusively search his eyes, the one bit he could see past the mask and scarf, for some hint of mockery or the slightest flick towards North Hamgyong behind him. But as usual, he couldn't read him.

Ignoring his words, North shoved past.

"You know, this could work out well for us," China noted, following.

North grit his teeth, fury flashing through him. “Explain how ninety percent of my power and almost a quarter of yours getting knocked out works ‘well’ for us.”

“It’s like the bounties,” his comrade said, easily keeping pace as they skirted blackened holes filled with bombshell shrapnel and dead earth. “The rest of the world isn’t entirely thrilled with America headhunting me, especially after I was already found innocent.”

It was true. North's report to the UN about the wanted posters for China returning had received a vague message back about it not being illegal, and them having dropped their own pamphlets back when they’d still had a functioning air force, but when a British journalist reporting on their side had sent the news back to his country, it had caused public outrage in some leftist and anti-American circles that they hadn’t been able to suppress yet.

“And when he basically commits an act of war on nations not officially involved in Korea by cutting my and CCCP’s power supply, how can that be seen as anything but headhunting?” China asked. “I hear it’s already caused a bit of a stir in Britain- our antagonist didn’t ask for his approval before doing something so drastic.”

There was that schism China had mentioned between the Imperialist nations again. But North knew it still meant nothing.

“It doesn’t matter,” he clipped, the sharp smell of gunpowder and singed power cables stinging his ‘nose’ as they neared the flattened transformer yards spread out along the riverbank. “He only cares because of his ego. His support for the war won’t wane.”

“No,” China admitted. “The old bulldog would never not support conquest. But America could be pressured into taking the talks seriously, at least for a week or so, and stop taking those three-day-long sabbaticals. We could get slightly closer to settling the POW issue. One step, one footprint.”

They shouldn’t *have* to take things one step at a time. America should just follow his own damn *rules* and *give his people back.*

"The other Western nations still want him to go to war with me," China noted as casually as if it wouldn't mean the mass murder of his people. "And Japan, of course. They're eager for him to butcher me up for 'them.' But they would prefer it wasn't in a situation where they have to get involved. If they think he's leading them a little too close to the slaughterhouse, they'll at least pretend to resist."

North stopped before they could reach the ruined plant, watching North Hamgyong stomp by to join the swarm of workers crawling over the rubble. China waited patiently.

"Are you going to declare war on him?" North asked when they were alone.

America had known he was knocking out China's power supply, too. North would bet he knew the exact amount of it he was. Twenty-three percent wasn't even a quarter, but when it came to industry, and more than that- an industrial hub, it was still a consequential sum. China's entire national production would be hobbled, from war materiel to agricultural supplies to daily necessities. It was far more severe than bombing a few airfields or 'accidentally' striking over the border. And while America could still deny the germ weapons he was dropping on Manchuria, he couldn't deny this.

No matter how you looked at it, bombing the Supung had been an act of war.

"I have no bearing on what my comrades back home decide to do," China lied flippantly. "But I would say no. None of us are exactly fans of giving the enemy what they want."

North had known he would say that, for the same reason he hadn't authorized a general assault after the first reactionary attack over the 38th Parallel after Liberation.

He knew how it felt to be forced to hold back, to take whatever the enemy did to you with gritted teeth because you were trying to spare your people, or someone else. It was a feeling no nation or person should have to put up with.

But China and CCCP were. For... his country.

Twenty-three percent. China was still rebuilding from his civil war, building his productive forces to usher in Socialism and trying to prove their system and *himself* to his people. If their industrial quota dipped, the liberal and reactionary elements in his country would use their crippled economic base as an argument against the five-year plan China had told North he wanted to implement. They'd had enough naysayers in Korea for their first one-year plan, even after it was concluded with every single sector having overfilled its quota.

North bared his teeth, stalking down the hill again.

"I'll remind you that just as it's not my fault the dam got bombed, it also isn't *your* fault," China said after him.

But he couldn't hide the accusing note in his voice, the same way South and North Hamgyong couldn't hide the look in their eyes. He was lying, like he always did, North knew it.

He couldn't be blamed for America wanting Korea so badly he would massacre their people by the millions for it, he couldn't be blamed for the Imperialist refusing to follow international law and stretching this bloody war out for as long as he could, or for his desire to conquer China and lay waste to his people, and he couldn't be blamed for China being here, or even being part of this war. He had came for his people, not him.

But he *could* be blamed that it wasn't over yet. Even if his people didn't blame him, even if he couldn't let it overwhelm him again, he knew the truth.

North couldn't be blamed for the destruction of their power plants or the suffering it would cause for both of their people.

But it *was* his fault.

Something major was actually supposed to happen around here (characterwise; Supung Dam bombing was definitely very major). For the longest time I had it in the outline, but the

closer I got the more it felt wrong to have it happen so early, so I pushed it back. Hehe. I'll point it out when it happens and you can question how it could ever take place now. It's the only big outline change I've done, even though meddling with the outline is my joy in life.

The bombing of the Supung Dam was to 'put pressure on the peace talks' (force the North Koreans and Chinese to accept that America could violate international law if they felt like and to just sign anyway to abandon their POWs). Though considering the American side had been taking walkouts that lasted for three days since the beginning of June while the Koreans and Chinese wanted to just keep talking, perhaps *they* were the ones that needed pressure. Perhaps someone should have paid a visit to the Hoover Dam (though that still wouldn't be as disastrous because it doesn't power as much of America as the Supung powered for Korea).

Also no matter how you look at it, they were either desperate to end the war (on their terms) or trying for war with China. The Supung had a 'no bomb' order on it since almost the start of the war. Initially it was utilitarian since the US didn't want to damage infrastructure too much since they expected to conquer Korea, but once they'd burned the rest of the Peninsula down, that didn't matter. And we know they can't have held back because of the effect it would have on civilians since they didn't care about that in any other field. So it had to be because Truman didn't want to get China pulled into the fight officially (reminder that neither of them have declared war at this point). So for him to say 'go ahead and bomb it' now, it was either because they were *so* desperate to make the DPRK give up that they were willing to risk starting a real war with China or because they *wanted* to start a real war with China (or both). There was also a governmental inquiry on June 30th in the UK where they were hinting towards 'America was definitely trying to provoke the Chinese/Soviets, did you know they were planning on doing this?' It was clear they knew what the US was trying to do, and that it was an act of war.

Little snippet to read between the lines of. Some other Korea stuff in there if you look around.

https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1952/jun/30/power-stations-attack

Also I think this is a jab. I just found it funny. If I have to make myself angry rummaging around in Imperialist reports, I will find my little joys in it.

https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1952/jun/30/united-nations-aims

On Parliament Hill

America couldn't believe the Nork still wouldn't throw in the towel, even after over a week with no lights on.

Well okay, he could. Commies were crazy and North Korea was even crazier than the norm, thinking he'd had any chance against the United States of America in the first place, or that he had any right to try and bargain with him in the Panmunjom talks now.

He hadn't expected him to come crawling on his knees in time for his birthday or anything. He'd love to see it, of course, and he would before the year was out. A few days just would've been too soon for the guy that had hung on tooth and nail for two years now, even with his country in ruins around him.

But he *had* expected a little bit of crawling from his guys at the table. Enough to drop the audacity of thinking they deserved to have any airfields in Korea when this was over, at least.

But while it was annoying that the Norks were crazy enough not to understand that they were capital 'S' Screwed, he wasn't too put off by it. Actually, considering the other thing he'd been aiming for hadn't happened, it was a good thing they hadn't, otherwise he'd just be left with the whole POW question to hold up the talks. And while the rest of the world knew they couldn't let little things like international law get in the way of stopping the commies from butchering the guys he'd unbrainwashed, the rest of the world also wasn't in this to save Korea. If the prisoners were the only thing keeping their guys there, some of 'em might suddenly start showing an interest in following the rules.

'Probably fucking Britain.' His fingers tightened, pinching the brown skin of his cigar.

No, what really pissed him off was that the chink *still wouldn't declare fucking war on him*. Hundreds of thousands of Red Chinese killed, his border zone bombed, people dying left and right from

germ warfare (*if* you were in a mind to believe what Communists spouted), and now a quarter of his productive power shut off. And still nothing but a complaint that didn't even come from him. He was radio silent, off parading around Beijing sightseeing or some shit, though America knew that had to be a trick, somehow. The bastard was in Korea and he *knew* it. He was ballsy enough to mosey on back after the trial just to mock America, but not enough to drop the 'volunteer' façade and hit back like a fucking *man.*

"So much for 'that's something we'll fight for,' or whatever," he sighed, tapping his cigar on the table as he looked out at the Rideau River.

"What?"

Oh, right.

"Sorry, forgot you were there for a sec." America turned back to the person across from him in the Parliament Hill suite. "What was that you were saying, 'Nada?"

Canada winced at the nickname, the way he always did now, thinking the American didn't see it. It pissed him off.

He'd never had a problem with it back when he was Upper Canada, the cute little kid that'd follow him around whenever he came to visit. But now it 'infringed on his sovereignty' or some crap like that. Not that he'd ever said that to his face.

***'What** sovereignty?'* The guy was still a British colony. Didn't matter that the Brit had let him sign a fancy piece of paper that said he had autonomy. Freedom wasn't something a guy with a damn monocle handed you- it was something America *took* and gave to the world.

Canada could've taken his freedom when America had offered it to him, but instead he'd thrown it away, right over his scrawny shoulder.

So yeah. If he didn't have a problem being an actual colony, he didn't have any right to make faces when America reminded him

that’s what he was.

The suite on the upper floor of Parliament Hill was richly upholstered in a style that was way too European for America’s tastes. The walls transitioned from glossy oak at the bottom to pale plaster that was mostly covered up by boring paintings of Canadian landmarks, and the ceiling looked like it was held up by white pillars in each corner, melding seamlessly with cornices molded to look like foliage. Two plush chairs were set in front of a fireplace with an ornamental mantle that stopped getting touched the moment April hit, and a real bearskin rug (head and claws still attached) sprawled at their feet. The table they were sitting at was small, and the heavy wooden chairs had arched backs worked into clusters of maple leaves.

It was all pretty damn ostentatious, and nowhere near Canada’s style (except for the bearskin- all him, baby), and neither was the black double-breasted suit he was dressed in. He almost disappeared among his surroundings as he shrank down in his chair.

America’s little brother was a tall guy, a bit more muscular than he looked in the suit (the one America had sent him for his last birthday, he was pleased to see) since his arms were pretty built from chopping down trees or wrestling meese or whatever he did in his spare time. But for someone just under six foot, he sure could shrink pretty well.

“I was saying…” His eyes flicked down at his lap before he gave the condensed version of what he'd been rambling about for the past few minutes. “My Parliament doesn’t really like that you sent our army to K-Koojay Island? Without asking.”

His voice rose at the end, like it was a question. One America wasn’t going to answer. He took a long drag of his cigar instead.

“Sorry,” Canada said, like he’d known he would. “But with some of the… stuff people are saying goes on there, it sort of looks… bad for us.”

“And what kind of stuff are your newshawks saying goes on

there?" America asked amicably, tapping ash on the table again.

"Could you use the ashtray, please?" Canada asked, eyeing the expensive hardwood anxiously as he took the bait.

"Whoops, sure thing." America pulled the white ceramic ashtray over, grinning. "Wouldn't want to go burning down anyone's house of governance, would we?"

Canada flinched. "Sorry."

"Water under the bridge," America assured, even thought it definitely wasn't.

His brother gave him a relieved smile, white eyes flicking down again. "But, uh, anyway, I'm sure you read the news. It's just stuff like that."

"Like what?"

Canada squirmed uncomfortably, taking a puff of his cigar that was long enough to make his cheeks start going even redder.

"You know," he said when he was done, slightly strained. "Trying to get POWs to switch sides, letting Mr. S-Singman? Rhee say he's going to send them to fight for him, and… torture."

He winced apologetically.

He was pretty much always apologetic, like South had used to be, apologizing for taking up space and daring to exist. Unlike his little Korean, America hadn't seen fit to break him of it. After all, *he* definitely had something to be sorry for.

He bobbed his head, blowing a smoke ring at the diamond patterns on the high ceiling. "Yeah, I've been hearing that crap from commie rags."

"It's… coming from some pretty respectable papers," Canada said awkwardly.

"What are you trying to say, 'Nada?'" America asked easily.

"Nothing," his brother quickly assured him. "Obviously I know you wouldn't let your army do anything like that. Even if a soldier did, you're in Korea. You'd handle it."

"A'course," America agreed. "But they wouldn't. That's more the truck of commies, don'cha think? What do you think's happening in *their* camps right now?"

"Those pictures that POW of yours was sending to the press didn't make it look too bad," Canada ventured.

That little stunt. They wouldn't let the Red Cross into their camps, so some idiot from the *Associated Press* had got the Reds at Panmunjom to send one of his captured reporters a camera. And since it was the perfect propaganda op, they had, shuttling him around to all the camps, taking pictures of men playing ball and posing with big ol' smiles on their faces.

Obviously it was bullshit. They'd be cherry-picking folks, forcing 'em to show their pearly whites with the threat that they'd never be able to again if they didn't. For all they knew, there could be a Doughboy getting his nails torn off right behind the cameraman's back. Anyone with half a brain knew that.

But it was still a real palookish move. Why give the commies free PR when they'd been doing half the job against it by refusing the Red Cross?

The reporter- Norm, Noem, Noel, that was it, Frank Noel- was one of his. He might have to make sure someone paid him a visit after the war was over, depending on what he said his time in the camps was like.

America gave his brother a disappointed look, not wasting words. It worked to make him shrink even more.

"Sorry," Canada muttered. "We can't trust anything coming from them, eh?

"Yep." He popped the 'p' with another smoke ring. "Some of your guys are in there, y'know. Only fair that the Norks have some

looking over their boys in return. You telling me you would've said no if my guys *did* ask you first?"

He smiled at his brother, and Canada shook his head so fast the striped tail on his ratty coonskin hat swung side to side.

"No, the UN put you in charge," he said quickly. "It's up to you."

Exactly. And it *wasn't* up to *him.* Even if Canada had said no, his suits would've steamrolled him anyway. And he would have let them, just like he'd always let Britain tell him what to do. He might have a long spine, but strong it was not.

America amused himself by imagining his brother's back as a spaghetti noodle while he went on about how Korea was his command, and he knew those things weren't actually happening in the camps, but it was a matter of protocol and blah blah blah.

As the American was picturing him wobbling around after soaking in a Yellowstone hot spring, Canada said, "I just would've appreciated it if you told me first."

His anxious white eyes flicked down again, and America sighed, standing up and leaning over the small table. Canada yelped, sliding his chair in a way that totally wasn't suspicious at all, but it didn't stop the American from snatching the paper off his lap.

There were bullet points on it. *'Ask about situation in Korea, talk about POW camps, germ warfare?* (crossed off)*, ask about what he said about bombing, talk about the dam,'* each with little details scrawled next to it in small, cramped cursive that looked like it was trying to sink through the paper to hide underneath.

The first one was obviously the complaint his government had fed him, but the last two made heat rise in America's stomach. He knew what this was about now.

He raised his eyebrows at his brother over the edge of the paper, and Canada hid his face in his hands, the white band in the middle of his flag turning red enough to match the borders and the maple leaf in the center.

“Really, ‘Nada?’” he asked, disappointment dripping from his voice. “You’ve gotta use this crap with me?”

“You know I’m not good with political stuff,” Canada muttered into his palms.

Understatement of the year. America made sure to never visit on his ‘birthday,’ but he’d caught a speech on the radio once. He could hear the awkward pauses and little stutter that came out when he got nervous clear as day. It’d made him cringe to picture him up on stage shuffling his papers and reading his notes with no subtlety at all.

On anyone else it’d be funny, and hell, it sort of was on Canada, too. C’mon, he’d literally written something on his palm once for a UN thing, forgetting he was the kinda guy whose hands got as wet as if he’d been fondling a mermaid the moment he got even a little bit nervous. And any kind of social interaction made him nervous. He’d stared at his hand for five whole seconds, then stuttered out his answer. And it had literally just been, 'Yes, Canada votes to continue this discussion tomorrow.’ America had howled for five minutes straight after, slapping him on the back as they went for drinks.

But it was more than a little annoying when he remembered they were related, at least in the eyes of the world. Canada was never just Canada, he was always ‘your brother.’ That was fine, it kept him convenient, but when ‘your brother’ was the guy standing in the corner at Lake Success looking at every UN diplomat like they were about to bite, and spilling his water all over himself, it was fucking embarrassing. It was a good thing his Prime Minister felt the same way and kept him home half the time.

“This isn’t ‘political stuff,’” America chided. “This is supposed to be a birthday chat with your bro.”

His was tomorrow, July Fourth, and Canada’s was on the 1st, a date America knew he’d chosen to try and overshadow him. Sucked to be him, ‘cuz it had backfired *majorly*- ask anyone what the Fourth of July was and they’d say it was America’s Independence Day, the day he'd declared himself officially free of Britain and his

laws. July 1st? That was just three days before Independence Day.

Canada's fault, really. Not just for trying to one-up him. It wasn't like Canada Day was the day he'd chosen to toss Britain off or wage war against him or anything killer diller like that. It was just the day the colonies of United Canada decided to merge into one, shoving Canada back into one body for the second time. All it had done was give the limey an easier colony to manage.

Not that Canada had ever been difficult. He'd always been the good one, the obedient one. When America had warned him to watch his mouth when he visited Britain and expect to be smacked around anyway, the kid had just tipped his head in confusion and said he'd never done that before. The whole time the American had known Upper and Lower Canada, before they'd united and aged into adults, they'd only been spanked three times between them.

Which was bullshit. All Canada ever did was trail behind his settlers and do what he was told. America had been far more successful than them, had actually *done* shit. But there hadn't been one trip where the old man hadn't bent *him* over his knee.

His stomach started to churn, heat rising in his body, the desire to teach Canada the lesson the Brit had turned too soft to teach him roiling inside him.

"But that's not why you called me here, is it?" America asked with false cheer. "You didn't invite me the last two years, didja?"

"I knew you were busy with the war," Canada said meekly, the way he said every-fucking-thing.

"Then what changed *this* year?"

America showed his teeth in a broad grin, and Canada looked down, forgetting his paper wasn't there.

"Britain put you up to this, didn't he?"

Canada cringed, confirming it without saying a word.

"I *knew* it."

America pushed his chair back with an aggressive scrape. Canada reached for him, but he just stormed to the arched window, puffing angrily on his cigar as he looked out at the Québec park across the river.

"Did you even want to see me?" he demanded, spinning back to him when he didn't want to break the chair over his head anymore. Not as much, anyway.

"I did," Canada said, sounding hurt. "America, I invite you for my birthday every year, and for today. You just never come for the first one."

"I'm a busy guy, 'Nada,'" he replied, annoyed he was trying to turn it back on him.

"I know, I wasn't accusing you," Canada quickly said. "I just mean I *always* want to see you. You're my brother."

"Just not today."

Canada sighed, putting his head in his hands. "Okay, fine. I wasn't going to invite you this year either because I thought you'd still want to stay in Korea."

Why the *fuck* would he want to stay in Korea? He had no air conditioning, no proper plumbing, no good food that hadn't been shipped over the ocean before it ended up on his plate. The only pros were the easy women and the POW camp, and he couldn't even go there this year with the bloodhound journalists sniffing around. Ottawa was a backwater little capital, but it was better than the city that was still barely any better than smoking ruins, or the one where the sky was constantly filled with smog and the two things you could smell were fish or chemicals. And that was on a *good* day. A bad one brought the stink of the slums into even the wealthy neighbourhood he had claimed.

Canada was still talking, not looking him in the eye. "But Father wanted me to talk with you about taking out the Chinese's power, and that thing you said about having the right to bomb places outside Korea without Security Council approval."

The word he'd used pissed America off, making him snap, “He isn’t here leaning over your shoulder, Canada. You don’t have to call him that.”

“Sorry,” he said reflexively. “Dad wanted me to.”

It wasn’t the word, actually, it was the way he’d said it.

“That man is *not* my dad,” America growled, storming back over to slam his hands down on the back of the empty chair. “And he isn’t yours either. He’s your damn *empire.”*

Canada leaned back, trying to sink into his seat. “I know you two don’t get along as much anymore, but he’s still our father. And- And I have autonomy now.”

Godddd he was an idiot.

“Your ‘Governor General’ can literally stop any law he wants from being passed,” America said, talking slow so he’d finally get it through his thick skull. “If Britain doesn’t like something you do, he can snap his fingers and put a stop to it. You don’t have ‘autonomy,’ Canada- he’s letting you play pretend.”

“It works and people are happy,” Canada mumbled.

Of course. And Britain *didn’t* snap his fingers because Canada never did anything he didn’t like. The reason the Canadian parliament couldn’t get the full independence at least some of them wanted was because the second they got too uppity, Britain would summon Canada and he’d fold like, you guessed it, a wet fucking noodle.

“Look, America, I don’t want you to be mad at me,” his brother said desperately. “I don’t even want to talk about this.”

The American threw his hands in the air. “Then newsflash- you don’t have to!”

Canada looked down shamefully. “You know how he is.”

And he knew how *he* was. A spineless wimp that couldn’t say no to

whatever ‘daddy’ wanted.

America spun back to the window, grabbing on to the sill with both hands as he pulled on his cigar, the smoke clinging to the glass and obscuring the summer outside.

He had to cool it. He’d been barking up this tree for over a century, and he knew Canada’s brain was as soupy as the syrup he made. He hadn’t came around back when he’d been a wide-eyed kid listening to his big brother tell him war stories about busting their ‘father’ in the chops, and he wasn’t going to now that he could trick himself into thinking he was free.

No, this wasn't the same Canada as that one. He wasn’t the Canada that he’d played hide and seek with in the woods or went trapping with. It wasn’t the Canada that had backed away from him the day he’d told him to join him and break away from Britain, and whose men had come back to burn his White House down. It couldn’t be because if it was, he remembered, and America would have to punish him for it. And that shit didn’t fly, even if they were related, in whatever way they were.

‘Not that I couldn’t get away with it.’ Canada probably wouldn’t even tell anyone. He’d always acted like Britain was in the right for teaching him a lesson. He'd let an Injun war chief go or didn’t ship enough corn across the sea for his liking, and those were both equally his fault.

Yeah, he knew how Britain was. And he knew how Canada was.

He turned back, taking the cigar out of his mouth. “I don’t want to be mad at you either, ‘Nada. So let’s just bury the rutabaga and do birthday shit.”

Canada awkwardly fiddled with the raccoon tail, and he sighed, plunking back into his chair.

“You need an answer for him, right?” he said, letting his cigar rest in the tray.

“Yeah,” he admitted shamefully. “He’s just going to get on me if I

tell him I let you make me drop it."

"I'm not making you, 'Nada." America kept his light tone. "You just said you *want* to drop it."

His brother bobbed his head.

"Fine. Then tell him the reason I said I reserve the right to bomb other nations without Security Council approval is because I *have* the right."

"I don't… think he's going to like that."

"Perfect," America said casually. "Tell him I don't have to care about what he likes anymore, just like I don't have to ask his permission before I use *my* arsenal."

He grit his teeth, remembering the phone call he'd got about bombing that dam. 'Oh, it's an asset for the Chinese, you shouldn't have done that!'

Like the old bag hadn't agreed to support war with China when it came. Like he didn't want North Korea and Red China exterminated, too. He didn't care that he'd cut the gooks' power or could've broken the dam or dragged the chinks into war. He didn't even care that the Ruskis could get involved because they both knew by now that Big Red was going to stay on the sidelines for as long as he could.

No. He'd been pissed because America hadn't told him first, because he hadn't asked for *'permission,'* like he was still a twelve-year old who had to write a damn letter to ask if he was allowed to wipe out an Indian village, or risk being punished for taking the initiative on something *he wanted him to do.*

Now the lobsterback Labour Party was scrambling, launching inquiries, trying to smear Churchill and his government for 'letting' it happen, like they still had any control over what America did. And since he didn't want Britain to get another pinko in office, he'd have to get Acheson to step in and take responsibility to save the Tories.

Britain knew he didn't have to ask permission anymore, he knew he didn't even have to tell him. America could do whatever he wanted, he had *earned* that right.

And still, he knew the fucking limey would be smug when Acheson 'admitted' they should have notified him. Like him letting Canada play pretend that he was free, he could play pretend that he still had any influence in the world, any control over America.

Rage swirling in his stomach, America said, "You gave me the right to do what I need to when you all voted for me to save Korea." He had *taken* it. "Where do you think the gooks' weapons come from, 'Nada? Because it sure as shit ain't Korea. I've burnt that place to the ground."

Canada winced, looking around like someone was hiding behind the curtains. "Maybe you shouldn't say that."

"Why not?" he demanded. "That's what *you* wanted me to do. That's what *all* of you wanted me to do- liberate Korea from the Communists. Two years, *two years,* they've clung on for dear life and the only thing that's let them do it is the shit the chinks ship over for 'em, and the airfields they use to launch their jets."

The leaf on Canada's face paled slightly. "You're… not actually going to bomb China, though, are you?"

He was going to do more than that. But there was no need to talk his brother into war with Red China. Britain had already agreed, and if Britain agreed, Canada did, too. Even if he didn't.

"I don't want to, 'Nada," America said more soberly. "That's why I took out his electricity- so I wouldn't *have* to. But if the only other option is watching him conquer the world, then I will. You don't want commies running you, do you?"

He shook his head right away. "No."

America relaxed slightly.

Canada had never been as against the tyranny of Communism as he pretended. He was like one of the idiots that heard about all the

fairytale shit they promised- free food, all the races of the world holding hands in equality, everything being owned by workers- and believed it, not realizing that even if they hadn't been lying through their teeth, that all that shit went against the very foundations they'd been built on. If everyone owned everything, then no one did. If everyone had power, then *no one* had power.

Including them.

But the Canadian government had taken in the anti-Communist Soviet patriots that had fought against Communism in World War II, so he'd probably been getting a few nice Ukrainian and Baltic sob stories over the last few years, helping him see the truth- fairytales came at a cost.

Good. His brain might be syrup, but at least he was smart enough to know who the enemy was.

"Neither do I," America assured him, winning another award for understatement of the century.

The Communists couldn't conquer the world. God had promised it to *him.* It was his, *his* destiny, denied to him by North Korea and Red China for *two fucking years.*

"And I'll do whatever I can to stop them."

He stood up again, leaning over the table to look at his brother through his aviators.

"I'm saving the world, Canada. And if I have to bomb a commie nation waging war against freedom and democracy to do it, I will. And I don't need to ask *Britain* for permission. I don't need to ask *anyone."*

"Right," he said, squirming again. "Sorry. I know."

"Good." America nodded in satisfaction, snatching the paper off the table and adjusting his aviators as he read it, bouncing back to cheerful. "So, what else is on the agenda? You asked for the sit-rep when I first got here, we've gone over the camps, the statement, the dam."

Canada flushed, hiding his face again. “Kill me.”

America laughed. “Don’t think your Prime Minister would be too happy with that. Plus it’s not on the list.” He eyed the paper again. “Germ warfare?”

“I know you’re not doing that,” Canada said quickly. “I was just going to ask about the Security Council meeting, but I realized it won’t be over until later.”

It was taking place right now, at good old Lake Success. America wasn’t going to attend, since he didn’t need to entertain obvious commie propaganda, but he knew how it was going to go. Big Red had charged like a bear right into the trap, aaaas usual.

America put two forefingers on his temple, screwing his face up as he put on a fake gypsy accent (still better than those broads in the ‘fortune telling’ shops). “Reading the future I am, and I predict the Soviet Union is going to veto.”

Canada’s laugh was relieved, clearly glad they weren’t fighting anymore.

Okay, the Canadian actually hadn’t been fighting. That was kind of the problem with him. Not that America wanted him to fight *him*.

Dropping the accent and picking up the stub of his cigar, he said, “There’s no way he’s letting the Red Cross in. Then they’d find out he's been bullshitting us. I mean, really- chicken feathers and voles falling out of the sky?” He snorted in amusement.

“Yeah,” Canada said, his smile fading somewhat as he sucked at his cigar.

It was good he hadn’t let the commies fill his head with lies. If he tried to come after America for using biowarfare when he’d been perfectly fine with Britain using it against the Indians…

His jaw tensed, but he made himself take another drag.

He hadn’t. And this Canada hadn’t been around for that. Not really.

"I wonder if you should've let the Koreans and Chinese in?" his brother asked, finishing off his cigar and placing the butt in the ashtray. "To the meeting, not the UN. Wouldn't it look better if we did, then CCCP still vetoed?"

"I'm not letting those commies pretend they've got even an inch more of legitimacy than they do," America dismissed, savouring his cigar more slowly. "And they're already being loud enough, don'cha think?"

That stupid little commission they had going on in China right now. He'd deal with it if they decided to butter their bread on the wrong side. The war would be over soon anyhow, and anything they had to say would be swallowed up in the aftermath. Korea would be free, and everyone would agree that whatever cost it had taken to get it that way was an acceptable one, like usual.

"Yeah," Canada said, fiddling with his raccoon tail.

"You know I can still make those, right?" America asked, not for the first time. "Not a lost art, and I think that thing's starting to smell like the coon what died to make it."

He should know how to make 'em, too. Why had he spent the effort teaching him if he was just going to wear the thing to tatters?

Canada clutched the striped tail protectively to his shoulder. "I like this one. And I wash it once a month."

"Suit yourself." Even if it made it a smidge harder to pretend he wasn't the Canada that had never been taught his lesson.

Maybe… Nah. The thing was like his brother's protective blanky. If something happened to it, he'd probably keel over the next time he was dragged in front of an audience. Or just into downtown Ottawa. He'd stick to hiding it around the place when he was over.

"So, now that you've been a good little messenger pigeon…" Cigar finally done, America flicked it into the ashtray and rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Present time?"

Canada wasn't like South, where he'd watch him like a hawk as

he examined the gift he'd given him, and probably cast himself from the window straight into the Rideau River if he said he didn't like it, but he did still twiddle his fingers anxiously and watch from the corner of his eye as America unwrapped his presents.

"Fuck yeah," he crowed, pulling out the Jack Daniels bottle and holding it up to the chandelier on the ceiling.

To the untrained eye, it looked like suspiciously thick, dark alcohol. But America knew it was full of maple syrup from Canada's farm.

"We had a really good harvest this year," his brother said, trying to act casual, but clearly thrilled he liked it. "On top of all the syrup, I got around three tins of candy out of the trees."

"I'll take 'em all," America said, already having popped open his blue tin and shoved a maple leaf-shaped sugar chunk in his mouth, moaning in satisfaction.

Pure sugary bliss. He had maple syrup from Vermont, but Canada made it like no other.

Well, *America* could make it better, if he was up to the sugar farming biz. But he didn't have time to traipse around in the woods, while Canada practically lived out there.

Canada laughed. "I already gave the other ones to Mr. Laurent and, uh…"

He scratched the fur on his hat awkwardly, and America rolled his eyes.

"I'm not gonna throw you in the fireplace and strike a match just for saying his name."

Even if it did make his knuckles whiten around the cookie tin. The geezer didn't even *like* sweets. They were 'childish.'

"Well I gave it to him," Canada said sheepishly. "But I made sure you got the most. Eat them quick so they don't go stale."

“Don’t worry, these aren’t lasting the plane ride back to Korea.”

Actually, he’d try and save one or two for South. The kid loved sugar, and this stuff was sickeningly sweet.

He shoved another one in his mouth, closing his eyes as it melted on his tongue.

‘Probably only one.’

Canada gave him another watch for his collection, too. It had a sturdy leather strap, probably from one of his kills, and the watch face was made up to look like his flag. The points on the hands were shaped like delicate flint arrowheads, and when he shook it, little gold flecks inside flew around like snow.

“And here I thought the Gold Rush drained you dry,” America said, still shaking it.

“I found some while I was hunting up in the Territories,” Canada proudly told him. “Do you like it?”

“It’s definitely the tackiest watch I own now,” America praised, strapping it next to his Rolex. “It’s getting a place of honour on the shelf.”

He didn't mind when his brother didn’t sell the house for his presents, since he made up for it economically. Natural gas, fresh water, precious metals. He was a veritable mine. Plus they had trade deals worked out since they were right next to each other and shared such a long border.

Honesty, he didn’t even mind when Grace got him cheap presents, since she wasn’t exactly rollin’ in dough. Just not a fucking *card.* She better have something real ace ready for him tomorrow.

Canada tried, that was the point. He didn’t just grab whatever, taking him for granted. He wanted to please him, and he did his best to, as he should. There were plenty of folks that could learn from him. Truman, for example.

Canada opened his presents next- a box of quality cigars, a good

compass, and a rifle. His eyes lit up as he tore the paper on the last one, making up for all the effort America had went through making his girl wrap it to look like a broom.

"What is this?" he asked, sighting down the scope at a painting of Niagara Falls on the wall.

"Chang Kai-shek rifle," America told him around another maple candy. "Type 79, I think the Red Chinese call it. Thought you might want to try it out."

He'd done a little shopping in the captured enemy weapons before Rhee could clear them out for his 'recruits.'

Canada lowered the rifle, looking a little guilty. "They don't really like when you give me guns."

"C'mon, 'Nada, live a little," he sighed, leaning on an elbow. "You ditched the registration when the war ended and *you* never had to follow it in the first place. If 'they-'" He put finger quotes around the word. "Try to give you trouble, remind 'em you're a Countryhuman, and if you want to get a new gun, you'll damn well get a new gun."

He knew the lily-livered sumbitch wouldn't do that, but he still sighted down the rifle again.

"Yeah," he said, definitely planning to smuggle it out to his cabin and never tell anyone. "Thanks. I can't wait to try this out. Hunting trip next time you're free?"

"Sure thing."

Any other country would have to be an idiot to go hunting with another Countryhuman, giving them access to firearms and the excuse of a hunting accident. But America knew his brother would never shoot him. He didn't have the moxie.

'Or the spine.'

Gift exchange done with, America eyed their presents, nodding in satisfaction.

Canada had got him two things, and he'd got him three. And while he'd actually pulled gold out of his ass this year, luckily the American had coincidentally chosen to go with gold plate for his new compass. He was still winning.

They shot the shit for a little longer, smoking more cigars- good ones, fresh from his tobacco plantation in Cuba- before America checked his new watch and sighed.

"Well, 'Nada, I gots to get back to the old ball and chain."

Canada frowned before realizing what he meant. "Korea?"

"Yep." He'd seen the little flicker that went through his eyes, thinking America had a wife he didn't know about.

He laughed silently, wondering if the idea of it being that broad from back then had crossed his mind.

"Actually, I was wondering if maybe you wanted to spend the night?" Canada asked hopefully. "I know if you're actually going to be on the continent for your birthday, you probably want to spend it at home, but you could catch a plane tomorrow?"

"Sorry, 'Nada. I promised Southie I'd spend it with him." He paused deliberately. "Whoops, that's South Korea."

He watched his brother's jaw feather, hurt flashing across his eyes.

Countryhumans didn't just hand out nicknames to other countries. Canada might resent his now for whatever stupid reason, but he couldn't hide that it hit like an Indian arrow to know he wasn't the only nation America had graced with one anymore.

"Oh," he said, trying to sound upbeat and falling flat.

"Yeah." America packed up his stuff, snatching one more maple candy. "He's a good kid. A lot like you actually, but a little more… Y'know."

He see-sawed his hand, leaving Canada to guess what 'y'know' meant. Less spineless? Less socially awkward? Less embarrassing?

The answer would have been 'no, no, and no' a little bit ago, but you know what? America could say that wasn't true anymore. South was gaining his feet, learning how to act normal, in public at least. A few days ago, he'd even managed to look at Rhee like he was gum on the bottom of his shoe instead of dog shit. He didn't apologize for nothing anymore, or burst into tears every other day, or start screaming his fool head off.

Or flinch from what needed to be done.

And honestly, with the whole Taejon freak out he'd had in the first year of the war, it was clear he'd always had more fight in him than Canada. Low bar, yeah. But still a bar.

Yep, his Southie was coming along just swell. He'd be even *more* swell when he got North's more appealing traits mixed in.

He let a proud smile twist his lips, and Canada's grip on the rifle tightened.

"Cool," he said, mustering a smile.

"I can't wait to introduce you two," America said chipperly, pretending he didn't hear his tone. "I bet you'll get along great."

"Can't wait."

"By next year I'll have won the war," he said, throwing his brother a bone. "I'll stay over then. We can go clubbing or something. Maybe I'll help you pick up a new girl. It's been awhile since you've had one, hasn't it?"

A shutter slammed over Canada's eyes, and he put the rifle on the table.

"Yeah," he said mechanically, not bringing up the last and only one, like America had known he wouldn't.

The American nodded. "We can get some drinks, pick up chicks. You don't mind sharing, right? The drinks that is."

Canada looked down at his lap, hands balled on his thighs. "No,"

he said quietly after a second. “I don’t mind.”

Of course he didn’t. He hadn’t even gotten mad when America had told him.

Canada got to his feet. He was taller than America by just an inch, but he hunched so much he stood lower. He didn’t talk much as he went for the door.

As ace as his gifts had been, and as eager as he’d been to drop the subject of the war earlier, he had still needed to be punished for tricking America here on Britain’s order. He might still be a colony, but the United States of America *wasn’t.* He’d told Britain he didn’t come when called anymore and he had meant it. Not for him and not for the person who had chosen him over America.

The American smirked, stubbing his cigar out, grinding it into the maple leaf on the bottom of the ash tray.

Canada didn’t talk until they were down by his car, and he was about to get in.

“Hey, America?” he asked, fiddling with his coon tail again.

“Yeah?”

“Even if you don’t see Britain as your dad anymore, we’re… still related, right?”

He straightened up, gifts safely stowed in the passenger seat. “Of course, ‘Nada. We’re the only North American countries. Who else’s couch am I supposed to sleep on when I’m dodging Republicans?”

Canada wasn’t a big fan of that side of his aisle, so the joke made his lips twitch.

“Okay. Good. Thanks.”

America crossed his arms. “You know you don’t have to be his son.”

Canada shrugged helplessly. “He’s my father.”

It was pointless, but he tried barking one last time.

"He doesn't have to be. We can just be brothers, no crooked-toothed limeys involved."

Canada looked down at his shoes, shuffling them on the paved drive.

'Of course.' He wouldn't choose him over Britain. He never had.

"See you around, 'Nada." He turned for the car.

"W-Wait," Canada said nervously. "Hug?"

They were alone on the side drive, so none of the reporters swarming the front of the property would see them.

America sighed, but stepped in and clapped him on the back in a manly embrace, refusing to inhale in case he caught a whiff of the hat. He didn't care how often he washed it, that thing was over a hundred years dead.

He pulled back after a few seconds. He wanted to end things on a high note so Canada wouldn't get any ideas, but you had to be careful when newshounds were baying at the gates. They'd sniff around for any hint of deeper meaning in how you handled another country. Leaned back 'cuz they'd had onions for lunch? Your trade deal had fallen through, obviously. Leaned a little too close because the room was crowded and you couldn't hear shit they were saying? You were hosting secret sessions in the middle of the UN floor, plotting. Someone caught you with your hand on Philippines' shoulder? You had to be exploiting her (not that he'd be against that, the girl was a dish, but he was always careful not to give CCCP any fuel for his propaganda flames, so it seemed a *little* unfair to accuse a man who hadn't even had a taste of the fruits, so to speak).

And if he got caught on camera hugging Canada, the press would be full of headlines about their 'brotherly bond.' That was good for their countries, and for getting what he wanted out of the Canadian.

But if he was Canada's brother, then he had to be Britain's son. That was how the press would see it anyway. And Britain. And he

wasn't. He wasn't *anyone's* son or anyone's brother, even if Canada had to be his.

He was America.

The big buildings, city streets, and distant rumble of the crowd made Canada nervous. He'd be wanting to flee back to his cottage in the woods on the edge of Ottawa as soon as possible. He slunk inside, not watching America drive off. The American snorted bitterly.

But his brother really was Britain's son.

Behind the wheel of the black Cadillac Canada had sent to the airfield for him, America took off his aviators, scrubbing a hand over his face. He didn't look at the car mirror until they were back on, white eyes covered by black glass. When he did, he grinned at his reflection.

Well! Back to Korea. He had to haul ass if he wanted to get there before tomorrow was over. He'd had Texas cook up some BBQ (so he wouldn't be subjected to more of Grace's mashed potatoes) and fly it across the border to meet him here, and while it wasn't as good as fresh, he wanted to make sure him and South had time to eat it before he took him to the front to watch the bombs fall.

America snagged one more maple candy for the road, then pulled out of the private drive and around the side of the sprawling Parliament Hill building.

Seriously, the size of the thing made him suspect his bro was overcompensating for something. It'd been the largest construction project in North America at one point (though obviously America had way more, way bigger ones now).

The main lane leading from the enormous tower (not *that* big) at the front split two rolling green lawns in half, sprinklers having put in a lot of work to keep the grass emerald in the summer heat. The sight of the car turning the corner to head down the driveway made the people on the grass swarm, redoubling the cries they'd been screaming themselves hoarse with since before he'd even got here.

America kept his smile fixed as he drove for the gates, the protesters crowding in. Not wide enough that he'd be accused of 'revelling in war' or some shit by the reporters in the crowd, but not so small that they'd think he gave a damn about them and their moronic signs.

They waved them over their heads like flags, everything from professional signboard to roughly cut squares of cardboard. *'US OUT OF KOREA, HANDS OFF KOREA, NO WAR WITH CHINA, NO WAR.'*

America's hands tightened around the wheel, pretending it was one of their sweaty throats he was gripping.

'No war.' How the fuck did they think things got done? Would he be free of Britain if he hadn't gone to war? Would the Krauts and the Japs have gotten their teeth kicked in if he didn't go to war? He could see a few Indians in the crowd, did the white folks think they could be so close to each other without one side getting scalped if it hadn't been for the crusade he'd lead against them? War was what had ensured they could get along together, and that he didn't have to eradicate them *all*.

It wasn't *him* they needed to show those signs to. It was North Korea, who'd been cocky enough to think he stood a chance against America, and still did. It was Red China, violating international law to whisper into his 'ear' in person and openly taunting them all at his trial. And it was CCCP who had brought the disease of Communism into the world in the first place, making the little people think they deserved things they didn't, that they hadn't *worked* for. He was the one puppeteering all the lesser nations into going against the natural order of the world, he was the one brainwashing good men into turning against their nations, and *he* was the one trying to claim America's destiny. He was the one that wanted war, the one giving America no choice. The Communists were bringing war to the world and no one wanted *them* to stop. No one but him.

'No war.' Just like Upper Canada back then, when his people had actually pulled up their bootstraps and started to rebel. Too little, too late, but at least they'd been standing up to the limey. Unlike

Canada.

*'I can't go to war with Father. I don't want to go to war with **anyone,** Mer. I just want us to be-'* Even after America had put his fucking pride on the line by offering him a second chance, something no traitor had ever gotten from him before.

And what had happened? The rebellion had been crushed. America had to waste money funding militias to teach him a lesson, the limey oligarchs stayed in power, and Canada remained a colony to this day.

Each and every one of these fucking Canucks, white, negro, redskin, gook, all of them were just like their Countryhuman- a spineless coward who didn't know what was good for him. They couldn't see that they *needed* war. He needed to crush everyone that stood against them, just like he'd crushed the Indians, the Nazis, the Jap, *Britain.* The United States of America wouldn't be the greatest country in the world if it wasn't for his wars against them.

God had given him a destiny and the only way to manifest it was through *war.*

His leg quivered with tension as his boot pressed down on the gas. He'd been mostly joking when he'd thought about turning the newshawks and Doughboys outside the Eighth Army Headquarters into speedbumps, but *these* chumps? Yeah, he'd gun 'em down in a *heartbeat.*

They swarmed like sharks, not even the shiny black Cadillac enough to keep them back. The only thing that saved the man that stumbled into the side was the fact it was borrowed. They shoved their signs into his windshield, *'REFUSE TO DIE FOR YANKEE BANKERS, CEASEFIRE NOW, CANADA OUT OF KOJE PRISON,'* gaping red mouths and patchy red skin and wild Red eyes and America felt his cheek start to tic.

These fucking people, acting like he was a monster for hitting a military target or trying to unbrainwash Korean commies, just like the fucking nations that'd turned down the Geoje visit. They didn't give a damn what was happening in the camps, they just didn't

want to tarnish their precious reputations, leaving all the dirt to him because he was the only one with the guts to do it, *he* was the only one who knew what it took to defeat Communism and why they had to, just like he was the only one that'd been brave enough to take up a gun against their father.

So what if a few commies died in the camps, so what if he *was* using germ warfare- if Communism won in Korea it would spread across the world, and how many people would die then? Who did these fucking yuppies think the Nork and Red China would come for first? They wouldn't care that they were 'conscientious objectors' if their little commie POWs had the chance to tell them what the Canuck army was doing on Geoje. Reds were bloodthirsty, savage, they wouldn't make any distinction between the guy holding the gun and the bitch back home and like America had gone for the limey bastards the first chance he'd got, they would come for *them.*

They didn't see that he was trying to save them, *none* of them did.

He raised his foot off the gas, about to slam it down and take out at least one of the idiots trying to throw themselves in front of his car, give them what they wanted as they screamed at him to stop doing what they *needed.*

Then startled shrieks rang out and the protestors went stumbling back, using their signs to shield each other as water showered over them.

The sprinklers had came on, rotating peacefully as they watered the lawn, maintaining its glossy green pelt.

America took the moment of distraction as they staggered back from the road to slam the gas, not speeding enough for some Red to claim he was fleeing, but fast enough to break free from the crowd.

"Always a pleasure, folks!" he called out the window he'd rolled down, sticking his arm out.

Good thing he'd slipped that Canuck maintenance guy a twenty. That was what- a hundred bucks Canadian?

‘Took him long enough, though,’ he thought irritably.

He snuck a look back at the Parliament Hill grounds as he shot down the hill, security trying to break up the protest. A few losers were doggedly running after him, one waving a red-painted sign that read *‘NO GERM WEAPONS ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.'*

America turned the corner out the gates, losing sight of him. But he liked to imagine he’d tripped and fallen on his face, like CCCP would at the Security Council today.

He sighed, back on the peaceful road, no commie crazies to be seen.

That was the bad thing about almost always visiting Canada on July 3rd- every shark in the sea knew he’d be here, and crawled out of the woodwork like a Jew scenting a penny, rubbing their hands together and voicing whatever complaint they had against him this year.

His lips pressed thin as he navigated the broad Ottawa streets.

There’d been a few more than usual today, though. Usually it was just a handful, a couple old men still bearing a cross from the War of 1812, or a few Beat Generation types that thought being anti-American was trendy. But back on the lawn had been a few dozen people, maybe around a hundred. So around eighty if you subtracted the outright Communist agents. They didn’t need numbers, even one commie was enough for the infection to spread to honest men.

America drummed his striped fingers on the wheel, wondering how many of them would have been cheering him on two years ago.

The war in Korea was getting unpopular, he knew that, even if you didn’t count the Red spies working their dark magic. Because people were stupid and short-sighted. And hey, he couldn’t begrudge them for that. It was just another part of human nature.

But they were. They couldn’t see that so long as the Reds refused

to surrender, they had to keep fighting. They couldn't see that by letting them sign an armistice now, letting them have their airfields and take their prisoners home, they'd be letting them think they had served as a real villain against America, like he couldn't just turn their shithole countries into smoking holes in the ground if he wanted to.

They would be letting them think they had won.

And they *hadn't.* They *couldn't.* The only reason North Korea and Red China were still capable of spreading their lies and drawing breath at all was because America was holding himself back to use their counties the way he deserved. If the Nork wanted to thrash and struggle on the line and refuse to be reeled in even after his lights had gone out, that was fine, because one day soon, he would be being served up on the frying pan, whether that was before or after Red China had been dealt with. He could keep dragging himself over the torched remains of his country and clawing at America's ankles thinking he could make him leave because he *couldn't.*

The only way America was leaving Korea was if he was heading to China. And if that was before the Nork bent the knee, he would be back.

There was no substitute for victory.

But the war *was* getting unpopular. Like, 'down to barely fifty percent approval' unpopular, even if his folks weren't being as knuckleheaded as Canada's about it. America knew it was mostly the result of CCCP's agents manipulating the polls, and the numbers weren't *that* low, but hey, he was an honest guy, he could admit when some of his people were fucking idiots making mountains out of molehills. Geoje Island was a whole mess folks wouldn't shut up about because the commie prisoners wouldn't just quit their shit and switch sides, the stalling in the talks he had to do to make North submit or lure Red China into a real war was making some of the mouthier nations start to gripe about how long it was taking, Rhee openly blustering that he'd send former Red POWs out to fight and locking assemblymen up willy-nilly (and also everything else he did) didn't look so good when he was there watching it go down,

the fuss Big Red was raising about biowarfare, while obviously no one believed it, had started to attract flies, and bombing the Sui-ho Dam hadn't been *quite* as popular outside his government as he'd expected.

So yeah, it was getting *really* unpopular. Not because people actually cared what happened to the commies in Korea, but because 'Oh, it costs too much money, it's taking too long, we've had too many casualties.' Not seeing that it was also *making* America money, which was the entire reason the steel dolts could complain about their bosses not paying them more, that this would have been over ages ago if they'd just understand the value of a well-placed nuclear bomb, and that those soldiers were *his.* They had chosen to fight for *him,* they had signed on to advance *his* destiny, and he could use them the way he wanted. They said they couldn't be defending their country when they were all the way across the Pacific Ocean, too blind to realize that if they didn't defend it there, one day the infection would spread to their own shores. That it already was, infecting the weak-minded rubes first, like that Puerto Rican soldier and his little pals, and the idiots in the factories, but sure to come for the rest of America if it had time.

Threats had to be smothered in the cradle, or one day they would hold a pillow over your face instead. Just ask Britain. Even if that smothering made you *li'l* bit unpopular.

Or a lot'a bit, for Truman. His approval had dipped to just over twenty percent in the latest polls, *toootally* not helped along by America suggesting he seize the steel mills to raise wages and prevent a strike, stealing a page from the commies' books. Except *he* was a free country, so the companies were free to sue to get them back, winning, of course, and firmly cementing ole Prez Pinko as unreliable to the workers and an enemy to the corporations. Even if he had a mind to run again after four years, America could use his mystical gypsy fortune-telling powers to predict he wouldn't be winning another term. Now everyone had it out for Truman almost as much as his Countryhuman did.

But, more annoyingly, *his* approval had dropped, too. Just a little. Big Business was miffed he hadn't been there to smack Truman on the wrist (not knowing he'd set it up to help them out, but hey, no

good deed went- got rewarded), and Big Labour was pissed he hadn't been there to tell BB to raise their wages (which he wouldn't have done, but he'd definitely have pretended to look into it).

But the drop being small didn't change the fact that it *had* dropped. And as the workers had gone ahead and started their strike at the beginning of June, it continued to. Tiiiny increments. But still too much. He usually hovered around a ninety since WWII, but now he was down to eight-five.

And more importantly, kindofnotreally- steel wasn't getting made. Exports had been slammed shut, meaning he couldn't rake in the cash from the Japs and the others, Defense was clinging to what they had refusing to sell to Consumer, and his plants were shutting down one by one, his arsenal going with them. Even their stockpiles were getting dangerously low.

The reminder made the heat in America's stomach start to rise again, and he sped a little faster through the streets, taking corners sharper than he had to.

Didn't they realize he had a war to fight, a war to defend *them?* Did they think he used the shit they made for fun? He was using it to save them, to save the *world.* And they were denying it from their army, from *him,* over a couple of fucking cents, because they thought they deserved the money their bosses made.

It was the entitlement he couldn't stand, the same entitlement Britain had always had, thinking he was owed what America made, what *America* had worked for. Fucking entitled union commies, thinking they were owed whatever they wanted, fucking entitled foreigners, thinking they didn't have to lift a finger to help America defend them, fucking entitled Britain thinking he had any say over what happened in Korea, let alone *anything* America did.

The surge of fire and brimstone felt good, burning away the cobwebs and getting his motor runnin' again, something he hadn't felt in awhile. Because more than the war starting to get a little too unpopular on the homefront…

Korea was starting to get boring.

South had been well-behaved recently, especially after the little demonstration with the deafie, and even if that was great, America didn't get the same rush from watching movies and chatting with him as he did making him believe what he needed to. Grace had been boring for awhile now, taking whatever he gave her without complaint, drifting around like she was half a ghost already; the combat at the front was still at a stalemate with no signs of changing, limited to probing actions from the commies and counterattacks to take back the hills America's Doughboys had claimed and annoyingly couldn't seem to keep; he'd given up on getting anything about Red China out of the stuttering cripple; and honestly he was sick of Korean food. Rice, radish, and that fermented cabbage, that was what he was stuck with when his imported groceries ran out. And Grace's fucking mashed potatoes. It was good, but a man needed *variety*. Canada's maple candy had damn near brought him to tears, the first blast of real sugar he'd had in way too long.

He couldn't even visit the camps or find himself a one-time girl to have a bit of fun with because there was always a dirt-digger following him around, looking for some new scoop, and would just *love* to lap up a story about a missing Korean whore, like a thousand of 'em didn't go missing every day, or more sensationalist Geoje crap for CCCP's propagandists.

He wanted to eat Texas barbeque right off the grill, not heated up in a wok. He wanted to kick his heels up on the desk at his plantation house while he still could and try to break his record on smoke rings, and visit the babes in California, finally introduce himself to that Marilyn chick, who was getting just as popular as he'd known she would. And he wanted to wake up in the morning whenever he wanted and suck in a deep breath of fresh air, with no traces of jet engine fuel or filthy refugees to be found.

America let a wry smile twist his lips.

Aw shucks, he was actually getting homesick. He'd never been away from the USA long enough to get that way before. Even as often as he'd visited Southie during the trusteeship, he'd been back and forth enough not to. He guessed it was the boredom that'd done it, though really, who *wouldn't* want to head back to the greatest

country on Earth?

He knew he could trust South to stay loyal. He'd seen the truth of the Communists, of Red China and CCCP and Kim Il-sung, and even if he still didn't want to believe the truth about North, that was fine. He understood that he wouldn't get his brother back until he was crushed and Communism in Korea was no more.

And even if he hadn't, America had more than enough material for him to understand that there wouldn't be any switching sides. He'd seen it in his eyes that day in the police station, and even before that, on the day he'd ordered Seoul to be burned.

Communists were crazy. They saw no value in God or borders or the natural order of the world. No value in family. There was *nothing* they wouldn't destroy. South knew that now. He knew that he would win this war with America, or he would be torn apart. Those were the only options.

No, his Korea wasn't anything like Canada anymore.

The war in Korea would be over before Christmas, and the war in China would have begun. A fresh new venture to raise his people's spirits, and a Korea as thankful as his Southie and as persuasive as North to assure everyone that he was so glad America had stayed in his county for so long, so glad he'd saved him, and that he wanted to see Red China's people be granted freedom and democracy just like his, and would be willing to *fight* for it. But for now…

Korea had grown a little stale.

America lifted the foot not on the gas onto the leather seat, leaning his leg against the door as he looked out the window, watching a plane take off from the Uplands airfield as he turned onto the road to it.

Yep. He was just about done in Korea. He had a few loose ends to tie up, then he'd hurry home to clean up Truman's mess, get ready for the elections, and raise his approval rating back up to ninety so he could watch it rocket to a hundred after he won the war, just like after he'd bombed Japan in the last one.

But in order to do that, there was one loose end in particular he had to get rid of. A piece of baggage he couldn't risk bringing back to the States.

The American Countryhuman was leaving Korea, wiping the slate clean for the blind and dumb and brainwashed.

Which meant it was time for Gracie to go.

Chewing on the parallels. They are crunchy like bone.

A clarification- the reason one sign calls Geoje 'Koje' (and why Canada says 'Koo-jay') is because that was the romaji for it back then. Also the thing about the Canadian government taking in 'anti-Communist Soviet patriots that fought Communism in WWII' is real. Canada imported UPA types that had worked with the Nazis to pogrom Soviet Jews, Communists, and such when parts of the CCCP were occupied to 'save them from the Soviets' (so they wouldn't be prosecuted with their crimes, gods forbid a Nazi actually pays for being a Nazi) and fight Communism in Canada.

If Canada seems different here than in Warring Pyongyang, it's for a few reasons. His social anxiety was still manageable back then, and didn't get crippling until around the late 1990s (it rises with the height of buildings. and also America's boredom level), and his mental break and withdrawal are very responsible for his stutter and general behaviour. This is Canada in a (mostly okay) state of mind.

Reading about the American steel strike is so funny. 'Steel manufacturers told everyone that the union wanting raised wages and eight holidays a year would lead to inefficiency, which would drive workers towards radicalism and Communism.' Would you… like to know… what *actually* drives workers towards radicalism and Communism…? Take a seat before your legs give out. NOT BEING PAID A LIVING WAGE. Aiya.

Saving Grace

There was a door. It was red. It was getting closer.

There was a door. Her ma had let her paint the last stroke, the brush clutched right in her chubby little fist. As it drew nearer, she could see the raised edges sticking out from the smooth coat of paint. The neighbour's corn rustled in the breeze, a hound dog barked in the distance, the sun was warm and the door was getting closer.

There was a door. Behind it was nothing, nothing nothing nothing, and then that spot of dried red and then *him,* shining and star-spangled, and no matter how much she screamed at herself to stop walking, to run back down the lane and leave it for someone else, it was all getting closer.

There was a door. And Grace was going to open it. She couldn't *not* open it. The curse drove her on, lifted her hand, placed it on the worn handle, opened it to that red nothing and her own rosy red nothing.

Gracie's eyes shot open, her breath catching in her throat, crushing the whispering whine that had been leaking from it. She twitched, but didn't lurch up. Her body told her to *stay still, be good, Gracie.*

So she held still, not even breathing, even though the pressure strained her ribs, still bruised up and sore from the last lesson she'd had to learn.

The room was dark, only a little bit of light from the high window making its way in. The heavy breathing beside her stayed even.

Her own breath escaped in a silent exhale, her lungs deflating, settling down inside her and putting weight on her bruised spine.

America had flown all the way to Canada and back, then hosted

his birthday party and taken that Korean kid out to celebrate. He'd been working hard, and deserved a good rest. If Gracie woke him up just because she was having nightmares again, that would make her bad. And bad girls got punished.

She'd been good for awhile. America hadn't had to punish her. She had been a good girl, wearing the pretty clothes and jewellery he got her, losing weight, always having dinner ready when he got back. Keeping her head down, saying 'yes please,' never 'no.' He hadn't liked that she'd been near that teahouse that day her hopes had poofed away like smoke. So Gracie had been trying to be good for him.

But she couldn't. She didn't mean to be bad, but she kept screwing up. She made too many mashed potatoes or talked too much or said something stupid and wrong or didn't dye her hair before her roots started showing and America had to punish her. He had to punish her a lot lately, more and more, almost every day. But she still couldn't seem to get better.

Gracie wasn't a bad girl. America told her all the time she was a real good girl. She just did bad things that needed to be corrected, like when she used to write with her left hand and her pa would slap her on the wrist until she learned to write with the proper one. And it was a good thing he'd done that because otherwise all her coursework would have ended up smeared in nursing school, and her medical charts would be all messed up.

It had been awhile since she had seen a patient. Besides herself.

Pretty white eyes and snowy white skin.

It had been awhile since she had seen anyone.

Gracie had thought she had been good today. She'd had a meat-and-three cooking when America had got back. A nice roast beef she had worked real hard on, with turnip greens she managed to get at the market, and cornbread. And mashed potatoes, of course. She had tried to recreate her ma's old recipe for the cornbread, but with Korean flair, adding some of that weird salty paste they used. She'd thought it tasted pretty good, and America had been asking for

some for awhile now. And even though he had brought back that barbeque, they could still have it as leftovers. He'd seemed happy with it, and with her gift- a pair of aviators she had begged the requisition officer for, promising to find ‘some way’ to pay him back. She couldn’t go there anymore, but that was okay.

She didn’t want to go outside. She hadn’t in months.

And America had liked the sturdy glasses. They weren’t gold, but she thought he could wear them when he went to visit the POW camps or other dirty places, so his good ones wouldn’t get ruined. He’d been so mad after his last pair got broken that he’d had to take it out on her. He had said it was thoughtful. He had said she’d done good, and kissed her on the cheek.

But she still had to be punished. Something about Britain and Canada. Countries she had never been to. Men she had never met. They had made him do it. If they had just been good like her, she wouldn’t have had to get hurt again.

Grace turned over slightly, her eyes tracing the contours of America’s face, lit by the moonlight coming in through the window, counting the maroon and white stripes, and the stars in the navy sky. Forty-eight, one of them hers. Far away and across the sea, almost as distant as a real star. The little prairie house with the red door that she’d never see again.

She liked watching him sleep. It was the only time he ever took his aviators off. He looked so innocent with his short black lashes resting on his cheeks, lids flickering, breath sighing out of parted lips. Harmless.

‘When the war’s over, we’ll get hitched. I’ll buy you a car, and all the fancy clothes and jewellery you want, and a nice house with a big kitchen so you can cook mashed potatoes for me all day. You like the sound of that?’

She did. It was what Gracie had always wanted. A big house in the city, a closet full of clothes that had never had to be mended over and over, sparkly jewellery and a sparklier life, like the ones she saw in the catalogues. A good man.

He was going to kill her soon.

Gracie slid out of bed, moving carefully. The wood was cool under her bare feet as she grabbed one of the blankets that had fallen to floor during their lovemaking, wrapping it around her shoulders. She hurt too much to get dressed. He had been rough tonight. Rougher than usual.

She drew the sheet over her chest, slipping out of the room and padding down the hall to the powder room. The lamp clicked on, orange light filling the small space. She had thought she needed to pee, but she just stood in front of the sink, staring at the mirror above it.

Gracie stared back at her. Big, cornflower blue eyes, freshly-dyed blonde hair that curled over her shoulders and down her back, tousled in a sexy way, scalp aching from how hard it had been pulled on, pink blush and Rosy Future lips, lightly smeared.

She was pretty. Everyone had always said so, from the postman to the army boys. America said it all the time. She was pretty when she smiled, prettier when she cried. She could've been an actress, but she'd never had the money. Gracie wasn't too bright or too tough or too useful. But she was pretty.

Too pretty to die.

Then again, her ma had been pretty, too, with her long loamy tresses and dark blue eyes. So had her nana, she'd realized when she was cleaning out her parents' things. When she was little, the woman had been a little scary with all her wrinkles and drooping skin. But her smile in that old photo had been so bright, her pop-pop's arm around her.

And now they were both gone.

She wondered what would happen to those boxes in the apartment America had rented for her. Where her family photos would end up.

She reached out, fingers brushing against Gracie's smooth glass skin, cupping her face. The reflection leaned into the touch as she

ran her thumb across the purple bruise on her cheek.

Who would want to kill such a pretty girl?

Maybe he didn't. Maybe he really loved her, and wanted to bring her home, to circle her and give her the life she'd dreamed of, the life he had promised. The American Dream.

But even if he did, the curse would make him do it. He could say it was Britain or North Korea or the Soviet Union, or even her, but Gracie knew what would really ring her dinner bell. The same thing that had made her pop-pop get behind the wheel that day, and made her pa do what he'd done.

She had seen it in his eyes the night he promised her a life. Through the side of his aviators, she had seen the curse lurking in their depths the same way it had lurked in her pa's after he'd come back from the war, following him home all the way from the Pacific like a stay dog whose brains had gone bad.

America had said she was lucky she was late that day. Gracie had never felt that way. Some part of her had known, ever since she returned after the clean-up to see that rusty red splotch on the white cupboards her mama had always kept so pristine, that she hadn't been spared by luck. It still just hadn't been her time yet.

It was coming now. And it was her own fault.

'It's not your fault,' on the message as he stared across the crowded room, looking at her directly for the first time they'd started doing this with an expression that had become as foreign as the country and people around her.

It was a pretty sentiment. Maybe Mr. Kim was right, and Gracie really wasn't a bad girl. Maybe it really wasn't her fault. Not all of it. For a moment, as she had passed him that note with shaky hands- *'I want to leave.'*- she had felt that could be true.

But in the end, it wasn't. The women in her family were cursed to die at the hands of the men they loved. Gracie knew that. She should have thanked America for his condolences and shut the door

on him that day. But instead she had gone to the movies with him. How could she not? He was her country. She'd loved him before they even met.

But that didn't make it any less her fault.

She had never learned Mr. Kim's real name. He'd said he would tell her when they were in North Korea. But he had been kind, when she had been starting to forget the word. He'd reminded her of her pa, before the war, back when he still knew how to smile. It had felt exciting to tie her hair up in a scarf and put on her little white sunglasses to pass notes with him in cafes and parks, and whisper together right under her guards' noses. Like she was a spy in one of the movies America liked. It was how she'd imagined Korea would be like when she first got here- adventure, intrigue, fun, and her a dashing war heroine saving their brave boys in khaki in the middle of it all.

It hadn't been fun for awhile now.

Now Mr. Kim was dead because she had been foolish enough to think she could escape the curse. Dumb, dumb Gracie. Silly little southern hick, thinking she was any smarter than her ma and nana.

She'd seen the curse in her pa's eyes as he stood behind the woman in the entryway, beer in hand, as she told Gracie to come visit next weekend and she'd make her famous roast and taters. She just hadn't known what it meant. Surely her ma had seen it, too. He'd kept the shotgun on top of the kitchen cupboard. She had to have seen him getting it down as she mashed those potatoes until they were smooth as buttermilk.

And she was still dead.

Just because Gracie was the first person in her family to go to school didn't mean she was smart. Not smart enough to escape a curse.

'There's no such thing as curses.'

Gracie's fingers slid away from the reflection, down to her side.

The words still didn't feel quite real. Whispered in her ear as she left the house for the first time in weeks to get stuff for dinner, pointing at the turnip greens on the square of fabric. 'How much?' in Korean, one of the few words she knew now. The answer had come in English, too quiet for the armed men behind her to hear.

'Hannah says there's no such thing as curses. We are all masters of our own destiny.'

When she'd asked, 'What?' in shock, the farmer woman had just given her an extraordinarily high price, like she hadn't even said anything.

Gracie had thought maybe she hadn't. Maybe she was going loony like her pa, like America always joked about. She'd bought the turnip greens and gone home to make him supper like the good girl she was.

She hadn't got to eat any of it. Or much of the BBQ. Meat was bad for her figure. Her stomach ached like every other part of her.

But as she let the words creep back out now that America wouldn't somehow sense them, she was sure she'd heard right. It couldn't have come from her own head. Gracie didn't have thoughts anymore. There wasn't anything good to think about.

Hannah had sent her a message. She hadn't forgotten about her.

Gracie hadn't forgotten her either. It was hard to when America would bring her up sometimes when he was teaching her a lesson. He wanted her to learn her lesson, too. Gracie had been sad when she'd left, wishing her friend could come with them to Busan, that maybe they could talk again. But she was glad she hadn't now.

And she had been kind. Even if Gracie couldn't understand her. And even if she had used her for that map.

'Please, my family.' The foreign state had been filled with a desperation Gracie knew well. It had filled her chest and tore her throat raw as she screamed at the ceiling, begging God to bring her family back.

Unlike Him, Gracie couldn't not answer.

She hoped it had helped when the Communists raided the camp. Maybe that was why they'd been able to pull it off as smooth as America had said while he was beating her after. She wasn't a traitor, but she was glad Hannah had got her family back. She was glad she'd been able to.

She hoped the paper she had dropped for that agent had helped, too. She would feel awful if Mr. Kim had died for nothing. Even if she hadn't been able to get away like he wanted.

She had thought about it for a moment on that day. Trying to catch the attention of the man he had said would be waiting for them. To run to him and hope he could spirit her away.

But America had been on edge, and her guards were on high alert. And even if they hadn't been…

Gracie couldn't escape. She was cursed.

It didn't surprise her that Hannah didn't believe in curses. A woman like her wouldn't. Her brother had shot her in the chest and she hadn't even seemed to care. She'd never flinched when Gracie treated her, or quailed away from America. She had killed a man and fled from her window like a bird, taking off into the winter mountains with the sun still in the sky. Gracie thought she might even be the reason America's aviators had broke, and why when he'd taken her that night, he'd kept his shirt on and bled even more than her. And why she had to be careful not to look too closely at his cheek for a few days.

Gracie couldn't even imagine that. Every time he was on top of her, she was aware of how absolutely powerful her country was. Bigger than her, stronger than her. Invincible. She'd thought it was hot, at first. Now she just knew that it meant even if she wanted to, even if she tried, she couldn't stop him from doing what he wanted.

Her brother had always told her that if a man ever raised his hand to her, she should raise hers right back, then call him so he could kick his ass. But he was gone, like everyone else. And Gracie

couldn't fight back. She wasn't like Hannah. She was just a normal girl. And she believed that curses were real.

They had to be. If they weren't, then why had her pop-pop called them to the car that day? Why had her pa splattered her ma's brains out all over her mashed potatahs and clean white cupboards then turned the gun on himself?

Why was America going to kill her?

They loved them, hadn't they? When her pop-pop would get the door for her nana like he had that day, wasn't that love? When her pa built her ma those flowerbed boxes for the windows, wasn't that love? When America bought her nice dresses and expensive jewellery and put her through nursing school and told her she was beautiful and funny and weird, the whole damn dish, wasn't that *love?*

So why did he want to *hurt* her? She didn't want to hurt him. Even after everything, all the broken bones, all the tears, all the ugly bruises and her nose that would never be quite straight again, even knowing he was going to kill her, she didn't want to hurt him back. She *loved* him. She would love him even as he wrapped his hands around her neck or used the pistol in his office to blow her brains out as she mashed potatoes or however he was going to do it because he was her country. She had loved him from the day she was born and would love him even after the day she died at his hands.

She didn't want to. She hadn't wanted to run away and leave him, she just hadn't wanted the curse to force him to kill her. She didn't want to end up like the other women in her family, she didn't want him to kill her. She wanted him to *love* her. He was her country, he was supposed to *love* her.

Gracie stared back at her in the mirror, pale, hollow cheeks, the blue in her eyes swallowed up by blown-out pupils as they peered through wild blonde hair, purple-black bruises mottling her breasts in the shape of fingers and teeth. Rosy Red lips.

And she didn't want to wear this *stupid* lipstick. It was *so* not her

colour, it washed her out and drew attention away from her eyes, her best feature, which she'd *told* America when he said she should wear it more often, and she wanted it *off*.

Gracie rubbed at her mouth with her wrist, harder and harder until she was crushing her lips into her teeth, the familiar sharp tang of copper staining her tongue, awakening the constant hunger inside her and making her stomach roar. She clawed at her mouth with her manicured nails like she'd clawed at America's back, crimson residue coming off under them, blood welling in their tracks.

When she was done, she gripped the edge of the counter with one hand, the other picking up the paper she usually kept hidden with her 'that time of the month' stuff, the one place she knew America wouldn't look, shakily smoothing it on the edge of the sink. She held it up to the lamplight, leaning towards the mirror, but not looking at it, fixated on the drawing.

It was her. Her the way Hannah had seen her. In black and white, her blonde hair tucked into the bun she kept it in back when she'd actually had work to do, her eyes and lips curved up in an expression her face hadn't done anything but fake in half a year. And that pretty red flower tucked behind her ear, the same one Hannah had on her flag.

What had she been trying to say to her that day, the one after Gracie's first lesson? When she'd looked at her so desperately and spoke in her strange language. Had she been calling her an idiot, telling her she was stupid for ever thinking her country could love her, that she could escape the curse? Or had she been telling her what she'd said in that message- that she *could?*

The picture was more familiar than the girl with the red lips was. Her, back when she'd still known how to smile.

She trembled as she looked from her to the reflection in the mirror, staring into its eyes.

It looked awful. Its hair was even messier now, like the tumbleweed folks that had used to blow through town, clinging to

its damp face. Long weals stretched across its mouth and cheeks, droplets of blood glistening where her nails had broken through. Red smeared the lower half of its face around its swollen lips. Its blue eyes gleamed with tears, the first that had fallen in months.

And it was her.

Grace squeezed her eyes shut, pressing the drawing to her heart.

'Ah don't want to die.'

It was so *unfair.* She was so young, she had her whole life ahead of her, her ma had always said so. She had wanted to *do* things, she'd wanted to be an actress and a news reporter and a mortician and a nurse. She wanted to make enough money to donate to charity so girls like her could be the first in their families to go to school, too, she wanted to earn a medal and be a war hero, she wanted to *help* people. *That* was what Grace had always wanted. She wanted to *be* someone. That's why she'd became a nurse, that's why she had got tangled up with America in the first place, so she could afford to.

She just wanted to be good, she *tried* to be good, but it was never enough. She'd told Hannah she didn't want to get in trouble again after that first time, but it just kept *happening,* no matter what she did, there was always some lesson she had to learn or punishment she had to take and now she was going to die. She was going to die without ever having done anythin', without ever making her family proud or savin' anyone. She was going to die alone in a foreign country with the only person left who loved her, the man that would kill her, and it was probably goin' to be on a goddamn empty stomach.

Grace shoved off of the counter, marching out into the hall. She didn't care much about the noise she was making. America was a deep sleeper unless he sensed a threat. And he knew Grace wasn't one.

She stumbled into the dark kitchen, falling to her knees in front of the tiny electric refrigerator. Yanking the door open, she grabbed her bowl of mashed potatoes and set it on the floor. She reached into it with her bare hands, scooping out a mass of cold congealed

goop and shoving it into her mouth, then another, not taking time to chew. She'd made them the way her ma had, buttermilk smooth, and they went down that way until her mouth was too full to swallow and they dribbled down her chin. The potatoes squished between her fingers as she grabbed another handful, forcing it in until the sensation was too much and she doubled over, puke splattering on the tile floor.

She didn't want to clean it. She didn't want to miss a spot and have to learn another lesson, she didn't want to scoop the rest of the potatoes into the trash and take it to the garbage dump, she didn't want America to see her like this, disgusting and messy and ugly.

She din't want to die.

Grace reached for the drawing again, holding it in hands that were shaking as much as the rest of her, getting blood and tears and potato on it, trying to see herself as Hannah had seen her again. The Grace that had a chance.

'We are the masters of our own destiny.'

She crammed the paper in her mouth. It was thick and suffocating as she folded it in, crushing down on it with her teeth, gnashing it into paste, pushing it down as her gag reflex tried to reject it. It didn't want to go down her throat, but she *made* it, massaging her esophagus the way she'd been taught in nursing school. For a moment it was stuck, blocking her windpipe, and she felt a surge of panic before she remembered she was going to die anyway. She forced it down, taking a ragged gasp of air when it went.

She could still feel it, a lump in her upper chest that made every breath hurt, but felt a vicious surge of satisfaction even stronger.

America couldn't get rid of it now when she was gone. It was the one thing here that was hers, not his, and it was hers forever now. Hannah would want that, she thought.

And she wanted her to stop believing in curses and master her own destiny.

Grace couldn't do it. Curses *were* real. Her ma and nana had been murdered by the men they loved because they were cursed, because how could you kill someone you loved if they *weren't* cursed? It ran in the family, like that blockhead cop had said.

But maybe she could do that second part.

She staggered to her feet, wiping her arm across her mouth. Leaving the sheet behind, she went back to the bedroom, sneaking over to where America had tossed his suit jacket when he'd started in on her. She reached into the pocket, pulling out a set of keys, the same ones she'd used to get those troop positions for Mr. Kim. America didn't hide anything. Grace was a good girl. He didn't expect her to ever fix to do anythin' real bad. It was the only reason she hadn't had to be punished when he'd heard she was near the teahouse during the shootout.

It was unfair that the curse had killed Mr. Kim. He'd said he had a family, a daughter, around her age. Grace should have done this a long time ago.

She looked back into the dark of the room. The moon had slid out of sight. America was just a dark shadow on the bed, sleeping like a kid.

"Ah love you, daddy-o," she whispered.

She did. He was her country. He was the greatest country in the world and he was *hers.*

She just wished they had never came to Korea.

There was a door. It was coming closer. Grace drove herself on, lifted her hand, unlocked it, opening it with her own power. She gazed into the darkness of the office.

'Master of my own destiny.' No one else, not her pop-pop or her pa or America or some curse. *Her.*

There was no freedom for her. No escape. Grace's American Dream had ended in 1950. This only ended one way.

He should've hidden the keys. He shouldn't have let her see where he kept it. He'd said it himself, hadn't he? A curse wasn't the only thing that ran in her family. Something else did, too.

Crazy.

The woman stepped over the threshold, her hands steady and her head clear for the first time in months. In years.

If Grace Hartman couldn't escape her curse…

'Maybe ah can break it.'

—

South shot up off the floor, reaching for North as the door burst open with a *'bang!'* curling into a ball as he waited for his brother to throw himself at Japan, for the next punishment.

Nothing.

Right. He wasn't there anymore. He was in Busan. Alone. No Japan, no prison shack. No North.

He sat up, holding a hand to his burnt torso as his heart pounded. The door was closed, the house was silent. He didn't know what had woken him. He held his breath as he waited for something, he didn't know what, every hair on his body prickling. Then-

'BANG.'

His heart stopped as the blood drained from his face, freezing him more than the floorboards were able to. All his organs dropped out of place, his legs going weak as for a moment, he was back in that tiny cement room, blood pooling on the floor and his brother staring at him like he'd just done something unforgivable.

A gunshot.

South surged up, throwing on the clothes he'd tossed to the floor, staggering out of the room and down the hall.

He should stay, he should hide under the covers and wait for whatever it was to be handled.

But the shot had come from America's house.

The Communists, it had to be. North, no one else would be crazy enough to try and take him out. His brother was here, he'd killed America or America had killed him and he needed to *know,* needed to get to his brother before they could make him disappear if it was the second one, and if it was the first one he needed to get to him too.

His brother was here. He'd come to-

South could hear voices outside as he ran from the depths of the house, bursting out the front door and straight into Wesson, bowling him over.

"Back inside!" Ku Cheol-moo barked, hauling him up.

Men swarmed on the next property, spotlights lighting up the night as their boots pounded down the drive. Down the street, lights had come on in the provinces' manors, faces peeking out the windows as their guards ran towards the commotion.

"What's going on?" South demanded, trying to sound authoritative instead of shrill.

"None of your business," Smith clipped, his gun drawn as he stood by the gate.

"I just heard a gunshot come from America's house!" he cried, incredulous. "How isn't that my business?!"

"False alarm!" a voice called and South's breath caught.

The American didn't sound alarmed or angry, like he would if something had happened to America. So that meant-

'No. Nonononononono.'

South tore out of his guard's grasp, sprinting for the gate. They

chased him, but didn't seem to care much about catching him now.

He shot down the road, heart beating in his throat, stomach sloshing. The little bit of hangover he'd had left was gone, blasted away with that shot, the shot that could've been-

He burst through America's gate, slipping between the dispersing soldiers, running up the path. A man caught him before he could get through the door, swinging him around.

"Let me in!" South demanded, struggling, unable to get free.

If it was North, if he was hurt, he had to get to him, America had to know he knew he had him. And if he was dead- If he was dead-

"South Korea's here, sir!" the man holding him called into the house. "Should I let him in?"

"Yeah," a voice called back after a moment. "Send him in."

It was America. He was alive.

South's chest tightened as the man let him go, and he stumbled into the house, every light blazing. The open door at the end of the hall gaped like a mouth, repelling him. He wanted to walk slow, to push back the truth for another second, but he'd never been able to stand waiting for anything, good or bad. He ran towards the maw, bare feet slapping on the wood.

Maybe it wasn't North, maybe it was just some random commie who was stupid enough to try and off America to make North proud. Commies were crazy, crazy enough to try and assassinate the most powerful country on earth, one with atom bombs and hundreds of thousands of soldiers already in their country.

But who else but North would be able to make it past America's security, who else but the man that had killed over four hundred in Seoul almost on his own? Who else but South's brother?

North couldn't be dead, he *couldn't,* South didn't want him dead, even if he knew he had to be punished, even if he'd hurt him if he found out what he'd done, even if his brother would never forgive

him for it, he didn't want him *dead.* He'd be alone when they were Korea, but at least he'd still have some part of him. If he died he would have nothing and no one. He'd never be fixed, he'd be left scared and cowardly and hated and his brother would be *gone.*

South skidded to a stop in the doorway of America's room, his eyes widening in horror.

The first thing he saw was the blood, sprayed over the far wall like a crimson flower. The bed was askew, the sheets rumpled and spread out like there'd been a struggle.

And America kneeled on the floor, a body in his arms.

Relief burst through him so strongly that he almost fell to his own knees, before the horror welled back up.

It wasn't North.

It was Grace.

Her head lay in America's lap like she was sleeping. But she wasn't. Blood stained the long blonde hair that cascaded over the Countryhuman's legs like a waterfall, and more spotted the white sheet that covered her body. Her blue eyes were wide open, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling, and what looked like bloody claw marks scored across her mouth.

America looked up. South couldn't see his eyes past his aviators, but he sounded stunned as he said, "She fucking killed herself."

South blinked, unable to understand. "What?"

America looked back down at his dead girlfriend. "I woke up with her standing in the middle of the room, holding my pistol to her head. I tried to stop her, but she just…"

South stared at the blood staining her temple. He couldn't see the bullet wound through her thick golden hair, but the spray of blood said, yeah, she'd shot herself.

"Why?" he asked, baffled.

America's aviators were locked on her pale face. “How am I supposed to know?”

“Were there… Were there any signs?” South asked, thinking of the day he’d helped her with the door. “Did you know she was going to-?”

“Don’t you think if I knew I would have stopped her, South?” America demanded, and he flinched.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean- I just can’t believe she’d *do* that.”

Grace had been sick lately, yeah. America said she hadn’t been up to leaving the house. But sick enough to kill herself?

The tension went out of America’s shoulders, and he sighed. “She’s always been a little fucked in the head, kid. Her grandpa crashed the car with her and her grandma in it when she was like, five. She was the only survivor. Then her dad kicked her mom's bucket, then his own. Blew their brains out with a shotgun on a Sunday afternoon. She was the one to find the bodies. If she was an hour earlier, he probably would’ve killed her, too.”

“Jesus Christ.” South was stunned, looking at the dead woman with new eyes.

He’d always thought she was a little ditzy, with nothing in her head but America. He couldn’t have imagined something like that had happened to her.

It gave him a little hope. Maybe even after everything that had happened to him, people could think *he* was normal, too.

*‘Even if **you** know the truth.’*

‘Shut it.’

“Yeah,” America said. “Stuff like that screws a broad up. She was always a little crazy. It ran in her family, clearly. That was why I wanted her in the first place.” He looked down at her as he stroked his hand across her cheek. “But I never thought she’d do something like this. Guess Korea was just too much for her.”

South winced guiltily. As he did, he noticed something on the ceiling. A bullet hole. He frowned.

"Did she just shoot herself in the head?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, South," America snapped, suddenly angry. "Can't you see I've practically got my girl's brains in my lap?"

The Korean flinched. Okay, yeah, that had been kind of insensitive.

"Sorry," he quickly apologized, rubbing his arm. "Do you… want me to do something for her? Like… a funeral or something?"

He didn't know what the protocol was for your friend's girlfriend killing herself in your country.

"Naw, I'll handle it." America's grip tightened on her corpse, then he sighed. "Take this as a lesson, Southie- the hot ones are always a little crazy. This is just the price you gotta pay for a good time."

That was… also a little insensitive. South knew America wasn't a sensitive guy, but he thought he would probably be bawling his eyes out if his girlfriend would rather kill herself than be with him. But he'd never had a girlfriend before, so maybe he wouldn't. You never knew how you'd handle something until you had to.

'Like whipping Gangwon?'

*'**You** should kill yourself, too.'*

And that obviously wasn't why Grace had committed suicide. She'd been with *America,* for God's sake. She'd had even more of his attention than South, and he showered her with presents. South had seen all the jewellery and make-up he bought her that she always covered herself in. She had been courting the strongest country in the world, someone who could give her everything she could ever want, and she'd still killed herself. On his birthday, no less.

South tracked the nail marks over her face, like she'd been trying to claw her skin off.

‘Definitely crazy.’

“Want to skedaddle, Southie?” America prompted. “My girl left me a bit of a mess to find someone to clean up.”

“Oh yeah, sorry.” South lingered for a second. “See you tomorrow?”

“Of course, kid. There’s a roast in the fridge- we can make some sandwiches for lunch, maybe put some syrup on them. Have a little celebration of life for her. No one else will.”

South sagged in relief. From the way he’d been talking earlier when they went to watch the bombings, he was a little worried his friend had wanted to stay in Canada for his birthday. With Canada. But he sounded excited for the sandwiches, and had brought him that really good maple sugar thing.

“Okay, cool.” He turned, then turned back. “Oh, and… sorry about Grace.”

He really was. Even if she’d barely ever even looked at him. She hadn’t deserved to die.

“Yeah,” America said quietly, his fingers sinking into her bruised cheek. “Me too.”

South was glad it was just a crazy broad, not a crazy commie. North was safe. So was America. His brother hadn’t come in on some insane ‘rescue’ mission to try and kill him, and spirit South away.

‘Of course he didn’t. He never came to save you from Japan, did he?’

No. Of course it wasn’t him.

So why did he feel disappointed?

South took one last look at Grace. Her fair skin and golden hair and big blue eyes. She really had been pretty.

He shook his head, heading off down the hall.

And crazy. Because as he looked at her lips, scratched so hard they were a bright, tender pink, stained with blood…

He almost could have sworn she was smiling.

You can’t, you can’t catch me now.

Did Grace try to break the curse by ‘killing’ America, only to fail? Or did she succeed the way she meant to from the start? No one will ever know but America. And he’ll never tell.

She's still buried somewhere in Korea. No one was waiting for her to come home.

Me and You

1924

Despite everything, Hwang had been eager to start teaching. When his proposal had been accepted by Japan, he'd thrown himself into study, learning everything he could as quickly as he could, even knowing he was just supposed to be an assistant. Even after finding out how restricted what the schools were allowed to teach was, he'd simply resolved to use any chances he had to inculcate what he could as thoroughly as possible, hoping he could kindle a desire to learn in his students that would drive them to seek out more diverse topics themselves. On the first day he'd been called in to cover a class, the only anxiety he had felt was anxiousness for the school to open its doors so he could begin.

That had changed towards the later years. As the censorship waxed, his enthusiasm waned. He'd still wanted to teach, but he no longer looked forward to the classes. He knew as he stood in front of the blackboard he would face ridicule and apathy, and for nothing, as he wasn't even able to teach the students how he wanted. They wouldn't want to learn it if he could. The Japanese students' superiority was only reinforced year after year. They looked at him with contempt, the Korean students looked at him with disdain, and they both strove to show that they held less respect for him than the other. Deep down the older Korean children had started to realize that they would never be equal to their peers, so they fought to be even more outwardly devoted to Japan, and even more dismissive of their native country. And its province.

He had kept an eye out for more students like Choi Jung-nam, but as discontentment with the Occupation rose outside, the wealthy students only hunkered down to avoid being lumped in with the malcontents, and to keep the cold, merciless eyes of Japan off them, the way Hwang almost had before extending his extracurricular offer to the boy. Their essays became more rote, and their responses

when asked what they thought of the Occupation rarely strayed from what was acceptable.

Perhaps they might've, had Hwang told them why he was asking-not to affirm their loyalty to Japan, but to sleuth out those with likeminded views that were quite the opposite.

But he hadn't been able to. As far as they knew, he was asking their opinions because *he* was loyal to Japan and wanted to ascertain that they also were. And as far as he knew, they answered the way they did, mocked him the way they did, because they were.

Being ordered to fill in a class became something that made his hands tremble and his stomach twist itself into knots, especially when it was one Choi Jung-nam wasn't in. Going over the coursework changed from being a chance to internalize information he could impart on others to a shield to protect him from some of the students' mind games. The better he knew the work, the less of a chance they had to convince him that he didn't. And when he was learning by mechanically memorizing what the other teachers and textbooks said, it didn't feel much like learning at all.

Something he'd used to love had turned into something he dreaded. The only classes he looked forward to in that final year were the ones he snuck out to with Choi Jung-nam and Suzuki Yoshi.

Since joining Korea, he hadn't felt that way. They'd only started their night classes in this village, as he'd wanted them to attain literacy themselves before teaching anyone, and later added an understanding of theory to that requirement once he got his hands on their works about Marxism. But Hwang hadn't felt any nervousness before the class he'd held here, and if it hadn't been for what happened after, he still wouldn't, even with the less than positive reception.

He could tell that even when his words escaped the peasants, they still paid rapt attention. They held a certain respect for him as one of their Provincehumans, despite his youthful appearance. The working men and women of this village felt nothing but hatred for the country stealing their harvests for his own, and felt no need to

degrade their own nation to prove themselves loyal colonial subjects. They may not understand what he was trying to say, but they listened, all of them, in a way he wasn't used to. It was thrilling.

But tonight, he *was* nervous. Quite nervous indeed.

"Are you sure I shouldn't observe for another day?" he fretted.

"Nope!" Hae said confidently, not lowering her voice.

They were outside the village house that had turned into a permanent nighttime classroom. Hwang winced, knowing her voice would carry through the thin clay and rice straw walls to those waiting inside. He could hear their quiet conversations well enough.

"It might be best," he attempted, gesturing for her to lower her voice (a sign she knew from their close calls with the Kempeitei). "A few more days of watching you speak with them could prove useful."

The night classes were held every night, after the day's work was done, and mostly by Hae. Learning to read was a daily endeavour, and that was the main goal of them. It was just a happy accident that the only writings they had to practice with were their political works, which allowed the provinces to slip in little discussions on the idea of land reform or a society where each person contributed what they could and received what they needed, something his cousins all echoed Korea's enthusiasm for now.

The more classes he'd observed, the more Hwang had to admit that Korea was right- the people here already had a certain intrinsic grasp of Socialist-adjacent ideas. They knew they were the ones who did the hard toil of working the land *(very* hard toil; their unit had been helping with spring planting for a week, and also Hwang was firmly on both North Hamgyong and now- to his great dismay- South Chungcheong's 'shit lists'), and they knew the were the ones who deserved to see the spoils of it. Not Japan and not some landlord. And they could apply those same ideas to the proletariat in the cities easily enough.

Hwang couldn't yet see them as the desired hard core of the Revolution Korea wanted them to be, but he could admit that they weren't *quite* as far below the intellectual class as he'd assumed.

Had that sounded insensitive? He was being careful to moderate the language he used for the people around them, ever since his talk with Hae under the sansuyu tree.

He thought that was okay to say. He *had* assumed they were below the intellectual class on an intellectual level, just like he'd assumed Hae hadn't taken offense over his comments about the peasant class or her illiteracy. Both errors he never should've committed as an intellectual.

At least they weren't fatal. That Hae was trying to coax him inside now was proof of that.

"No more watchin'," Hae declared, lowering her voice as much as she ever did (which wasn't much at all). "You've got'a do what Korea says an' 'learn by essperience.'"

"Perhaps we could finish our catalogue of books first?" he asked meekly.

He'd been doing as planned and rereading every tome and article they'd collected so far, making sure to internalize the information correctly this time. Hae had been helping. Every chance they had to snatch a few minutes of rest in the fields or before dinner, they would sit between the rows or head out to the *cornus officinalis* to read together, him helping her understand the more theoretical concepts and her making sure he could explain those concepts in ways someone of her educational level could make sense of.

It was taking longer than it should have. In a week, they'd only managed to get through Marx's *'The Communist Manifesto'* and *'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,'* neither of which were particularly long works. Even with the limited time they had between working (and Hwang truly understood why most peasants didn't have the time to pick up a book and teach themselves to read now), he still could've finished their collection by himself. But stopping to explain a word to Hae or elaborate on a piece of information and how

European conditions contrasted with theirs ate into their progress.

Hwang had thought he might find it slightly frustrating, the way he had when Hae had been taking forever to learn her characters, but was pleasantly surprised to find that he didn't. In fact, it was far more enjoyable than reading on his own. He got to teach her while learning himself, and didn't just learn from Marx and Engels, but from Hae, too. And the shortcomings in her writing weren't mirrored in studying. Even when she still couldn't read their Korean translations very well, or the untranslated texts at all, once he read a sentence to her, she could repeat it back verbatim, even if she didn't know what it meant. It was his job to explain it so she did, and it was one he found more fulfilling than teaching at the Seoul school had ever been.

But their speed had left him feeling vastly unprepared for hosting his first night class since Korea and Hae had reprimanded him.

"I just think-"

"No thinkin'!" Hae decreed, grabbing him by the thin wrist. "Doin'!"

Before Hwang could protest again, she'd dragged him through the door and in front of half the village.

The chatter cut off as the villagers rose from the floor to greet them.

"Comrade Hwang," the village elder said, bowing. "An' the li'l lady."

The elderly man had become used to using the term 'comrade' to address them, but not Hae's name. Korea didn't approve, but it didn't seem to bother the province.

"Howdy," she chirped. "Hwang's goin' to be teachin' tonight. *An'* he's goin' to make sense this time."

A laugh rippled through the packed room, making Hwang flush. But it wasn't like the cruel laughter of the students at the school. It was more amused than mocking.

"That would be much appreciated," the elder said, stroking his long black beard. "Though I reckon you were makin' enough sense as it were."

The comment had been addressed to Hae, not him. When an old rural patriarch was more willing to listen to a girl than you, that was when you knew you were in dire straits.

"Ah'm still here," Hae assured him, taking Hwang's wrist again and dragging him over to the front of the room. "If Hwang says somethin' that don't make sense, ah can essplain it for ya."

Hwang bit his tongue on correcting her 'don't' right now, knowing it was a speech quirk many of those with the Jeolla dialect shared.

"Yes," he said, clearing his throat. "Hae is here to translate for me, so to speak."

Ironic, considering her grasp of Korean was still so poor. Objectively. He wasn't judging.

He paused as he saw a man pull his cushion out from under himself and set it next to the one already waiting for his sister. There weren't enough in the house to seat everyone, even with some brought from other houses, so most were sitting directly on the raised clay floor, not even ondol flooring. If the village was raided, the Kempeitei would likely go to one of the larger chosonjips first, not this weathered chogajip, giving the night class attendees time to flee, hopefully.

He supposed he'd noticed it before, peripherally, while standing in the corner watching Hae orate, but…

Hwang slid his eyes to peek at the men and scattering of women packed like papers in a filing cabinet in the sparse house.

They all looked worn and exhausted, drained from spending the entire day weeding, planting, conducting repairs, and tending to someone else's land. The villagers were sacrificing their comfort and much-needed rest to attend these classes, some of the women fighting tooth and nail with their husbands to come. One even had

a babe cradled in her arms, rocking him perfunctorily to keep him from waking.

And still, every day someone gave up a cushion for whoever was holding the class. And two of them had given up theirs for him and his sister.

Hwang preferred to stand when lecturing, but he folded his legs under himself and sat on the cushion. He would've insisted the villagers take it, but he knew rejecting hospitality was tantamount to a slight for those with little. He was fairly certain he'd seen Korea come close to getting beaten for trying to turn down dinner one night.

Hae flopped down, legs splayed out, before she peeked at him and copied his pose, shaking her shoulders out as she tried to look like a dignified observer.

Hwang had ran out of paper long ago. The teaching materials the villagers had were homemade pulpy sheets with the fibres visible, and stubs of charcoal saved from the fire. Some of them already had blacks stains on their fingers from practicing on their breaks and before he'd arrived.

And they were all looking at him raptly, just as eager to learn as he was to teach. Despite the lines drawn at the corners of their eyes, there was a light in their earthy depths that he was familiar with from those first years at the high school. He'd seen it in the mirror.

Ah. Maybe that was it.

Aside from Choi Jung-nam and Suzuki Yoshi, most of his students had never looked at him that way. They were the sons of landlords and businessmen, those few that could afford education, and they'd taken it for granted. Waking up early, sitting in class, doing homework, were all inconveniences in their easy lives. Schooling was just an item on the checklist in the life their parents wanted for them.

But to the peasant class, even reading was a right denied to them. Japan purposefully drove the price of paper and pencils up, refusing

to manufacture writing tools in the country, and the landlords worked them too hard for self-study. They didn't take chances to learn for granted because they *couldn't,* even when they knew that learning to be literate wouldn't miraculously provide a new life for them. There were more barriers than literacy between them and a life where they didn't have to slave away in the fields for someone else's sake. But they still wanted to learn how to read and write, even just so they could one day teach their children how to.

They wanted to learn.

With the eyes of the class on him, Hwang lowered his head in a half-bow.

"I'm sorry for any confusion with my teaching style before," he said, aiming for polite, but more like how he was learning to apologize to Hae than to a school board.

And biting his tongue on the excuse that he was used to teaching more learned students. Even if it was objectively true, he felt it would be one of those comments that could hurt.

"It's no trouble," the elderly wife of the village chief (one of the women that had fought to be here) assured him. "We just ain't used to city folks 'round these parts. Seoul dialect is hard to parse, so ta speak."

Ah. Yes. Speaking of, Hwang should really be making an effort to switch back to Hwanghae dialect, now that he wouldn't be mocked for it anymore. He would work on that.

"Thank you for your patience regardless."

He looked sideways at Hae, who beamed encouragingly at him, then straightened his back, pushing his glasses up on his face and summoning his orating voice.

"Let's begin."

Since paper had to be withheld for writing practice instead of sample sentences, they were using *'The Agrarian Programme of Russian Social Democracy,'* which they'd been translating

themselves, Hwang (who had grasped the fundamentals of Russian by now) reading it out loud for Korea so he could copy the words he heard and write them between the Cyrillic lines. His province had offered to do it himself to save his Countryhuman the effort, but he insisted on being the one to scribe.

The villagers passed it around the room, taking turns reading paragraphs out loud, squinting at their Countryhuman's handwriting.

Hwang had seen him practicing it back when their own reading lessons first began, after Gyeonggi had said it was hard to read. He'd accidentally caught him out in the woods pressing charcoal into a boulder, hunched over to see better in the moonlight. And though Korea had quickly moved in front of it, he'd caught a glimpse of the characters he was writing, trying to tame his scratchy handwriting into something more legible with the lyrics of a song Hwang had never heard before, something about a man trying to convince the woman he loved to dance with him, which seemed... uncharacteristic to say the least.

It had been a scandalizing reminder that his Countryhuman had been formed illiterate, and it had also worked. As small as Korea's writing was, crammed in between Lenin's lines, it was still quite easy to read, plain and unstylized. Though Hwang could tell by the way some of the men buried their noses in the thin pamphlet that they needed glasses they couldn't afford.

Whenever they would finish a passage, he would explain what he knew of the conditions in Russia at the time it had been written, and what Lenin intended with it, so that they didn't just understand the words, but what they meant. He made sure to speak slowly, to not let himself get carried away, and to pause if it looked like someone was struggling with comprehension.

He couldn't lecture. He didn't just want them to listen- he wanted then to *understand.*

Occasionally, his mouth would get ahead of him as his mind raced, thinking of the Soviet Union and all they had already accomplished, badly wanting to discuss what he'd heard from the

Soviet traders in the north and travellers in the south, and what Korea could accomplish once they were free from Japan. But Hae was there to nudge him and get him back on track. And when he just couldn't find a way to convey what he wanted to, she was there to explain it in simpler terms. It didn't have to happen often, as Korea was right, and Lenin wrote clearly for his intended audience. But his intended audience in this case had been those with already a modicum of political education. There were also some Russian nuances and references to events and people that even Hwang didn't know about. He'd never actually read the agrarian program Lenin was elaborating on, for example.

'Yet.' They should be turning north once they were done here, after having spent over a year mapping the south. There would be more Soviets and Koreans that had lived in or been to the Soviet Union up in the Hamgyongs, with more books and pamphlets to collect, more ideas to refine.

At first Hwang waited anxiously for Korea to barge in and drag him out again, but gradually he gained more confidence, enough that the class ran long, making it through a good chunk of the article. But no one bowed out. They were too caught up in reading. Even if some didn't care about the words or meaning, they cared that they could understand them.

But he eventually knew it was time to start winding down when Hae's eyelids starting to droop. If even she was tired, the farmers must be as well.

"As you can see, our peasantry differs quite a bit from the Russian peasantry in the early 1900s," Hwang said, coming to a close. "Peasants make up the vast majority of our population, and the ratio of tenants to landlords is even more skewed in our nation. Our own system of 'serfdom' was also abolished far longer ago with the nobi system, and we have our colonial relations to contend with, not solely feudal ones."

"We've got to worry about Japan on top'a the landlords," Hae clarified.

Hwang nodded. "But you share the common conditions of living

in bondage, suffering under the rent system, and living at the mercy of landlords."

He could see by their darkened eyes and clenched jaws that they were well aware of that.

Korea's Socialist revolution was far in the future- they had the Occupation to deal with first. As such, they had to rally every patriotic member of every social class. Hwang had met with several of the minor landlords in the area to do just that. A couple had been quite pleasant. They weren't hugely landed, this village being small and poor. Each one only had a few acres, one or two renters.

Yet if that rent wasn't paid on time, if the summer brought a drought or floods and the harvest was poor, those renters could lose the land they lived on. They and their families would become homeless, doomed to drift until they could either carve a new life out in the city or on another farm, or perished.

It didn't matter how friendly some of the landlords were, or if they felt any neighbourly bond with their renters and wouldn't just evict them. They *could.* Or the sons who inherited the land could evict the sons of the peasants that inherited the rent.

Korean peasants owned little, as the single-room house around them could demonstrate with its sparse collection of kitchenware and threadbare dividing sheet. They didn't truly own their harvests or their houses or their land. During his time at the school, Hwang could say that the only thing he owned was himself, his mind and body. Their peasants couldn't even say that. The only things they owned were their minds. And the ones who owned their bodies made sure they were so worn down that they couldn't even use those to their full potential.

"None of it is right," Hwang told them what they already knew. "And the peasants in the nations under the Russian Empire knew that, too. They've managed to overthrow those who oppressed them, and now the Soviet peasants have claimed the land for themselves with their Decree on Land. We believe we can do something like that for ourselves in Korea, too."

"We can do more," Hae said, puffing our her chest. "'Cuz we're better than any stuffy ol' Soviets."

Hwang hid a wince. That was another quote from Korea that bordered on direct. Best not to share that, though.

"We *can* do more," he did agree, adjusting his glasses as he looked out at the house full of peasants. "But... the Soviet Union has only been able to accomplish what they have because of their peasants. So if Korea is to cast off the chains not just of Japan, but of our own unfair systems..."

He glanced at Hae, then back at his class.

"We're going to need you."

Whether the Soviet peasant-worker uprising was a fluke or not was yet to be seen. But even if it had been, they would need their peasants regardless.

And Hwang was slowly becoming certain that if anyone could recreate a once-in-a-lifetime fluke, it was Korea.

Hae wrapped around his arm, and he could feel her grin light up the room more than the lantern hanging from the ceiling beam. But he kept his eyes on the class.

The villagers looked to their elder to speak for them. He gazed around at them, chewing on nothing, then nodded to himself.

"I reckon you've got us," he said, running his fingers along his beard. "I may be one of the landowners yer talkin' about, but I like to think I'm a fair sort. Nothin' like those land-grabbers comin' in and buyin' everythin' up."

He got a few nods from his neighbours.

"Iffin this carries on, we'll *all* end up tenants."

"To the Japs," another man muttered.

The elder bobbed his head, his old eyes weary. "I ain't never had a

problem with the way things work. But it's about clear that if they carry on like this..."

"We can't," the woman with the babe murmured, her eyes half-lidded with exhaustion in her dust-streaked face.

The old man nodded in resignation, turning back to Hwang. "So your Comrade Korea has us. For whatever a bunch of bent-backed peasants are worth."

"You can't put a price on people," Hae told him, and Hwang agreed, though it wasn't quite true.

You could put a price on people. From the nobi system to the current one, their peasants had always had a price on them. How much they could sell, how much they could make for their masters, how much value their labour could produce. You *shouldn't* be able to put a price on people. But those with far more power had.

They were tasked with removing that price. Or rather, putting their value into their own hands.

"Then I'm glad to call you all comrades." Hwang cleared his throat, attempting a less sober tone. "Now, do you have any questions about what we discussed today?"

To his delight, they did. A few tired men took their leave, but unlike his students back when he'd asked that question, the rest crowded around, voicing theirs, including the woman with a baby.

Hwang thrummed with satisfaction, even as Hae had to occasionally interject to translate for him.

'No, not translate,' he thought, looking around at their faces, glowing despite their weariness, exhausted, but still wanting to learn. It was the wrong word, and he shouldn't have used it earlier.

They all spoke the same language, after all.

Later, as the class ended and they trickled away, he and Hae bid the homeowner a good night and left the house. Even with the moonlight casting a silver glow over it, the village seemed much

darker than inside, until Hae's smile illuminated it as she threw herself at him.

"Ya did it, Hwang!" she cheered, crushing his ribs. "Ah knew ya could!"

"Naturally," he sniffed, adjusting his glasses around her head. "An intellectual can do anything he sets his mind to."

She puffed her cheeks at him, making him smile.

"And I couldn't have done it without your assistance," he admitted.

Her grin consumed the lower half of her face again. "Nope! You should give me your kimchi when we get back."

"Extorter," he accused, before looking out at the small village.

The villagers were meandering off, some only having to walk next door, while others plodded out of the village together, off to their more distant farmhouses. A man with a cowcart pulled up next to a group of them, and they got in.

As he tapped his lash against the ox's broad flank, Hwang could hear those in the back eagerly discussing the night class past yawns. It filled his thin chest with a warm glow.

"I suppose that's the potential Korea sees in you all," he said to Hae, noting that now he was classifying her with the peasants as well. "You don't know anything."

Hae- still plastered to his side- squinted up at him.

"I mean no offense," Hwang said quickly. "I simply mean that intellectuals have received education already, and some of them let themselves think that means they know everything."

Like the students in his old classes. Not even adults, but already convinced there was nothing else of value they could be taught.

"But the people here know they know nothing," he continued, watching the cowcart leave the village. "And they want to."

He knew there were plenty of intellectuals like him that wanted to see them free, and some that would fight for it. But Korea was right that they'd been taught under Japanese and feudal ideals. And it was hard for someone to unlearn something they'd been taught. Often they would actively reject it, refusing to intake anything new.

But if you had never received an education, like the majority of their peasants, you had less to unlearn. Their peasant class had learned by experience only. And it had taught them that life shouldn't have to be this way, short and hard and miserable.

Hwang wanted to apologize for his rigidity before, and any of his unintentionally unkind comments. But he knew it could reflect on Korea poorly if the villagers knew one of his provinces held biases like that. So he would just work on unlearning them himself, and continuing to learn.

And to help Korea make sure their lives wouldn't always have to be this way.

"They want to learn," he murmured.

"Okay!" Hae said enthusiastically. "That's good! Ayuh?"

"'Ayuh,'" he made himself echo.

She saw the way his face scrunched, and pouted. "You don't like my words."

"I do," he corrected sheepishly. "That one just isn't for me. But your words were very helpful tonight."

Hae considered this, then nodded decisively, tilting her chin up. "Prob'ly 'cuz they make more sense than yours."

Hwang sighed.

"Don't worry," she assured him, skipping towards the earthen todam wall around the house. "Ah'll give Hwang lots more words. An' you can teach me yours."

"I'm looking forward to it," Hwang padded after her. "Once we get

rid of your atrocious Japanese accent."

"Mah accent isn't at- atroc- at-ro-sh-i-oos." Hae hung her head. "Danggit."

Hwang smiled. "I'll teach you that, too."

As they started down the road towards the village chief's house, there was a noise from behind them. He looked over, seeing Korea emerge from the darkness behind the chogajip.

'Eavesdropping again.'

Hae immediately started to vibrate. "Korea!"

She threw herself at him, her forehead slamming into his palm before she could slam into him. It didn't stop her, her legs churning as he held her back with one hand.

Ever since she'd recovered from her imprisonment, their Countryhuman had been more stringent with the 'no hugging' rule. This dissuaded her not at all.

As Hae finally bounced back, she asked, "Did ah do a good job, Korea?"

"You ask me this after every class," Korea complained, walking by her. "The answer doesn't change."

She pouted, but said, "What about Hwang? He's been workin' real hard, an' everyone understood him tonight. You should tell him he did a good job."

"Why should I congratulate him for correcting an attitude he shouldn't have had in the first place?" Korea asked coolly.

"I need no congratulations," Hwang said quickly. "You're quite right- I allowed myself to fall into prejudices I shouldn't have."

He didn't want to be like those who thought they already knew everything. He was a true intellectual, a Marxist. He knew if Marx himself had lived to see the Bolshevik Revolution, he would've

changed his own opinions, so he couldn't cling to his. Dogmatism was the death of revolution.

Hae pouted up at Korea, sagging against his arm with a sound like someone had inflated a pig intestine with air, then jabbed a needle into it.

Their Countryhuman sighed. "You both did well," he grudgingly praised.

"Ura!" Hae shot up with a cheer that echoed over the village. "Didja hear that, Hwang? Korea says we did a good job!"

He was already polishing his glasses, vigorously.

"Shh!" Korea sharply hushed her. "People are trying to *sleep."*

"Oops," Hae whispered. "Ah mean 'Ura, Korea says we did a good job.'"

Hwang shook his head, bemused.

"We're leaving in two days," Korea suddenly announced, not looking back as he strode off. "This village has awakened. South Hamgyong, South Chungcheong, and I have written out copies of our books for the people here. Now that they know the basics, they should be able to teach themselves the rest."

Hwang felt a pang of sadness. Even when he hadn't connected as well with the peasants as his sister had, it had been nice to stay in one place for awhile. He loved travelling and seeing all the sights of their country as they mapped it, but he'd also enjoyed getting to know the people here, and learning how they lived their lives. And clearly that experience had been even more valuable.

But he didn't protest. The Kempeitei were always on their trail. They couldn't let it lead them here.

"But plantin' season's not over yet," Hae protested.

"They've worked this land with their own hands for decades," Korea said. "They'll be fine. We need to work to make sure it's *their*

land they're planting. And we've stayed too long."

He looked out across the plains beyond the village, like he could see Japanese soldiers somewhere beyond the darkened horizon.

"We'll go north," he told them. "We'll stop in Seoul, then head up to finish mapping South Pyongan and work our way northeast, then down to the Amnok."

Hwang blinked in surprise. "Seoul? Are we visiting Suzuki Yoshi?"

He'd like to. He hadn't seen her since the mission to retrieve South Chungcheong. He wanted to know if she had heard from Choi Jung-nam at all, and find out if he'd left for Japan.

If he had, it meant he had been there for the Kanto Carnage last year.

"I'll see if that contact she gave us can find out if she has any news for us," Korea clipped, not looking back.

Hwang frowned.

"We'll scout what we can of Bukhan Mountain while moving through," the other boy continued. "Try to make up for a full survey near the capital being too risky."

Hae perked up. "Ah get to see Seoul?"

"From a distance," Korea replied. "It's too dangerous for you to head into the city."

But not him, evidently.

"Korea," Hwang tried. "What do you need to do there?"

"Try and get in contact with your... student."

It was nice that he'd made an effort not to call her 'your Jap,' but Hwang was still curious. The way he'd said it before made it sound like that wasn't his main goal.

But Hae was already chattering enthusiastically about finally seeing their capital, eating up any silence he could've asked questions into.

She went on to tell Korea every little thing that had transpired in the night class, though it was quite obvious he'd heard it all. Still, he didn't tell her to shut up until they reached the chosonjip, and he went to talk with the old village chief smoking on his stoop.

"We made a good team today," Hwang said, inhaling the scent of tobacco.

"Ayuh." Hae nodded vigorously. "Hwang an' Hae are the best teachers ever!"

They really did cover each other's shortcomings.

"I suppose it makes sense we work well together," he said idly, fingers itching for his pipe. "We're supposed to be one person, after all. We will be after the literacy gap closes, most likely."

It had taken awhile for Hae to understand that they were going to be one person someday, once the root problem causing two of them to form was solved. Truthfully it had taken Hwang some time to wrap his head around it as well. He hadn't known there were two Hwanghaes. In his mind, and in all his predictions of the future after Japan was gone and their country was free, he would always be himself.

He knew now that wasn't true.

"Mhm," Hae said, more subdued.

Hwang pushed the thought away. It still troubled him, but there wasn't anything to be done for it. All he could do was- All *they* could do was educate *each other* so that when it came, the merge would be seamless.

"Hwang." Hae caught his sleeve before he could go attempt to wheedle tobacco off the elder.

"Yes?"

She looked at him as close to seriously as her round face could get. "Ah don't think you're like those in-tell-ec-tu-als that think they know everythin' an' don't got'a learn nomore. You're doin' a real good job at learnin' how to make sense. An' how to be my brother."

Hwang's heart squeezed, and he reached over to hold the hand clutching his sleeve. "Thank you," he said, touched.

Hae smiled.

"But it's 'anymore.'"

"Mrgh!" She slapped him on the chest. But her pout was hiding another big grin.

Her brother smiled fondly, looking up. Korea met his eyes from the stoop, giving him a single nod.

Hwang felt a flush of accomplishment, though he didn't let himself think it was the accomplishment of success. There was no 'success' with learning, no final stop. It was an unending road, one he hoped to have all their people walking someday, alongside him.

And he would look forward to every step.

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1952

"Thank you for the help, Comrades Hwang and Hae." The factory manager dipped his head to them.

"Thank *you* for your efforts," Hwang's said, returning the head bow and watching the man incline himself so his was slightly deeper.

Unlike Korea, he had no desire to stifle the instinctive expression of gratitude and respect, so he let it stand. Even though his brows crinkled at the look of pain on the man's face.

"And thanks for lettin' me spin your big fan," Hae said happily.

Hwang had to look away from her. They were at the new location

of the Hwanghae Ironworks, an essential factory whose production was incredibly hampered by the blackout. In order to keep the conveyor belts with the raw ore on them moving, and the cupola of molten iron turning, they had to spin the fans by hand, an incredibly arduous task.

One his sister was *very* enthusiastic about. Unlike him, she enjoyed repetitive tasks that didn't require much thought. She'd been turning one of the fans for nearly the entire two hours they'd been at the factory, and was covered head to toe in grime. Her hands were smeared with it, and her habit of mopping her brow with her arm, combined with the powder dust that had been floating in the air, had left her bandages and flag streaked with dirt, only two circles around her large white eyes saved by the protective eyewear she'd been wearing.

But there were still burns there, red and black and creeping out of the dressings.
Even when the Chaeryong Power Station in their province had been spared any new damage, Hwanghae's transformers had been utterly destroyed.

"It's our honour, Comrade Hae," the manager said, bowing to her. "Would you like to use our bathhouse...?"

"Ah'm alright," she assured him. "We've got information work to do."

Hwang checked his thin watch. "And we're due in an hour."

"We'll let you get to it then."

There was a weariness in the manager's brown eyes, one mirrored in his coworkers as he trudged back over to them, his back slightly bent as he tried to mask his pain in a way that was all too familiar to Hwang.

Before they could leave, Hae squared her shoulders and braced her hands behind her back in as she called for their attention again.

"We're real proud of how hard you're all workin', comrades," she

told the group seriously. "Ah know it's real tough operatin' everythin' by hand."

Indeed, all the workers in Songnim looked far more exhausted than they had when they visited previously, and far more dirtied.

They'd been fighting hard to mechanize their production so that their labourers would no longer have to carry heavy loads on their backs and expend all their energy at work, leaving them unable to study or enjoy their personal lives. But the blackout had practically sent them back to just after Liberation.

"That's why you need to make sure your procure those pushcarts," he said to the woman that led the ironworks' Party cell. "Your pig iron is essential for our steelworks to increase our military production, not to mention daily necessities. But we can't let the enemy reduce our workers' conditions to those we had under Japan."

"We'll make sure our comrades have what they need," the woman said determinedly, her filthy fist over her heart.

She couldn't force their suppliers to conjure pushcarts out of thin air, but Hwang was convinced she wasn't one of those that would pay lip service to the idea, then not take any concrete action towards it. The Party organization here had been taking too much command of production before the war, instead of helping the manager play his full role, but had rectified their mistakes after being criticized. And while membership had been cut drastically by the massacres during the tactical retreat, and was now swelled with new members, the Hwanghae Ironworks cell had been remaining dedicated to the Party line. She would try, at least. For what good it was worth.

"Excellent," he said to her. "And our comrades will work on restoring power."

Not that that would truly help. Their original plant had been utterly devastated, all of their blast furnaces and coking ovens destroyed. They hadn't had even a quarter of it restored in this hilly ravine. Even before the power went out, there were too many tasks

being done by hand.

"Until then, keep workin' hard," Hae ordered. "If you encounter any difficulties, ah know you can overcome 'em by workin' together. And if you can't, send a letter to me or Hwang, and we'll see if we can."

Right. They weren't truly back to those days after Liberation, with their country in shambles. Their workers had more protections and rights, and finally owned what they made, whether directly or through the State. They had the Worker's Party cells to guide and organize them.

And they had them. Even if Hwang felt all too small in the face of it all.

Hae stopped imitating Korea, putting her hands on her hips as she beamed at their exhausted comrades. "Korea's real proud of y'all. So keep up the good work!"

The factory manager's lip quivered slightly, and his spine unbent as he raised his hand to his brow in a salute, the rest of the workers mimicking them. Though they weren't military, Hwang and Hae saluted back, and they filed back into the dark factory, already discussing how to implement the changes for adapting to the blackout the provinces had discussed with them.

That was the most important thing they had now. Their workers weren't simply going to work to make money to try and survive, each one dwelling inside himself until his shift ended. They were working for the survival of their country, and they were working together.

Hwang took a single deep breath of the summer air, his ribs crackling as the skin across them stretched painfully. Then he exhaled, ridding his lungs of the choking miasma from the factory.

He could see Hae doing the same, more greedily. She didn’t like the claustrophobic underground factories, though she never hesitated to enter with the eyes of their workers on her. It was even worse with the dim bulbs on the ceilings no longer lighting the way.

Mind cleared, Hwang started briskly for Songnim proper, skimming his report for their next task. "Your work with the fan was excellent," he told his sister. "Hopefully it will convince the men to let women take more active roles."

Women nearly outnumbered men in the factory now, but some of the latter wanted to spare the former from more physical tasks. But while spinning a fan was physically exhausting, it *was* doable for a woman that didn't have much muscle mass, unlike some of the more strenuous jobs. 'Sparing' the women from the tasks they were capable of would just leave them idle or doing busywork, while the men neglected work their musculature was needed for, which was entirely unacceptable for fighting a protracted war.

"That's what ah was thinkin'," Hae said proudly, skipping down the road. "SH said to make sure all the women were gettin' involved how they should."

Hwang watched dust puff off her white (grey) skin every time her heels met the ground. "Are you sure you don't want to bathe?"

"Nope!" Hae cheerily reaffirmed. "If everyone sees me all dusty, they'll know we're workin' just as hard as them."

"You look like a coal miner."

"And coal miners are hard-workin'!"

Hwang shook his head as they cleared the hills, what was left of Songnim coming into sight. He could see the ruins of the proper Hwanghae Ironworks spread next to the Taedong River. None of the blast furnaces remained, but one had crumbled in a way that left it half-standing, the titanic structure of blackened metal pipes and charred scaffolding twisted together like interlaced ribs.

Blast Furnace Number 3, the first one they'd restored after the Japanese had razed the plant to the ground on their flight from Korea. It had taken two years to repair it, fighting against enemy sabotage and their lack of engineers and technicians. Now far more of their factories were gone, reduced to rubble in a way even Japan hadn't been able to accomplish.

It was hard not to view the destruction of the Supung Power Station as a temporary thing, another issue their workers would resolve in a few days' time, as with their rail and train repairs. But the truth was...

Hae followed his gaze, her own hardening slightly as she stared at the skeletal factory.

"Hwang," she said quietly. "Do you think everyone we met in there was good?"

She was thinking of the sabotage they'd faced during the rebuilding, too. He'd disliked seeing the look of shock and disbelief that would cross her face every time they were told about it back then, but now... He wished it would return. He despised that this new look wasn't foreign anymore.

"There's no way of knowing," he told her, adjusting his glasses.

There were thousands of workers at the Hwanghae Ironworks, even with its reduced size. Statistically speaking, there were probably at least a handful of those that wouldn't mind seeing the destruction of everything they'd worked for. He knew he didn't need to tell his sister that, though.

"But I'd like to think that everyone we spoke with personally today was." He tried to sound confident.

"But they could not be. They could be evil."

Hwang once again bit down on telling her there wasn't truly such a thing. Her gaze had moved past the factory now, over the Taedong and southwest across the plains, towards Sincheon.

"They could be infiltrators," he admitted. "All we can do is make sure our Party organs are conducting proper ideological work and intensifying the struggle against reactionary elements."

Hae nodded wordlessly, tearing her eyes away from horizon.

Part of that struggle was making sure their people were keenly aware of every decision the State and Worker's Party made, and all

their policies. The basis of making their country truly democratic was connecting their masses with those governing them, not alienating them from their system the way capitalism did. Their democratic publicity halls played a great role in that. They were where many discussions on candidates for their elections had been held, along with explanations of their policies to the voters. They were hubs for disseminating advanced farming techniques to peasants, motivating them and their workers to increase production, and reinforcing support for the front. They were, as the Premier had said in his address to the Party Organization Committee a few days ago, their base for mass education.

Hwang, as one of those who'd been responsible for workshopping and organizing them, was quite proud of that. But like all things, they could be improved, as had also been ordered at the meeting of the Organization Committee (and wasn't it strange to see South Pyongan at *that,* especially when she hadn't told any of them she was a card-carrying member now until she'd taken her seat next to him, smirking).

The publicity hall in Songnim was ran by Oh Pan-jin, a peasant from a nearby farm. They met her at her facilities- a long, low hall rebuilt outside the demolished city center- while she explained to them how she was managing it.

"Ah know it's a bit sloppy," the middle-aged woman sighed when they were done, standing next to the main doors. "Ah'm only a part-time chief- ah spend the rest of the day in the field."

"Important work," Hwang assured her. "Naturally the full-time chiefs have more time it devote to running their halls, and don't need to worry about coordination. But the democratic publicity hall is the base of democracy. We can't allow it to be run in a lacklustre manner."

"We're not sayin' a new chief's goin' to be set up," Hae interjected, letting him know he'd been a bit too blunt. "We're just here to help you figure out how to run it..."

"More smoothly," Hwang said, saving her from having to say 'better.'

"Ah really want to," the peasant woman sighed, slumping onto one of the plain wooden benches lining the hall. "Ah've always wanted to be a teacher, but ah can't just abandon the farm. Ah thought ah could have my tteok an' eat it too with this."

"If you have the tteok, why can't ya eat it?" Hae asked curiously.

Oh Pan-jin didn't realize she was questioning the expression, not matching it. "Ah've got my kids. Even when ah'm done workin', ah've got to get them fed an' taken care of. And it's hard to meet up with Comrade Yun- he's the other part-time chief- to set up lectures an' such when ah've got the rascals clingin' to my skirts, let alone attend them."

Hae frowned, and Hwang pondered the conundrum.

That was the case with many of the publicity halls. Most of the men were gone, leaving only the women to run them. On one hand, you had men in local organs that tolerated several mediocre male part-timers instead of appointing one good female chief, and on the other, you had female chiefs that could run their halls well, but had home responsibilities to deal with.

"Ah do understand if you have to appoint another chief." Oh Pan-jin was trying to appear professional, but Hwang could see the flicker of dismay the idea brought her.

He disliked the idea of someone that genuinely wanted to educate being turned away from it, but they couldn't sabotage the functioning of a democratic publicity hall, especially in a factory town like Songnim, just for someone's dream.

"How old are your kids?" Hae asked, plunking down next to her on the bench.

"Three and five," the woman replied. "Ah had an eldest, but..." Her hands balled in her white skirts.

Songnim had been hit hard early on in the war as the Americans sought to destroy their ironworks. Its neighbouring Hwangju had been razed almost completely, along with the villages and farms

between them. The Hwanghaes already had the burns by the time they'd reached the Raktong.

That was to say, Hwang didn't need to ask what had happened.

Hae leaned into her, but her voice didn't dull. "That's plenty old enough to bring 'em with you."

The woman looked a bit scandalized. "Ah couldn't bring them to a lecture! My Bong-tak's a crier. If he interrupted, ah'd be embarrassed enough to pitch a fit."

"No, Comrade Hae has a point." Hwang quickly rifled though his mental filing cabinet. "A few of the halls in the more isolated villages have set aside spaces for the peasant women with children to care for. You certainly have the room to do that here. And I'm certain you could find someone to observe them."

Hae nodded vigorously. "And if there's childcare, more women with kids'll want to come, too. Then you've just got'a find people to help out when you're workin'. Songnim's still got lots of folks left around, so ah bet you can find more women to help out part-time."

"There are a few girls that want to help," the older woman said, fiddling with her goreum. "But ah think they need more study first."

"Is their political level high?" Hwang inquired.

"Mm. But their intellectual one is a little behind."

"That's fine," he assured her. "It's not as if you're asking them to be lecturers. So long as they have a correct understanding of our People's Democracy, their other levels can be raised while they work."

Hae beamed up at him. "Ayuh."

"But is it really okay to have women come here just for childcare?" Oh Pan-jin fretted.

"Of course," Hwang said, examining his report. "That plays into the other item you need to improve here. You're holding a satisfactory

amount of lectures and meetings, but those aren't enough- you need to increase the entertainment value of the hall."

The woman's thick brows furrowed. "The comrade who inspected my work before told me that, but ah don't really understand. Aren't we supposed to be teachin' here?"

"Ayuh," Hae said. "But that can't be *all* you're doin'."

Hwang nodded. "If you simply invite lecturers to teach classes, the only ones who show up will be those who already want to learn. But if you invite war veterans or soldiers from the nearby units, or singers or teachers–"

"Or older peasants with stories to tell," Hae added.

"-you'll attract a wider audience."

"But doesn't everyone want to learn?" Oh Pan-jin asked, perplexed.

Hwang wished it were so.

"Some of them aren't aware they wish to learn," he told her. "It's the task of the democratic publicity halls to make them see that they do."

"If you get lots of books an' paint an' stuff, people will want to come," Hae said, kicking her heels. "Then you just teach 'em while they're havin' fun."

"You lure them in with supplies and experiences that are difficult to procure at home right now, give them a place to spend their free time with a background of Socialist instruction, and before they know it, they'll be learning regardless," Hwang explained, pushing his glasses up. "A school dog can recite a poem after three years."

"Except 'lure' makes it sound scary." Hae eyed him, and he coughed. "You're just givin' folks a place to be, and talkin' while they're there. Like church, but better."

That was how the Premier had described it, drawing on his background coming from a Protestant family. Many people hadn't

started attending church because they were devout Christians- they'd been driven there to get a taste of music, or for housewives to experience community they wouldn't otherwise be able to. They just became religious by rote after being exposed to the ideas for so long. Ideally, the democratic publicity halls should operate like this, but far more usefully, as they were making sure rural citizens stayed informed, and teaching political theory and production methods instead of scripture. And here, once they learned by rote, they would be driven to learn for real.

Oh Pan-jin considered this, and the light slowly dawned in her eyes again. "So get some of the locals girls to help out, arrange for childcare here, and find some supplies an' entertainment. Ayuh, ah think that could work. Ah'll definitely still need Comrade Yun's help, but ah think ah could manage my share much smoother."

"I think Hae could find you your first storyteller," Hwang said, looking to her. "Is Ms. Kim Myeong-sil still well?"

Hae lit up. "Ayuh! She used to work at the Pyongwon Rubber Factory," she told Oh Pan-jin. "She was part'a the big strike when she was young, and she doesn't live too far from here now. She used to know Kang Ju-ryong."

She was a worker at the factory that had climbed onto the roof of the historic Ulmil Pavilion (now destroyed by bombing) to protest against the wage cuts female workers were receiving, until police had knocked her down against her will. Her and her fellow workers had later gone on to hunger strike, and even more impactfully, forcibly prevent anyone from breaking the working strike. She'd been arrested for joining a Socialist labour union, and died after being released from prison.

"Ah've heard'a her," Oh Pan-jin enthused. "Ah'm sure if Ms. Kim knew her, folks would come to hear what she had to say."

"You should arrange for a soldier or two to speak as well," Hwang suggested again. "War stories will bring in more young men, and demonstrate how ardently our People's Army is repelling the enemy."

"You should get a PVA soldier to come, too," Hae said unexpectedly. "Ah bet if you ask one of the units around real nice, they'll send someone."

Hwang raised an eyebrow at her, and she crossed her arms proudly.

"The Chinese are workin' real hard to help us. The more people that know that, the more they'll help their soldiers out how they help ours."

Her slightly furrowed brows asked, *'Do ya think Korea'll be okay with that?'*

"A good idea," Hwang replied out loud. "If they talk about their experience with their own Japanese occupation, and in this war, our peasants will realize how closely our countries are linked."

Now *that* Korea wouldn't like. The wording, that was. Well, possibly all of it.

"They'll be even more willing to render assistance." There were mostly Chinese units manning the Hwanghae sector of the front, so the deeper the camaraderie that ran between them and the peasants and other civilians along the supply line, the better.

"And ah'm sure people would want to come see a foreign soldier," Hae added.

Hwang twitched an eyebrow at her this time. *'So long as they bring candy, yes?'*

His sister tilted her chin.

"That could be good." Oh Pan-jin stood up like she didn't realize she was doing it. "Ah know a few more people ah could invite, too."

"Don't rush it," Hwang advised. "Make sure you have a solid foundation for what you build on it."

"A'course, a'course, ah'll start local before ah spread out." Oh Pan-jin was deep in thought, already heading for the door. "Ah bet ah

can talk to Miss Pak today, and she'll jump to help out. If ah don't have to worry about intellectual level, ah can get-"

She whirled around just as her hand touched the door, dipping into a deep bow.

"Oh, pardon me, Comrade Hwanghaes. Is it okay if ah take my leave? Ah've got work to do."

Hwang dipped his head. "Get to it. And good luck teaching, Comrade Oh Pan-jin."

Her smile deepened her wrinkles. "The next time the Party sends someone, ah'll have this place runnin' like water."

With that, she darted off, running herself, Hwang could see before the wooden door closed after her.

"Ura!" Hae cheered when they were alone, jumping up. "Another problem solved!"

"Not solved," Hwang corrected. "Another problem course-corrected. We'll see how she does."

Hae stuck her lower lip out.

He sighed. "But I believe we did a good job."

He was certain Oh Pan-jin had the drive to succeed. It wasn't the teaching she had trouble with, only finding a way out of her own problems. They'd given her a helping hand with that, and freed her up to start solving those of the the publicity hall's.

His sister grinned, attaching herself to his side as he tried to hobble for the exit. "Hae and Hwang make the best team," she sing-songed.

"That we do," he said, then paused before they could leave.

He looked down at his sister. The hall was dim, the electricity obviously off, but he could see fine with the late afternoon light filtering through the high windows. She tipped her head up at him.

"Hae," he began awkwardly. "Do you... remember what I said to you when you were in your recuperative coma? Did you hear it?"

She had said those words to him, but he didn't know how conscious she'd been. Or if she heard everything.

Hae let go of him to clasp her hands at her waist, looking down.

"'Ah want to be warm like you,'" she murmured. "'But ah don't want to be merged with you.'"

He wondered if that meant she'd heard what he said about Choi Jung-nam as well. For safety's sake, he wouldn't ask, though his family was safe in the Soviet Union by now.

Hwang bit his lip, pushing his glasses up, feeling them scrape against his burnt skin. "You... feel the same way, don't you?"

His sister had frequently said she did. She'd wanted to say it that day in the hospital. But she heard the weight in his voice and didn't answer immediately this time. She looked down at her boots for a long while, then raised her head, nodding.

"Ah want to be more like you, too," she told him, dust motes swirling by her bandaged face. "But ah want to be *me.* Ah don't... Ah don't want to not be me." Her eyes dropped, her knuckles tightening around each other. "And ah don't..."

"I don't want to lose you."

It wasn't about whether they would be better as one person or not, whether they would function more proficiently or fix each other's shortcomings. It wasn't even about himself, even though he didn't want to not be him, either. He didn't want steamed three-grains to stop being his favourite food, he didn't want classical Western string music to become 'borin" to him, he didn't want to lose the ability to stare at a book for hours. Even if he and Hae shared the core qualities that mattered- a love of learning, a desire to teach, boundless curiosity and love for their people, he didn't want to lose those little unimportant things he enjoyed. He didn't even want to lose his glasses.

But even more than that, he didn't want to lose *her*. He didn't want to live in a world without his sunbeam of a sister in it, even if his sister was still in him.

Hae's eyes glistened in the light as she nodded mutely. "Ah don't want to lose you, either. And ah don't want ta lose the others. Or..."

The way their cousins treated them would change if they merged, just like the way they treated North and South Kangwon had changed since they split. They would still be family, still love them, but it would be different. Even more different than the Kangwons. The way South Pyongan 'bullied' him, the jabs he exchanged with North Hamgyong as they smoked, discussing history with South Chungcheong were all things he didn't want to lose. He knew Hae had plenty of the same.

And he couldn't lose the way Korea stared seriously at him as he explained something from history or a theoretical concept he couldn't quite grasp, drinking in his answer even though he hadn't wanted to ask and Hwang wasn't allowed to tell anyone he had, just as he couldn't afford to lose Hae sneaking into his room and curling up against his side with all his blankets.

Change was good. Society couldn't progress without it. Hwang loved change, tracking patterns, analyzing what brought it about, what it would lead to.

But he didn't want his relationship with his family to change. He didn't want his sister to change. *He* didn't want to change. Not like this.

He laid a hand on Hae's shoulder, letting her know he understood what she'd been going to say.

"I think..." He drew in a breath. "I think we should tell Korea to separate our province."

"Ah already asked if he would," Hae glumly reminded him. "And you know he doesn't like when we bug him about stuff over an' over."

No, he didn't.

"He's goin' to make us our own provinces," she said, trying to perk up. "Ah know it. He said he'd make the right decision."

And merging them couldn't possibly be right.

Hwang didn't think it was. Hwanghae was large, large enough that leaving it whole didn't lend itself well to administration. Kangwon and Gangwon had said Korea planned to leave them apart for that very reason. And even if the Hwanghaes would be far more efficient as one person, he felt like the convenience of having an extra set of hands outweighed that, considering they were both efficient in their own fields. Surely it was better to have one person who could till an entire field in one day and one who could get an entire essay for a magazine written and edited in that same time than to have one person who could do both equally well, but only had the time to do one. When you looked at it logically, the case that it was better for their country to make the division of Hwanghae official was a sound one. But...

The more Korea rejected what they had to say about his brother, the more he denied that he'd been the one responsible for cutting out his eye, and the more he doubled down on refusing to discuss what had happened to the provinces in the holding camp under the South's purview, and what he had been letting happen to their people...

Their Countryhuman liked to pretend he made decisions solely based on logic. But that wasn't true. It was why Hwang hadn't told him about Hae and Sincheon on the strategic retreat, and why he still wouldn't if it happened again, criticism be damned. Staying in Seoul hadn't been logical. Neither had visiting it all those times during the Occupation or heading to Chorweon or storming Seodaemun or going after Japan on his own or withholding the South’s existence from them for over a decade. And sometimes that was fine. 'Logic' didn't always win wars or save people- emotion did.

But as more time went by, the more Hwang worried that he would make *this* decision with emotion. And not the one he felt letting Hwang talk his ear slits off or Hae crawl into his futon.

"I don't think we should ask him again," he said to his sister. "I think we should *tell* him that we want to be our own provinces."

Hae's eyes widened. "What if he says no?"

"Then we argue." Hwang shoved his glasses back into place. "But he won't be able to. We'll gather our proof, present our reasoning, and he'll have to accept it."

And if he didn't, he would have to accept *why* he didn't. He couldn't pretend it was simply logical.

“Well go to the Premier if we have to.” Even if he left the Provincehumans personally to Korea, surely he would step in for their province's sake.

He was prepared for Hae to say she didn't want to argue with their Countryhuman, but she just wiggled her shoulders, then nodded.

"Okay," she said determinedly. "But what's our proof?"

Hwang was tempted to wage psychological warfare by telling her to get him to let her sleep in his room every night, but Korea could be touchy. There was a very good chance that if he thought he was being seen as too affectionate towards Hae, he would merge them just to prove he wasn't. It was the same reason he couldn't simply feel content letting Hae's wide eyes and gap-toothed existence do the convincing for them.

Plus he couldn't see him letting her in to cuddle when China was there.

"Aside from our current catalogue of accomplishments, including today's," he began. "The Information and Publicity Department needs to get those short-term training courses for rural committees, chiefs, and chairmen ready by winter. They need to be clear and free of jargon to match their current intellectual level."

Hae brightened. "So you're goin' to need my words."

"As always," he said without shame. "We'll work vigorously on it,

make it as comprehensive and clear as possible, and get much more work done in the meantime, work that couldn't be accomplished by just one person. And *I-"* He proudly adjusted his lapels. "Will write a persuasive essay."

Hae puffed out her cheeks. "Hwang just wants to write an essay."

"For a good cause." He wrung his hands, blisters popping. "Do you approve?"

His sister kept her cheeks inflated, then blew out a puff of air, nodding. "Ayuh. *Ah* know Korea's goin' to make the right decision, but..." She brightened. "If we make the right decision first, maybe he'll be proud of us!"

'Whichever thought process helps.'

"Then it's agreed. We demand that Korea divides our province."

They locked eyes, and for a second, the look in hers didn't quite match her expression.

He wondered if feeling this way felt like a betrayal to Korea for her, too.

He held out his hand to clasp her forearm, but Hae bypassed it to wrap her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. He felt her squeeze his ribs like she was about to lift him, but his boots stayed on the floor. She still hadn't regained all her strength from dy- her illness. She wouldn't unless the war was won and they had enough to eat.

Hwang's hands didn't flutter. He knew how to hug his sister by now. He rested them on her back, careful not to disturb the burns he could feel radiating heat under her uniform, and leaned into her, the throbbing in his skin easing, but not as much as the ache.

It would be strange not to feel it anymore. But entirely worth it, so long as he still had his sister to hug.

"Ah'll help ya with the *Peasant Newspaper* an' *Political Knowledge,* too." Her words were muffled by his tunic. "The next issues'll be

done before the short course stuff, and Comrade Pan-jin can keep copies here."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Something that had never changed was that if a hug from Hae had to end, you had to back away first. But this time she did, slightly.

"Hwang, do you think..." She didn't meet his eyes as she asked the question, her voice lowered like it was a shameful one. "Korea ever thinks about not Reunifyin' with the Southern One?"

Hwang stiffened slightly. "...He has to," he said after a moment. "Our country isn't like our province. It can't remain Divided."

"Ah know." Hae was almost muttering now. "Ah don't want it to. Ah meant..."

She trailed off, eyes still fixed on the floor, hunching like she was going to be scolded by Korea. She didn't finish her thought, but she didn't need to.

"No," he said to her, just as quiet. "I don't think he ever does think about it."

That was what worried him.

Hae nodded, her hands clasped together again.

"And that's good," Hwang said louder, wanting to steer her away from the topic. "We don't know why there are two Koreas, so we don't know what would happen if one were allowed to fade away or- Ahem."

According to Korea's grudging answer, both he and his brother had been equally illiterate at formation, and had no great differences in common sense. Whatever had created two of them, Hwang suspected it was different than what had formed he and his sister.

"There ain't two Koreas," Hae said defiantly, looking him in the eyes again. "There's only *one* Korea an' he's *ours."*

"That will be true soon." He smoothly pivoted to, "Let's set out. We have a few more places to visit before Haeju, and we need to get back by the 7th for the meeting of the Political Committee."

Hae's head dipped, but when it came back up, she had a smile on her face again. "Ayuh! Ah want to take Comrade Pong-ju to see his sister, too. He's worried about how she's takin' the blackout."

Hwang assured her they could do that, and she asked, "Could we visit Kaesong, too? Ah want to see how the kids are doin'."

"I already asked Korea," Hwang admitted, making his sister puff her chest out.

"See? Hwang's worried about the kids 'Merica hurt," she said almost proudly. "Plenty warm."

The words- fully lucid now- touched him a little more than he'd like to admit, and he quickly removed his glasses to clean them.

"Yes, well," he coughed. "He said it's too close to the front. He wants us to wait until he can accompany us."

And with their current problems, it might be awhile.

Hae pouted, but only briefly. "That's okay. Korea says the war's goin' to be over soon. Then we can visit all we want without botherin' him."

Hwang's smile didn't stay on his face long. He gently steered her out of the publicity hall, switching the topic to the factories they still had to visit to assess for how they were dealing with the blackout, even farther away from the topic of merging and Reunifying.

He didn't want the same possibility that had been plaguing him since last year to haunt his sister. Not when she carried such strong negative feelings towards the South, and such great love for Korea. He would've been surprised she hadn't already asked him about it, if the thought hadn't even flickered across his mind until Kangwon brought it up at the secret vote, despite their parallels.

Unlike them, the Koreas' merge was something that had to happen. There was no argument against it that wouldn't also come from a place of emotion. Even some of the logical ones brought up by North Hamgyong at the vote could be countered by the simple fact that had helped decide how Hwang had cast both of his- they didn't know what would happen if they lost one of the Korean Countryhumans. Whichever natural laws governed them didn't care if the provinces only saw one Korea, and didn't want to lose who they saw. They couldn't care, they couldn't decide. They could only react along whatever inscrutable principles they followed that not even science could yet explain. And if those principles truly had a bearing on a country's lifespan after its Countryhuman fell, then they couldn't risk finding out how they would react to losing a Korea. And as for a simple fading away...

Hwang knew there was no chance of that happening.

The merge was best for their country. So it would happen. And perhaps nothing would change, so there wouldn't have been a use in Hae fretting over it. Or perhaps it would, and there still wasn't any reason to make her possibly bring it up to Korea, forcing his hand the way some of his cousins feared, and bringing about a change worse than the one he was trying to prevent.

But Hwang didn't think he would try.

Change might not come for *them,* if they could argue their point well enough. But it would come. And like the destruction of their power system, that wasn't always something to look forward to.

He didn't want Hae to feel the way he did, watching it creeping towards them.

While trying to think of a title for this chapter, I found this Bible verse (wasn't looking for them this time): Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor / If either of them falls down, one can help the other up / But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up / Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm / But how can one keep warm alone? / Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves / A cord of three strands is not quickly

broken.

I think the third strand is supposed to be god or something so that's unimportant, but the rest of it... my Hwanghaelings...

A notice that the name of Sui-ho Dam is changing to Supung Dam because it used to be called the Sui-ho (Sui Lake) Dam before becoming Supung. I knew this, but couldn't find the exact time it changed. But I know at this point it's Supung Power Station and Supung Lake, so the more I think about it, why would just the dam still be called Sui? I've edited the past occurrences, this is just a notification for future chapters- Sui-ho = Supung.

Also to clarify, village elders would have also been landlords, but the old man in the flashback is a bit of an exception. Like he tells Korea and Hwang in an earlier flashback, his extended family works his land. So he has renters, they're just family branches (and then some of those branches have renters). So the idea of land redistribution doesn't *quite* threaten his class interests in the same way it would another landlord (plus the bigger landlords monopolizing land thing). He's also an okay guy. Just to be clear that not every village elder has been happy with the provinces strolling in and telling them they're going to abolish landlords one day.

All of the provinces can speak all Korean dialects if they choose, it's just that their dialect is most natural to them (though Seoul dialect is more natural for Hwang in the early Occupation years because he forced it, and South Chungcheong speaks... South Chungcheong). All of the dialects are equally natural to North. But he usually just speaks Seoul dialect until 1964 where he switches to Pyongyang dialect (Munhwao), prepping for it becoming standardized in two years. If he was like China and America where they mirror their speech to whoever they're with, one could imagine North speaking with Hae or the Jeollas' patterns. Unfortunately he's not a chameleon so we are deprived of 'Ah reckon ah ain't *never* seen somethin' like this before' North.

I Looked, But I Didn't See

The heavens above the Supung Dam were dark, moonlight reflecting off the black waters of the reservoir on one side, and harsh white spotlights powered by portable generators illuminating the other, lighting up the bottom portion of the massive concrete barrier.

North Pyongan sat on the crest, a safe distance from the edge, his legs folded under him, and his bodyguards a respectful length away along the walkway. Pain washed through his body in waves, courtesy of the customary increased air strikes July 4th had brought. He tried to rock with them rather than let them sweep him away.

Down below, he could see their handful of engineers working with the Soviets and Chinese, examining schematics as military and civilian porters carried in supplies on their backs or in carts. The distant sound of shouting and whistles made its way up to him, with no mighty crashing of water to drown it out. The gates below him had been shut, along with the sluice gate, leaving the downstream Amnok dry so they could work on repairs.

It hurt North Pyongan's heart to see his river reduced to patches of water in a muddy channel, but it was better than what could have happened.

He had been in his province when the attack came, accompanying the Premier as he visited to speak with the staff and students of the Central Higher Cadres Training School. He had seen the planes flying in upstream, and felt his heart sink into his stomach as new burns spread over his cobalt skin.

He hadn't been able to stay, needing to keep the Premier safe on his journey back to Pyongyang, and Korea had forbidden him from returning until he got back from Wonsan. He had spent the entire night feeling useless and afraid, wishing he could be in his province, only able to tell South Pyongan what had happened (and

only because Korea knew it was easier to let him).

It annoyed some of his cousins (and especially his sister) when their Countryhuman held his tongue on information until he was ready, as with the Incheon landing. But if North Pyongan didn't already understand that he just wanted to spare them from the nervous dread that filled him all night, he did now.

The power had already been going out in places, but he was sheltering in the City Hall shelter with civilians during a minor bombing raid when the last of it had gone for good. Halos had flared around the dim bulbs above before they went dark all at once. Those with him were all used to it by now, assuming that a power line had been cut or a local transformer substation had been hit.

But North Pyongan had known the truth. And even though he knew it would do no good, he couldn't help but pray that it was 'just' the hydroelectric station that had been destroyed.

It was. Thank God. There wasn't anything else to thank, except maybe the poor aim of a pilot, or luck. Their anti-aircraft guns had been overwhelmed by the hundreds of planes.

North Pyongan knew he couldn't depend on God anymore, but he chose to believe it was Him that had spared their dam. Because the alternative, that the only reason their farmland and villages hadn't been wiped away by a great flood was because of luck, made his stomach churn like the waters that should have been turning the turbines below.

Because luck ran out.

"There you be. You were starting to worry me."

North Pyongan looked up, seeing Liaoxi padding along the edge of the dam. His guards knew her, so they hadn't seen fit to alert him, but he still would have scolded himself for not realizing he wasn't alone on this stretch anymore, if he didn't know it was simply because his comrade moved so silently. And with the amount of Chinese specialists around, she was moving even more silently than

usual, trying not to be recognized.

"Do they need me?" he asked, half-rising, the skin on the back of his legs tearing.

He didn't have any practical engineering skills, more theoretical. He knew how dams and hydroelectric systems functioned and how to fix them. He just couldn't do it himself, something that was supposed to be fixed in the classes Korea had drawn up for them. He was here for planning, consultation, and translation. And to make up for North Hamgyong's lack of morale.

Liaoxi shook her head, perching next to him on the edge, sliding her legs over it. "I said it was me that felt worry, but 'twas more your kin. I came to save my sister's skin."

Internally, he apologized to Liaotung, though he knew she did work North Hamgyong up on purpose sometimes. He should have told his cousin he was heading up here, but he was preoccupied with the same decision that had been bothering him for over a week.

"North Hamgyong can get difficult to deal with when he's worried," he said apologetically, settling back down with a wince.

Something shared by another member of their family.

Liaoxi raised her brows knowingly. "And only then, I ken."

She turned on the heavy-duty flashlight strapped to her waist, flashing it twice to signal 'all's well' before returning it to her side.

North Pyongan squinted down, trying to spot North Hamgyong operating on the turbines. But it was too far. Everyone was just little shapes.

He had always wondered how God saw them. He knew Heaven was almost definitely a spiritual realm, not actually hovering far above the earth. The clouds and ascending were metaphorical.

But the Lord was omnipotent, He knew everything that went on in their hearts and in His world. Their world. It made sense that He

had some way to look upon them. Would He walk among them unseen, or was it easier to look down from above, where they were all just forms and virtues?

'Or sins.' The question that had driven him up here bore down on his shoulders.

"I must know," Liaoxi began, her keen eyes picking up on the way he slumped. "What troubles you so? Even since before this tragedy, it feels like you were plagued by a malady."

"Right now I'm troubled by how close you are to falling off this dam." North Pyongan eyed her legs anxiously, dangling over the void.

The Supung was over a hundred metres tall. Even if she fell far enough to land in the mud instead of smashing off the wall or machinery down below, the recuperative coma to heal every bone in her body would take months. And that was if it didn't count as a suicide.

His fingers twitched to cross himself, but he denied them. If she fell, he would grab her.

"It's a habit, I must confess. But I wouldn't want to add to your stress." Liaoxi drew her legs in, then looked to her side. "But someone else will, it seems."

North Pyongan leaned back to see past her, seeing someone tall and broad stomping along the dam, coming from the abutment. He briefly stopped to talk with the men working on the cable tower on the top.

"North Hamgyong," he noted.

"I guess he wasn't reassured by my beams."

"I think…" North Pyongan awkwardly scratched his cheek. "He might just want to stop us from being alone."

Most of the workers and engineers were sleeping in temporary barracks while they worked on the hydroelectric station, including

him and his cousin. But the Hamgyong had been very insistent that Liaoxi and Liaotung get their own dug-out. Ostensibly because they were women, so it was the chivalrous thing to do, which North Pyongan completely agreed with. He had been going to bring it up before he had.

But his cousin had also mysteriously been taking his break every time North Pyongan and Liaoxi did, when usually he would refuse and keep working. Never to talk, just to grunt and glare at Liaoxi.

'I'm not sure what he expects us to do.'

They had… shared more kisses since the night he had read his poem for her, but it wasn't like they were going to do that when there were people around, and they were both constantly exhausted.

The Chinese woman gaped in mock dismay at his words, covering her masked mouth with her hand. "Are you telling me he doesn't approve of us? I never would have thought thus!"

North Pyongan bit his lip, half-amused and half-guilty. "I'm sorry he's still being rude to you and Comrade Liaotung."

You would think after nearly two years fighting by their side, North Hamgyong would trust them, or at least be *slightly* more courteous.

'Then again,' he thought. *'We'll have fought together for thirty-three years soon, and he still calls me 'God-lover.''*

Liaoxi waved her hand. "Quite used to it by now are we."

"You shouldn't have to be." Just like China probably shouldn't be so used to how Korea treated him. North Pyongan had heard his Countryhuman tell him to end his own life himself now. Three weeks ago. Twice.

"I… don't like to think you're both tolerating him treating you poorly just because you feel like you have to perform," he ventured.

He had been being careful not to bring up what she had told him

about her and her Countryhuman on their way to Guk Island. She had confessed it in a moment of confidence, and he didn't want to make her regret it.

But he also didn't like to think her and her sister were genuinely hurt by some of the things North Hamgyong said, but felt like they had to hide it for their alliance.

Liaoxi looked away from him, out at the darkness beyond the work area.

"We truly don't mind," she said after a moment. "Not everyone can be kind. And when you're used to understanding your own emotions…"

She trailed off, closing her eyes and tilting her head back.

"I can't finish it," North Pyongan apologized. "I don't know what you're going to say."

Her mask moved as her lips pursed.

"…Those of others become clear as oceans," she finished triumphantly after a few seconds.

"Oceans aren't very clear."

"Too honest again."

North Pyongan chuckled. "Alright. As long as neither of you are truly bothered."

"Liaotung may be a bit irked," Liaoxi confessed. "But it looks like if he says anything else to her, by Korea his neck might get…"

"Jerked?" North Pyongan finished, fishing the Mandarin word out of his mind.

She sighed. "I *really* didn't want to say that one."

He laughed again, but worry plucked at him.

This wasn't the first time her rhymes had been a bit clunky. Since they got here a week ago, they had both been working from as soon as the sun set to long into the day, only stopping when enemy planes came too close, but he didn't think that was what was affecting her. Her cí had never wavered on the battlefield after all, even after days without sleep.

He thought it might be the bombs. The American jets had been crossing the border more often lately, and while the incidents of germ warfare had coincidentally waned slightly in China now that the International Scientific Commission has arrived there, the regular raids had only gotten worse, targeting the airfields.

He almost never saw Liaoxi in anything other than her uniform, and she couldn't even take off her jacket with all these people around. But even before the attack on the dam, he had noticed she didn't roll up the sleeves of her undershirt while she wrote poetry at dinner anymore, even when she was mopping sweat from her citrine brow with a cloth in the stifling summer heat.

She had told him she was alright, but not that she wasn't burned. Even when he asked directly.

"I'm sorry you got caught up in all this," he murmured before he could stop himself.

"Let that sorry be done," Liaoxi said without pause. "Because none of us are. If we were, we wouldn't have came so far."

Two years, for both of them soon. The darkness from both sides of the Amnok weighed heavy on his soul.

"Like you said," she added. "If our nations must be in the fire, then to burn together is my desire."

Her eyes gleamed, and North Pyongan flushed, ducking his head. It made the back of his neck make a sound like pork crackling.

"By the way," he murmured, making sure his voice wouldn't carry to North Hamgyong as he stomped closer. "I didn't get a chance to say you looked nice yesterday."

China wasn't acknowledging the destruction of the Supung Power Station himself, to try and keep America and the war at a distance, but with over twenty percent of their provinces' power gone, Liaoxi and Liaotung had to for image's sake. Yesterday, they had snuck over the dry riverbed before dawn, then 'arrived' on the far side of the dam to survey it. They hadn't set foot on the titanic structure, staying on Chinese soil. But North Pyongan and North Hamgyong had walked over to 'meet' them.

It had felt strange to exchange formal bows and politely thank the women for their continued help in the war and with fixing the hydroelectric plant when he had shared countless meals with them both. And was trying not to look like he was drinking in the sight of one of them out of uniform for the first time.

Liaotung had been in a workshirt the colour of the sky with a long crimson scarf wrapped around her head, twined into two braids that trailed over her shoulders in imitation of the hairstyle many of the female Chinese soldiers wore, but it was Liaoxi he had to keep his eyes from straying to, dressed in a knee-length collared outfit that looked like a dress, but actually had two wide legs. It had been dyed a vivid orange, and combined with her pastel yellow skin and the red scarf around her neck that he thought might conceal the burns her uniform usually did, it made her look like a sunset in full flush.

She had told him she was used to more subdued clothes, like the ones their peasants wore, or in a military cut. But they had needed to look as removed from war as possible, without wearing the sort of suits that implied a professional visit America could somehow use against them.

Since that was the case, North Pyongan supposed he could thank her and her Countryhuman's performing talents that he had got to see her in it.

"Oh?" Liaoxi asked innocently. "I think chances you've had many."

His face warmed under the burns. "I didn't take any," he corrected himself. "But I am now. You looked… very good."

For a poet, he should be able to think of better words. Especially now that the poem he had written for Liaoxi had knocked his poetic block free. But even something like ‘beautiful’ wouldn’t be enough to capture her. And North Hamgyong was too close to compare her to the golden light that graced the waters lapping at the other side of the dam at sunset.

Liaoxi tilted her face away. “Thank you,” she said, sounding pleased. “And for you, the words would also be true.”

“I was in the same clothes I always am.” North Pyongan plucked at his drab general’s tunic, sweat-stained and covered in mud and grime from working around the river.

Liaoxi’s eyes squinched up as she nodded. “And you looked quite handsome.”

North Hamgyong was almost here, and the moon was nearly a full disc in the sky, illuminating them clearly. He subtly rubbed his cheeks, trying to get rid of the blush he felt on them, before realizing it probably couldn't be seen past the bandages. Blood trickled out, brought forth by even the light touch.

“But your acting was slightly like you were being held for ransom.”

He hung his head. “I know.”

He hadn’t quite been able to pretend he didn’t know her or Liaotung when they had been fighting at each other’s side for so long. Or when she had kissed him on the cheek before she left that morning. Even when he had been careful to use high courtesy, it still sounded too familiar.

“No need to feel low,” she said. “No cameras were there. And even when you’re criticizing my rhymes, I find your honesty fair.” Her eyes slid sideways. “And at least you were *trying* to make a show.”

“Just because you’re poets doesn’t mean you get away with being fucking lazy, you know,” North Hamgyong called as he stopped over.

Liaoxi's eyes lit up as he finished her rhyme by accident, cracking her neck towards North Pyongan, who couldn't hide his smile. They burst into giggles.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" his cousin demanded, stopping behind them.

"Not you," North Pyongan assured him semi-truthfully, stifling his amusement.

"What is there to laugh about at all?" North Hamgyong crossed his arms. "We're no closer to getting the fucking lights back on."

"We are," North Pyongan corrected, shifting to face him. "You and Comrade Vasilev said that if we keep going at this pace, we should have power working again in another week or so."

"When we all add wood, the flames burn good," Liaoxi said pointedly.

"One more rhyme and I'm pushing you off," North Hamgyong growled.

"If you did that, Liaotung would not lightly scoff," Liaoxi said with perfect innocence.

"Cousin," North Pyongan scolded as North Hamgyong's lip curled, reaching instinctively for the woman's hand.

The other man watched the gesture with narrowed eyes before glowering at his face. "We'll have *some* power working in another week. *If* we don't get bombed again in the middle of repairs."

"That still means we're closer to having the lights back on."

His cousin opened his mouth, glanced at Liaoxi, then *'tch'*ed. "Whatever. Get your ass down to the powerhouse. Once the Soviets are off break, they're testing the generator with our guys. I don't want our translator to fuck it up."

North Pyongan could see that one of the Soviet crews had just put down their tools to rest. He clearly just didn't want him having a

private moment with Liaoxi.

But he needed to get back to work anyhow. He had came up here to examine how much Supung Lake had expanded now that it wasn't being drained, and to take another paranoid look at the gates and examine the crest for cracks while he took his break, but the dam was as sturdy as it was the last time he checked, and time was up.

And he wasn't any closer to finding an answer for what he should do.

He stood, black spots swarming his vision like a school of minnows. He swayed slightly, and North Hamgyong shot out an arm, gripping him on the shoulder and jerking him away from the edge.

"Thank you," North Pyongan said as his cousin quickly released him, scowling.

The Pyongan shook the darkness away, dusting himself off and helping Liaoxi up.

"Well, you successfully distracted me from finding out what with you is wrong," Liaoxi said, adjusting her gold-patterned scarf. "You smooth-talker, I give you aplomb."

He winced. "I didn't mean to."

North Hamgyong glowered at him. "Are you seriously stressing over that fucking trial?"

"Trial?" Liaoxi perked up.

North Pyongan sighed. Korea hadn't said not to tell her. And it did involve her, in a way.

"Pak Chae-eun's trial is coming up."

Korea had told them the morning before the Supung bombing began.

The Chinese woman raised her brows. “I thought you were waiting for the war to end.”

North Hamgyong made a bitter noise in his throat, and North Pyongan placed a hand on his shoulder that was immediately shrugged off.

“We’re economizing,” he explained, the word weighting his heart with like a stone. “We can’t afford to keep feeding prisoners who might get the death sentence. If they won’t, we can factor them into the prison supply plan, but if they do…”

“Then they need to be offed before they can waste any more of our food,” North Hamgyong grunted. “Not that it’ll help.”

North Pyongan hung his head. “And Pak Chae-eun is old.”

He couldn’t even work like a younger, healthier prisoner. Honestly, if you considered that, and how soon after committing their crimes most reactionaries had been tried, whether the verdict was innocent, a pardon by the voluntary surrender, prison, or guilty enough for the death penalty, he felt like Korea may have had a hand in delaying Pak Chae-eun’s judgement. He had thought he wanted him to just waste away in prison, but…

“I’m sorry,” Liaoxi said. “I know you saw him as a friend.”

“He tried to get him fucking kidnapped,” North Hamgyong growled. “He almost succeeded.”

“But he did used to be a friend.” North Pyongan sighed. “Korea wants to know if I’ll testify against him.”

“Ah,” Liaoxi said softly. He could see she knew what it meant.

Pak Chae-eun had committed espionage, working for the enemy in wartime. And turning a Provincehuman over to them was an act of highest treason. He hadn’t surrendered himself or even cooperated with Korea when he tried to find out where North Pyongan had been taken. There was almost no chance he wouldn’t be found guilty and executed.

But there *was* a chance. His niece was the only witness. And while she had been cooperative, if she had a change of heart and decided she didn't want to see her only living family killed, they would have nothing. Or like he had told his sister, if a people's jury didn't think they had enough information to convict, or took pity on an elderly man who probably only had a few years left in him anyways, they could ask for leniency. He could be kept imprisoned, or even found innocent.

But if North Pyongan testified, it would take that chance away. Korea was right. There were people they were guiding who saw they were leading and thought that meant they were following. And that they should follow unquestioningly. He knew if he got up in front of a people's court and told them how Pak Chae-eun had betrayed him, they would find him guilty.

He would be signing his writ of execution himself.

"What will you do?" Liaoxi asked. "Will you?"

'Do you think I should?' North Pyongan bit the question, the same one he had wanted to ask his sister, back.

It wasn't either of their decisions. And it wasn't God's either. He hadn't came up here to be closer to the heavens, but to be alone to search inside himself.

Korea had told him he *had* to testify, back when they had returned to Seoul. But he hadn't repeated it when he told the provinces about the upcoming trial. He hadn't even looked at North Pyongan, like the news had equal weight for all of them.

He didn't know if this as a test. Did his Countryhuman see testifying against Pak Chae-eun as him prying the final nail out of his faith in God? Or did this, too, have nothing to do with the man? Perhaps he wanted to see North Pyongan acknowledge that harming him was harming their people, and to place them above his personal feelings by guiding them towards sentencing the former priest to justice. Or perhaps he wanted him to fight back. He knew North Pyongan hadn't been enthusiastic about the idea of executing him, but he had given in anyways, the way he used to give in to

everything. Did he want him to push back and refuse, even if the outcome would still be the same?

He didn't know. The only thing he knew for sure was that Korea wanted Pak Chae-eun dead.

"You fucking better," North Hamgyong cut in. "The bastard fucked you over."

"It isn't that simple." Nowhere near it.

"Would you be saying that if it was your precious fucking sister that he tried to hand to the Yank?" his cousin growled.

Korea had said something similar. *'Would you call it a 'mistake' if it was your sister he did this to? Or South Hwanghae? Or me?'*

It hadn't been a mistake. Pak Chae-eun had done it intentionally. He was a traitor, a collaborator, a criminal. And he deserved to see justice for it.

But he had helped him, once. He had kept him and his sister alive. If it hadn't been for the priest, they would have died in that blizzard and been handed over to Japan long before they ever met Korea. Betraying him last year didn't make that not true.

The man hadn't thought America would hurt him. He believed the lie that the nation was Christian, that he followed the same God as them, like North Pyongan had felt better leaving his sister with South knowing he believed. And that he was Korea's brother.

Pak Chae-eun had been blind. He had looked at all of the destruction America had wrought on their nation, the burnt husk of Seoul, the bodies they had pulled out of the mountains, his own brother and his family murdered by American bombs, and refused to see the evil that it was, and that God wouldn't want it. Whether it was money or unquestioning faith that had set the scales on his eyes, they were there. He had thought he was doing the right thing, like he had all those years ago. It felt wrong for North Pyongan to want to punish him for that, like he was seeking vengeance.

Yet he knew if it had been his sister, or Hae, or Korea, or North

Hamgyong himself, he *wouldn't* be hesitating. Even though he still wouldn't want the man dead, he would want his family to get justice. He wanted the guerrillas that had died saving him to get justice, though he knew a court couldn't try for cause and effect that way.

If they could, they would have to try him, too.

He looked down at his boots, clasping his hands, and North Hamgyong *'tch'*ed.

"Exactly," he said. "So have some damn outrage for yourself. Get the bastard put up on the wall. Better yet, pull the trigger yourself."

"I would execute him," Liaoxi agreed, running a hand along her rifle. "But you don't need to follow another's whim. I know your heart will clear your vision, and you'll come to your own decision."

"What the fuck does that even mean?" North Hamgyong griped.

North Pyongan understood, though, and smiled at her thankfully as she turned around.

"It means I will leave you to talk, and alone down the dam, I will now walk." Liaoxi delicately stepped away, swaggering enough that North Pyongan was sure she was pleased by her own rhyme.

"I hate the Chinese," North Hamgyong grumbled as she left.

"No you don't," North Pyongan sighed, then fear shot through him as he heard the drone of a jet engine.

Their heads both jerked towards the sky as their bodyguards took half-steps towards them.

It was only one of their own reconnaissance planes coming back, heading for Manchuria.

"Ssi-bal." North Hamgyong bared his teeth at the sky. "What's the fucking point of those things if they couldn't keep the dam safe the *one* fucking time it gets targeted?!"

"It wasn't their fault," North Pyongan said, rubbing his chest, his heart still racing. "The weather wasn't clear in China. Most of them couldn't take off. And the ones that already did had to prioritize the airfields."

North Hamgyong *'tch'*ed. "Of course they prioritize *their* shit."

"Our pilots are with them, you know," he pointed out. "And if the airfields are damaged, *no* planes will be able to take off. We'll be completely vulnerable."

"We're *already* completely vulnerable," North Hamgyong hissed, thrusting a bandaged hand down at the bottom of the dam. "Look what they fucking did! How can you be so damn cheerful when our entire power system is fucked?!"

"Lower your voice," North Pyongan advised, keenly aware of his guards behind him, and how their voices carried along the crest.

"Why?" North Hamgyong demanded, lowering it anyway. "Everyone here knows damn well we're setting a tower of blocks up so the Yanks can knock it down again. You think once we get this place running, they'll just let it end there? How can you be up here fucking flirting with a Chinese with no fucks in the world when you know damn well we're never going to get our power back?"

North Pyongan knew that he was right. Now that the Supung was an acceptable target, their repairs wouldn't go unpunished, so long as enemy planes still flew their skies. While they did, their power production would never be allowed to return to what it had been.

"We'll be able to work on it in peace and restore it fully after the war is over."

North Hamgyong stared at him from under his heavy black brows, saying something to him with his desperate eyes.

North Pyongan refused to understand it, ignoring the unease that rippled through him, and turned to look down at the workers at the bottom of the dam.

"Everyone is working hard to fix this," he told his cousin. "All of

our comrades, and us. Our people are depending on us to get their power back. They believe in us, and that we can. We need to believe that, too."

"Belief isn't going to save us," North Hamgyong snapped. "Your 'god' can't fix this."

"No," North Pyongan agreed. "But we can."

He tilted his head back to look at the stars scattered across the black velvet sky like moonlight glinting off waves, a dark mirror to Supung Lake, but far most vast. Endless, perhaps.

Korea had told him before that if God was real, he was either unable to control anything, and thus useless, or capable of it, but chose not to. And that would make him cruel.

North Pyongan couldn't believe the second one. He believed Heaven was a different realm, one God could watch on from, but not truly reach across. Any time He did, it came in the form of manifestations to guide instruments of His will, what they called miracles.

He had used to think that maybe God could change things directly, but had blessed them with free will, and so didn't. He left it up to them. He had thought that was good. Especially when North Pyongan knew if He did take an active role in the world, trying to control them and their fates, Korea would probably find the idea unacceptable and rebel against Him.

It had become more and more difficult to stomach that lately. The idea that perhaps God *could* change the world, yet chose not to. Free will was one thing, the freedom to choose good or evil. But what free will was given to a girl forced to bed a man with a gun who had already killed her friend's family, or to a Chinese elementary school teacher that contracted anthrax from American-dropped insects, or a child doused in napalm? None of them had chosen that. Someone else had chosen it for them.

North Pyongan would stop it all in a heartbeat if he could. He would turn their power on, he would have stopped it from being

destroyed in the first place, stopped the war and Reunified Korea. If he had been able to save Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin's families, he would have, so they could live on to make their own choices. The idea that God could, that he watched all the suffering in all the world and *could* stop it, but just didn't…

He couldn't stomach that. He couldn't *believe* that. If there was a God, He loved them as much as North Pyongan and Korea loved their people. If he didn't save them, it was for the same reason they didn't- because He couldn't.

Maybe one day they would be able to head up onto that endless black and find that it did end. That somewhere above the clouds was Heaven. That God was above them, looking down, watching every cruel, vicious thing that was done to innocents, and the only reason He didn't stop it was because they were all so small as to be faceless to Him, and He only cared to save them once they were dead. Maybe He was the eye-for-an-eye, vengeful deity some said He was, and there would have to be an accounting.

But for now, North Pyongan had to believe God loved them. And he had to believe that they could fix their power system and win this war.

"We're here on Earth," he said to North Hamgyong, turning back to him now that he could bear the weight of the message in his eyes. "We are the ones that have to fix this."

Unlike God, he and Korea and all his cousins *could* save their people. Not all of them, not entirely. They couldn't knock every jet out of the sky or stop the Supung from being bombed again. But they could set up more anti-aircraft positions, they could repair the turbines and transformers, they could carry supplies on their backs and make torches and turn the fans in factories by hand.

They could end the war. And before that, they could take care of the ones who believed in them as best as they could.

They didn't guide though miracles- they guided through action. They and their people could affect the world around them and they *would.*

“And we need to believe for them.” North Pyongan touched the burnt tips of his forefinger and thumb together, circling their engineers down below.

They were who he had to make his decision on Pak Chae-eun for, too. Not for Korea, or South Pyongan, or Liaoxi or North Hamgyong. Not even for their government, to make the former priest an example on what happened to those who caused harm to the masses, even with intentions they thought were right. And not for himself.

He still didn't know what he should do yet. What the fate of the man that had shaped his life should be. But he knew it would be what his people wanted, and what he thought was best for them.

“Belief is what got us this far, cousin,” he said, smiling at North Hamgyong. “It will get us through this. This, too, shall pass.”

They would make it so.

It was North Hamgyong’s turn to look away from his silent message. His head lowered like a hound’s, his lips peeling back from his teeth. It made fresh blood well along his cheeks, crimson on pine.

“You don’t have to be so damn *happy* about it,” he muttered, kicking at the concrete dam.

“I’m not happy.”

The sorrow North Pyongan held for the workers having to break their backs like the old days to keep their factories running, for the men and women that might die tomorrow that wouldn’t receive the messages meant for them on time, and the engineers, theirs and their comrades’, that were working themselves to the bone with the weight of Korea on their backs, was fathomless.

And for Korea, and the emotion he had seen in his eye on the day they arrived.

“I’m grieving just as much as you over this,” he said, ignoring his cousin’s protest. “I just can’t let it dampen the joy I feel in the

meantime.”

Even when his sister had been gone, there had still been small moments of happiness. Seeing Korea and his cousins again, finding out the Premier was safe, getting to know Liaoxi, meeting up with comrades that had survived the occupation, Liberating Pyongyang. Even when that pearl of worry had been rolling in his mind, and the weight of her absence crushing down on him like he was at the bottom of the sea, it only stifled those moments, didn’t drown them out entirely.

He felt for his cousin, for whom it did. He let the grief of losing someone outweigh the joy of knowing them, and so didn’t let himself feel it at all. And he let the greater sorrow around them douse even the possibility of fishing snatches of happiness from this war.

“You might try seeing things the same way,” he said gently. “The Occupation took enough from us, and this war is taking even more. Don’t let it take your bright moments, too.”

North Hamgyong avoided his gaze, shoving his hands in his pockets as he turned his back on him. “Enough bullshit. We have a fucking block tower to fix.”

“We all do care for you, North Hamgyong,” North Pyongan told him, something he should have done sooner.

It was true he had treated his sister worse for far longer, but SH also knew his insults were false. He wasn’t sure his male cousin did.

“I don’t want to see you lose anything else.”

North Hamgyong didn’t answer, continuing to stomp away, his back bent.

North Pyongan sighed. He knew by now that was one sail he couldn’t mend. It was up to the boaters.

He took one look back down at the riverbed below. He held out his hand, covering up the people scurrying over it with construction tools and schematics, putting a scorched cobalt shield between

them and the sky.

He had to believe. In a kind God, in their dam's strength, in their people, and in Korea. And in himself. He had to believe they could win this war.

His hand returned to his side, and he hurried after his cousin, returning to making sure their people believed just as deeply.

The silver moon hung far, far above the Supung like a wide, unseeing eye, not watching him go.

To clarify, it's not a mistake that Canada says 'You're not actually going to bomb China, right?' to America when he already is at this point. The bombing raids on the Chinese airfields weren't widely publicized because the US didn't want to get accused of trying to start a war with China (even more than they already were). They were officially only crossing the Amnok if they were in hot-pursuit. (all these things they *swore* they weren't doing, and some people think the germ warfare is the *one* thing they were telling the truth on) Even if it was publicized, Canada doesn't read the news. It makes him anxious. (diagnosed with liberal. It's chronic)

Something that irks me is when the same liberal types that praise MacArthur and his land reform here demonize the DPRK's land reform. The US quite literally did the same thing they had called the DPRK evil for, just in Japan, and they get lauded for it, 'the land reform was so enlightened and democratic.' And don't get me wrong, the land reform here was good and definitely needed, but it should have been carried out by Japanese, not by colonizers. Why can a foreign nation murder millions, come in to forcibly redistribute land and break up conglomerates (while leaving the conditions for those monopolies to happen again), then be praised for 'bringing democracy to Japan' but when a formerly colonized nation does the exact same thing in their own nation *without* the mass murder, and removing the conditions for that sort of monopoly to reform, that is a great evil? Even US historians admit the DPRK's land reform wasn't bloody, so it can't be levels of

violence. 'Forcibly seizing land belonging to honest hard-working landlords' vs 'redistributing land to tenant farmers' is how its portrayed, but they're the exact same act, the DPRK did it first, and *you* called them evil Communists for it.

In other news my sweet cat was making a noise I have never heard before, so I went over to check, and he found a bug! I killed it and he stopped right away. My loyal child, protecting our home. Meanwhile during the earthquake, he disappears. You might think this is cowardly of him, but actually this just means he's tactical. Bug = Mother can handle this. Earthquake = Mother is going to die, I must save myself. I admire his practicality. He will be a great warrior after I am killed by the next earthquake.

Chosen

"So you're really leaving?"

The look America gave the question made South feel the way it always did, his disappointment scorching his skin worse than the lingering burns. Though he managed not to cringe this time. Too noticeably anyway.

"I told you I was leaving days ago, kid," he reminded him. "Made sure you were sober as a preacherman and everything. The whole reason I did that was 'cuz I didn't want you to say I was springing it on you from nowhere."

"I know, but…"

It still didn't feel real. South had half convinced himself that the talk at the table with Rhee and… Clark? Hadn't even happened. Even after standing here watching America pack his clothes, his papers, his pistol, into a series of cases and carry them out to the shiny black car waiting to take him to the airfield, it still didn't feel real.

Had it really been two years ago that he'd stood on the docks, his heart soaring as America leapt from the deck of his warship onto Korean soil and promised him the war would be over soon?

It simultaneously seemed like just yesterday, everything in between a jumbled mess of pain and grief and alcohol, and long ago. Far too long ago.

He rubbed his arm, looking down at his dress shoes.

"C'mon, kid," America sighed. "Don't gimme that face. I can't spend my whole life managing your country. I've got my own to take care of. Elections are coming up. Plus Truman screwed the pooch with the steel guys back home, and you know him- he couldn't find his way outta a damn corn maze. He needs me to go

play hero for him."

"I know," South muttered.

It was selfish of him to want the American to stay. He'd already drawn a lot of negative attention from Soviet propagandists for being here for so long, or at all. It was already crazy that he'd spent two years in a foreign country, just for him.

"I just…" He hung his head, unable to help murmuring, "Want you to stay."

"Who wouldn't?" America preened, before saying more soberly. "But can I be honest, kid? I can't stay here anymore. This place…" He looked around the house, then gave a wry smile. "It's got some bad memories now."

Right. Grace.

South knew it was wrong, but he couldn't help but feel a bit of resentment towards the dead girl. Not only had she offed herself on America's birthday, but in his country. Now whenever his friend thought about Korea, about *him,* he'd have that shadow hanging over him.

'Couldn't she at least have waited to go home?'

He didn't say that, obviously. Just said, "Sorry."

"Not your fault, kid," America told him. "But it still happened. And it's a little hard to sleep in a room knowing if I turned on a blacklight, I'd see my girl all over the wall. And the bed, if ya catch my drift."

South did not. He didn't even know what a blacklight was. But it sounded like a joke, so he gave a smile that was still appropriately apologetic and nodded, reminding himself people dealt with grief in different ways. He drank until he couldn't feel anything anymore, and America made jokes.

"And it's not like I'm going to Antarctica," his friend said, easily moving on from Grace. "Just Washington. I've got a phone and a

private jet. If you get in over your head or just need a friend, I'm a few spins on the dial away."

South needed a friend *now.* He needed *him* now.

But he kept his mouth shut. It'd just make him look like a whiny kid if he broke down in tears and started begging him to stay. And he wasn't. He was the Korean Countryhuman, a key American ally. Clearly his friend thought he was capable of handling things alone now.

America had to leave. South needed to prove that he could still trust him once he did. He didn't want to end up on house arrest like the provinces.

He still couldn't stop the stinging in his eyes.

"Are you…?" He subtly swallowed, trying to make his voice sound less thick, and less pathetically hopeful. "Going to come back on my birthday?"

It was next week. He'd been going to ask if America wanted him to sing for him, like he'd had him sing *'Amazing Grace'* at their little memorial for the girl.

But the way his mouth stretched out told him that wouldn't be happening.

"Eee, no can do, kid," his friend said regretfully. "You can blame Rhee for that one. Folks are raising a bit of a fuss over that shtick with the assemblymen."

The elections were coming up in August. The man wanted to change the constitution so the president would be voted for directly. The assemblymen hadn't. So he'd locked the ones he hadn't arrested in the Assembly until they had.

And now he was ruining South's birthday. God he hated him.

"You and I know that was necessary," America assured him. "But you know how Big Red is. Him and his agitators in the north are crying foul. I've got to put a little distance between me and your

Prez until the water's cooled off. To rephrase- if you get in over your head or just need a friend, I'm a few spins on the dial away. *And* ten to fifteen business days after your elections are over."

"Rhee's going to rig them," South muttered, toeing at the carpet and eyeing America.

His friend's mouth screwed up. "Yeah, I'd say. With me gone, he'll be free and clear to. But it's probably for the best. If he didn't rig 'em, your brother and his guys would find some way to. You don't want some commie double-agent in charge, do ya?"

South dutifully shook his head.

"Exactly." America nodded in satisfaction. "The devil you know, y'know?"

His face turned more serious, and he took South by the shoulder.

"You *do* know that it's best he wins for now, right, South?"

"Yeah," he said, mustering the word. "I know. He's an asshole, but he's better than a commie. I'll work with him."

Even though he still couldn't stand him.

Whatever. It wasn't like South had to do anything anyways. He'd just keep his distance and let Rhee handle things. The less he knew *how* he handled them, the better.

'Over eight hundred people died.'

And how many had died under North's Communists? The Hangang was nothing compared to his brother's... government's death toll.

South wasn't defending Rhee. Blowing up the bridge had been messed up. Those refugees hadn't all been commies- they'd been fleeing from them. Even though North definitely had spies mixed in, some of them had to be innocent.

'Most of them.'

‘The devil you know’ really was a good way to put it. He at least knew most of Rhee’s violence was focused on the Reds. They were the ones he *really* wanted dead. And South did, too. And if anyone else ended up in that count…

It was necessary. And he’d never have to know anyway. And one day it would be over.

“Right.” America snapped his fingers in front of his face. “And as soon as the war’s over, I guarantee you’ll be free and clear of him by the next election.”

That would be a relief. Even if South would be paranoid that the next guy might secretly be a Communist. The one, *one* good thing about Syngman Rhee was that he was sure he wasn’t.

But he really did wish he knew less devils.

“Maybe the next guy’ll actually have eyebrows,” he joked, and was rewarded by a laugh and a ruffle on the head.

He’d used to find the action a little patronizing, and honestly he still did. But knowing he wasn’t going to feel it for awhile made his heart clench.

America smiled down at him fondly, hand still on his head. “I’m gonna miss you, kid.”

South swallowed. “Even if you can’t visit right away, I can still call you, right?”

“A’course, a’course. I’ll give you a birthday ring. Just don’t get your knickers all twisted when it’s not first thing in the morning. It doesn’t mean I forgot about you, just means you’re thirteen hours ahead of me.”

South flushed, knowing he probably would’ve thought exactly that, especially if he was drunk or hungover. And he would be.

His friend’s voice lowered seriously. “I’m not leaving for good, Southie. My advisors are still going to be here, and so’s my army. My guys are still going to be working out your ceasefire and

fighting for you in the UN. I'm still in your ring, and I *always* will be, no matter what. Got that?"

The hand on his head weighed him down. He did.

"I'm not abandoning you," America said firmly, bottomless aviators boring into him. "I'm not your brother."

South looked down, heart splitting in two for more than one reason.

'Not that it wasn't that way already.'

"I know," he said quietly. "You won't leave Korea. Or me."

"Never," America promised, showing his teeth. "I'm going back to be a hero for my folks. But I'm always going to be *your* hero, right, Southie?"

South's eyes fell to the case at his side. Chunkier than a normal one. He'd seen the grey box he'd packed inside, watched him nestle the reels in with it, insidious coils of wire, metal snakes hissing secrets.

It was almost funny, to think that just two years ago he'd been quivering at the thought of someone overhearing their talk about rats in the granary. It made him want to laugh and laugh and-

"Right." He smiled, raising his eyes to the other country. "If it wasn't for you, North would've won two years ago. I'd be a commie puppet."

He'd have his brother back. They'd be Korea. But they'd never have the future they dreamed of back in the prison shack, even if Kangwon had been telling the truth. He knew how North was. Even if Communism was the paradise he said, he wouldn't let them enjoy it.

His saviour beamed at him, his teeth a white half-halo in his striped face. "You've got that right. And hey, who knows? Maybe next time I come back, it'll be when the war's over."

Probably not. Bombing the Supung hadn’t made North and his masters crack. South had known it wouldn't. He knew America would win no matter what, but it wouldn’t be until at least winter, when the frost crept over the fields and the dark came sooner.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said, smiling.

“I’ve actually got a little going-away present planned, too,” his friend said mischievously, pulling down his aviators so he could give an exaggerated wink. “Should be hitting tomorrow, so look out for it.”

South didn’t ask what it was. The suitcase loomed in the corner of his vision. All he hoped was that the surprise wasn’t anywhere near the frontline. It was hard enough to deal with the sweat soaking his burns as it was.

“Can’t wait,” was all he said. “Maybe it’ll get the Reds to finally give up.”

Once America's negotiators came off their recess.

He knew it wouldn’t get North. But maybe whatever it was would be the final straw for China, show him South’s brother wasn’t worth protecting. Then his army would go home, America could swoop in and destroy the Communists, and South would have his brother back, after he learned his lesson. After that, it didn’t matter what happened with Red China.

“That’s the spirit, kid,” America cheered, slapping him on the shoulder. “And hey, to make up for being AWOL on your birthday after you gave me such a good one, I got you a little something-something.”

He reached into the inside of his suit and whipped something out, presenting it like a king grandly gifting a loyal eunuch.

Black aviators. Like the ones him and MacArthur wore, but without the fancy gold rims of his, though the chain attached to the arms looked like it was made of the same stuff.

“Ta-da,” America sing-songed, placing them in his hand. “Now we

can match, more or less." He gave him a critical once-over. "Well, no one's going to be getting our names mixed up at a bar or anything, but you know what I mean."

South stared down at the glasses in his hands. The black lenses stared back, murky and impenetrable. They distorted his reflection, turned it dark and wavering. But he could still see the way its expression twisted.

"Aw, come on, Southie." America clucked his tongue as tears started to stream down his face. "You were doing so good."

"I know," he sniffled, rubbing his forearm across his eyes. "I just-"

He wanted to burst into tears and hug America. Maybe if he'd done that to North back then, he wouldn't have left. It was a nice thought.

But he knew it wouldn't have worked. And it wouldn't work now. He'd just ruin another of his friend's suits.

So he firmed his lip, straightening up.

"I'm going to miss you," he said, sounding almost normal.

America's lips curved, and the bit of pride he thought he saw there for not breaking down completely made him flush.

"I know, South. I'll miss you, too. I mean it."

America took the aviators back from him, unbending the arms and placing them on his face, reaching around his head to do the clasp, tightening the gold chain around him.

It felt weird. Countryhumans weren't built to wear sunglasses, and South was overly aware of their position on his face, and how easy it would be for them to slip off. It gave him a new appreciation for his friend wearing them around the clock.

The entryway got darker, tinted by the black glass. But America's grin pierced the shadows as he nodded in satisfaction at his work.

“And I’ll always be with you, kid,” he said. *“Riiight* here.”

He placed a finger on the center of South’s chest, and he looked down.

“My… heart?” he asked, sensing an incoming quip but playing along anyway. That was way too mushy for America.

“Nope,” he said, as expected. “Your stomach. I’ll keep having stuff shipped over from Tokyo for you. Alcohol, cake, the goods.”

South sagged in relief. Thank God. He really hadn’t been looking forward to having to shop for himself full time. He didn’t have enough money and the market didn’t have enough food.

It'd be more debt, but hey- what was a few more drops of liquor in the ocean?

‘If you won, we would be-‘

Who cared? Better to be in debt to America than to Communists. At least if Korea was capitalist, they’d have a chance to pay it off.

“You can take the crap still in this place, too.” America looked around, then dramatically lowered his voice, shielding his mouth with a hand even though the house was empty and about to be emptier. “But be warned- it's mostly potatoes."

That was fine. South just needed something to gorge himself on to try and dull the eternal aching hunger inside him.

It was unfair, really. He could never be full so long as people were hungry, but even if every person in Korea ate enough, he could still starve.

“Thanks,” he said to his friend, tilting his head up so the aviators wouldn’t fall, resolving to take them off as soon as his friend was gone.

“No problem, South.” America rested his hand on his shoulder again, and his expression softened more than he’d ever seen it. “So long as you’re with me, kid, I’ll always look out for you.”

South knew it. America wasn't really leaving. He was going to keep him fed, keep calling him, keep sending him presents. He would take care of him, so long as he was good. And even if he wasn't, he would come back, whether from Washington or Tokyo or China. He would always come back.

America wasn't a Communist, he wasn't the provinces or Red China or Japan. And he wasn't his brother. He hadn't chosen North or 'more important things' over him. For better or worse…

He had chosen South.

—

America grinned down at his colony, liking the look he saw in the white eyes behind the aviator lenses, less inky than his, the way the lids relaxed, the way the tension in his shoulders stopped quivering under his hand, and the feigned ease on the rest of his face became real.

Yeah, *that* was what he wanted to see. Not those wide eyes and half-open mouth as that kid had backed away from him on shaking legs in the snowy woods, shocked and confused and *scared,* for some fucking reason, like America had ever hurt him on purpose.

He'd done well. *This* kid knew which side of the bread his butter was on. He knew there wasn't another side *to* butter. Only America's.

It was safe to leave. South wasn't Canada. America's brother had chosen Britain over him and always would, until there *was* no other choice.

But South had chosen *him.*

A surge of affection rushed through him, making him want to hug the kid. And since he always did what he wanted, he did, swooping down and heaving South off his feet as he shrieked, spinning him around in the air. His shrieks turned to laughter as he tried to keep his aviators on his face, and America laughed, too, laughed and laughed until he got bored and set him down on his feet with a

dramatic sweep.

South swayed, dizzy, holding a hand over his torso. There was pain at the edge of his mouth, but he still smiled up at the American, his aviators askew.

The look in his eyes told America that he knew well and truly what he was- his Korea. And that wouldn't be changing.

America grinned, reaching out and adjusting South's aviators with a flick of his finger. Then he grabbed his suitcase and plucked his hat off the stand, tipping it to the Korean.

"Catch ya around, South."

"Yeah," he said back. "In a while, crocodile."

America laughed, delighted that he'd learned the expression, then clicked his tongue and headed out the door.

'They grow up so fast.' He wiped a fake tear away.

He'd admit, he was genuinely a little reluctant to leave the kid. It was nice to have someone around that saw him for the hero he was, instead of the backstabbers like Truman and the other pinkos. But he couldn't bring him home with him. He had shit to do.

'Have to pick up a new girl.' One who wasn't quite so loony. One who would *appreciate* what she *had.*

Rage flared inside him, turning his vision red, but quickly faded. The thought of that crazy cunt wouldn't dull his shine, not when he knew he wouldn't even remember her name in a few years. The sun was high, the air was warm, and by tonight he wouldn't have to smell fish and smog and poverty. He'd be back in America, land of the free, home of the brave, purveyor of the best goddamn french fries you ever had in your life. The first thing he was gonna do was stop at a diner. Summer was for milkshakes, drive-in movies, and cruisin' around with a pretty doll in your passenger seat.

There was a skip in his step, and as he headed down the gravel drive, he couldn't help but kick up the heels of his shiny leather

shoes, tapping them together as he tossed his pork pie hat in the air, catching it on his wrist and rolling it across his shoulders as he passed through the gate, plunking it firmly back onto his head as he yanked the car door open.

He glanced back, grinning as he saw that South was standing in the doorway, watching him. He inclined his head, snapping off a half-salute, then threw himself into the vehicle, setting his wire recorder on the passenger side floor.

With all his material, he *could* make South say just about anything he wanted. But he wouldn't have to. He knew all he'd have to do was ask.

America laughed, then hit the gas, speeding down the street, eager to get out of this Godforsaken county. Goodbye gooks and whores and boring war, hello pin-ups and elections and the thrill of politics, a war that was far more subtle, but no less bloody. And with the eyes of the newshawks off him, he could actually get *his* hands bloody again, try to bring that spark back.

He'd go home, fix up the steel situation, win back the hearts and minds of the masses, and wash their brains clean of all the commie lies clogging up their wrinkles, once he figured out how CCCP had done it in the first place. Then they would see that this war wasn't just just, but *holy*.

He hadn't needed Big Red's tricks here. Not for South. The kid was his. Soon Korea would be, too.

"And everything else is just dominoes, baby," he said out loud, and laughed out the window at the Korean summer.

—

South stood in the doorway, watching his car go. Then just watching, until the vehicle was gone and America was gone and even the dust in his wake had settled and he was alone again.

He didn't cry. America wasn't like North. He wasn't abandoning him with nothing, and he wasn't lying when he said he'd come

back. He *would* be back.

And South wouldn't cry. There was no cement room waiting for him this time. No dried blood soaked into the floor. No lashes. No punishment. Not for him, anyway.

There was only South.

He turned and went back inside, prepared for tomorrow's going-away present, and whatever else was to come.

I've been the archer, I've been the prey. Who could ever leave me darling?
But who could stay.

Archer by Taylor Swift is actually very good for South. I was just thinking of this line, but go listen or read the full song. It screams South. And by that I mean abandonment issues and being desperately afraid someone will see through your façade.

Mm, I've definitely read the phrase 'screwed the pooch' in English books before, and always thought it was just a nonsense saying. But is it actually saying 'fucked the dog?' I don't think I want to research this.

I was really torn with calling this chapter Born To Stay. But I settled on Chosen for the double meaning.

Going-Away Present

"Inhale."

Hae sucked in a breath, trying to hold still on the hospital bed while Kangwon listened to her lungs, even though the little disc thingies on the stef… stethoscope were cold against her ribs, and the pressure on her burns made her want to squirm.

"Exhale," Kang directed, and she obeyed, breathing slowly out, repeating the in-out breathing as he worked his way down both sides of her body, back and front.

When he was done, he straightened up, takin' the band he used to hold the contraption on his head off.

"Well?" Korea demanded.

He'd been facin' the corner the whole examination (even though Hae had her slip on, it was just pulled up to her chest), but he spun around to look at Kang now.

"She's fine," Kang told him. "Just a minor infection. From picking her elbow," he said pointedly, looking at Hae.

She blinked innocently, sliding her hand away from the part of her body he'd examined earlier.

She couldn't help it! She'd been doing good at not pickin', but she had a ton'a new burns now from the transformer attacks (something she hadn't thought was possible), and whenever the one that covered her elbow started to heal, the scabs got all stiff and gross and made her arm feel weird when she was trying to work. The feeling was so annoying that before she knew it, she'd be pickin' them off, like on the ride back to Pyongyang a few days ago. And even if she didn't, they broke open on their own when she helped out in the fields.

But Korea was still glarin' at her, and she knew he didn't want to hear excuses.

"Ah'm sorry," she said to both of 'em, hanging her head. "Ah really din't mean to."

"Make sure it doesn't happen again," her country ordered. "I can't have you out of commission for a second time."

"It won't, Korea," Hae promised, really hoping it wouldn't. She'd never disobey him on purpose, her hands were just traitors that got all picky without her realizin'.

Korea had been keeping his eye on her face, but it flicked down for a moment, to her stomach.

Hae pulled her shift down over the mess of ribs, blisters, and bloody bandages, swingin' her heels as she put her undershirt and jacket back on, covering it all up.

"Ah'm okay, Korea," she chirped, givin' him a real big smile. "Ah told ya ah din't feel that bad."

Her head just felt a li'l hotter than usual. She wouldn't'a worried him at all, but she wanted to make sure it wasn't the sympathetic fever getting worse. And she didn't want to bother Kang unless she *really* had to. And she only really had to if Korea said so.

He was still all tense, so she added, "Kang says it's just a li'l infection. And he's never wrong."

Her cousin's voice was quiet as he said, "I'm wrong sometimes, Hae."

He was rubbin' his face, his smooth doctor's gloves off now. He kept it down, like he didn't want them to see, but Hae was still sitting, so she caught a glimpse of his eyes through his fingers.

They were real tired.

But his expression was easy again when he lifted his head. "But yeah, it's just an infection. I'll give you a few antibiotics, and you

should be fine."

Hae frowned, sneaking a look at Korea, who was still starin' at her stomach like covering it up with her clothes hadn't helped at all. She tried to catch Kangwon's attention to talk to him with her face, but he'd gone back to rubbing his.

"Do ah… *have* to take antibiotics?" she ventured, flinching as Korea immediately growled, "Yes."

She didn't want to use up their hospitals' precious medicine. Their machines couldn't work right without steady power, and if someone needed to be hooked up to one after they got sick 'cuz she'd taken medicine they needed…

"But-"

"South Hwanghae," Korea growled in that voice that meant if she said anything else he'd get mad for real. "Do you need to be reminded of the criticism I gave you after your recuperative coma?"

Kang had told him about her wanting to refuse rations. He hadn't told him *all* of it, and Korea hadn't asked so Hae hadn't had to either. But he did know she hadn't wanted to eat too much as part of her cholera treatment.

She didn't blame her cousin. He was just tryin' to look out for her. And Korea hadn't been mad. He hadn't even been upset. Not at her. But she had been criticized for it.

Hae looked down at her scuffed boots. "No."

She hurt too much right now. If he gave her that disappointed look, she'd burst into tears. Then he'd just be even more disappointed.

"Then you will take whatever Kangwon prescribes you," he ordered. "Or else when you die again, I'll make sure you don't wake up."

His teeth bit down on the last word, his jaw twitchin'.

Hae said real quick, “Ayuh, Comrade Gen’ral.”

She didn’t want to die again. Korea got that look in his eye even thinking about it. If it actually happened…

“You won’t need many, Hae,” Kang soothed. “And I told you before- if you need them, it’s not a waste.”

He went to touch her shoulder, but his hand only hovered, then dropped. Hae didn’t know if it was because he’d seen how burnt up her shoulders were, or if it was ‘cuz his own hands were hurtin’ under the bandages. She hoped it wasn’t the first one. She didn’t mind a li’l pain if she got a hug out of it. And since she was always in pain all the time now, the hug could only make it better.

Her eyes flicked sideways, and she guiltily fiddled with her top button.

It wasn’t like she was *really* hurtin’. Korea had to bear all the bombing from *all* their northern provinces. He had way more burns than her. And since he wasn’t curlin’ up into a ball crying, she wouldn’t either. She was tough. She’d also just… really like a hug.

Kang left to get the medicine, taking the flashlight with him. Hae’s eyes didn’t even get to close before Korea’s light came on, chasin’ the shadows out of the small check-up room.

“Thank ya, Korea,” Hae said, her insides relaxing a li’l.

He didn’t answer. He was looking at her stomach again.

Hae wished she could pull the shadows back over just that part of her, and the bandages on her face and hands. But she knew even if it was pitch black, Korea would see them anyway.

Kangwon came back a few minutes later, handing her a li’l bottle.

“Penicillin,” he told her. “They're the ones I gave you when you got that mouse bite in '48. Take two a day for a week. Only take them with your rations, and bring the bottle back after.”

Hae gaped in dismay, running through her fingers just to be sure.

Two a day for a week? That was fourteen pills!

“You need them, Hae,” Kang said seriously. “You remember why North Pyongan couldn’t help Korea break us out of the holding camp?”

“’Cuz Korea doesn’t like bringin’ us with him on dangerous missions, even though he always tells us to bring backup an’ never go alone if we don’t have to,” Hae said confidently.

Korea grimaced. Kangwon didn’t smile as wide as she’d wanted, but he did have to hide a tiny one.

“And because his infection wouldn’t let him operate,” her cousin said. “You wouldn’t want to get stuck here if America launches another attack and we need to defend ourselves or march south, would you?”

Hae’s back teeth clenched. “No.”

She wanted to be there where Korea put his fist through ‘Merica’s stupid stripy face. And she *needed* to be there when he confronted the Southern One. He needed her there to make sure the bastard didn’t blind him for good.

“Then take your damn pills,” Korea muttered.

He wasn’t looking at either of ‘em now. He was staring past them, at the white wall. Hae looked too, thinking there might be a bug for her to kill, but didn’t see anything.

“Okay, Korea.” She took the bottle, tuckin’ it safely into her belt pouch and doing up the clasp. The only thing worse than taking fourteen pills from someone would be losing them.

“And don’t say anything about ‘wasting’ medicine around Kim Yong-hwan,” he ordered, finally breaking his starin’ contest with the wall.

“Because she’ll scold you for it?” Kang asked, leaning back against the door, his face twitching like it wanted to wince.

Korea's was stony. “Just don’t do it.”

Hae promised not to, staying on the cot as they moved on to a germ warfare debrief.

She wanted to get back to work, but Korea hadn’t told her to, so she thought he wasn’t done with her. And she wanted to be in the same room as him while she could. He hadn’t slept at the bunker since the electricity went out, and she was probably goin’ to get sent back to her province soon since the meeting of the Party Political Committee was over. They had work to do to get ready for the Party leadin’ body elections in August and September, and to make sure all the criticism the Gen’ral and everyone else gave at the meeting was followed through on.

Hae was going to suggest that Korea send her along to Hwanghae to keep rallyin’ everyone there, and send Hwang to survey the ri People’s Committees an’ Party cells across the country to find out what the best stuff to put in the winter courses was, so both of them would be doing what they were good at. All innocent-like.

She snuck a look at him.

He was focused on Kang. His head still didn’t have any burns for some reason. North Hamgyong had grumbled about it, but it pleased Hae. Even the bombs knew not to mess with his face. It made her feel a li’l better to know that even if everything she could see was destroyed, enough of Korea was still standing that her Countryhuman didn’t have to wear these annoying bandages on his face like her. She could see all his bands, and the li’l scar above his eyebrow, and his cheeks. Even if they were even hollower than hers, being able to see their flag still untied the braids her insides had tied themselves into.

And she could see his eye. It was narrowed now, a li’l tight at the corners. But when she said she thought her sympathetic fever had gotten worse and it might be a real one, it had shot wide open, all alarmed as he clamped down on her shoulder and dragged her off to see Kang.

She knew he didn’t want to lose her or Hwang. Just like her and

her brother didn't want to lose each other. Just like she didn't want to lose…

Hae pulled her legs up onto the cot, wedging her heels against the side so she wouldn't get the thin sheet dirty, trying not to feel her thighs splitting opening as she rested her chin on her knees.

Korea didn't want to lose them. And he was smart. Even if they didn't tell him to separate them, she knew he'd still make the right decision.

But... she did... know he didn't always. It probably wasn't the right decision not to take at least Cha or Hambu to break them out of the holding camp. Or to sneak away to the south a few months ago. And she guessed he hadn't known that the Southern One was stupid and evil back then, but Seodaemun probably hadn't been the right decision either. He'd even said it wasn't.

Korea *could* be wrong sometimes. He'd been wrong about the Southern One being kind, after all.

She didn't love him any less for it, and she knew he was still right at least ninety percent of the time, but…

She knew he'd make the right decision with her an' Hwang, like he'd made the right decision with Kang an' Gang. But she also knew that was all she could hope for.

Hae got up while Kang was midway through tellin' Korea about the recent germ attacks around the country, walking over to wrap her arms around their Countryhuman. He tried to shove her off, but she clung tight, and he couldn't interrupt Kang talkin' about another batch of spiders torched in his province, so she got to stay.

He huffed, grabbing her arms. Hae tightened her hold, but he just moved them up so she was hugging his chest instead of his stomach. Pleased, she relaxed her grip, hopin' she hadn't hurt him.

"China told me Liaotung had more blighted leaves dropped on her province a couple days ago," Kang reported. "Looks like *Macrophoma kuwatsukai.*"

“That’s the stuff that causes ring spot on apples an’ pears,” Hae told Korea helpfully.

Hwang had been surprised she knew that kind’a stuff. Not in a mean way, just a surprised way. She didn’t know what he thought she’d been learnin’ in her night classes to join the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, but of course she knew all the gross fungi and stuff that caused crops to rot. She just called them by normal names. She didn’t see why scientist types had to call them all fancy. She thought maybe it was 'cuz peasants knew more about plants and animals, so they needed to make up code words so they could still feel smarter.

Korea had went stiff at her words.

Oh, right. Hae should be stiff, too. Ring rot was real bad. It didn’t just make the apple go bad, but the entire tree, causin’ cankers and twig blight, until the entire thing was no good and had to be cut down. And it was *really* infectious.

“They burned ‘em, right?” she asked urgently.

“Yeah,” Kangwon said. “Don’t worry. They just kept a few samples for testing.”

But if they were just dropped a couple days ago, they didn’t know if any had got missed and managed to infect a tree.

Hae buried her face in Korea’s side. She hoped the Chinese didn’t have many orchards in the northeast. And she hoped they didn’t get any more dropped on *their* country.

“We’re handling the drops here?” Korea’s voice rumbled in her ‘ear’ like a tractor.

“Ayuh,” Hae said into his uniform. “Everyone knows to burn any weird leaves. And to get rid’a trees or crops right away if they show blight.”

They couldn’t afford to go around burnin’ down fields or trees right now (except for the mountain peasants that still slash-and-burn farmed), but losing one tree was worth it to save an orchard.

“Good. Keep it up.” But Korea didn’t untense. “Word on the ISC?”

“They’re investigating Shenyang now,” Kangwon told him. “I got a message from Zhao Jingjing, and she says the reports were all good. They should be here by the end of the month.”

Korea nodded tersely.

Kangwon fiddled with his fingers a li’l, how he did when he was trying not to bite them. “Korea, the Security Council resolution-“

“The second veto was the last,” Korea said blankly. “They don’t intend to listen to us. They have decided that CCCP refusing to accept us not having a presence at the vote means that we are lying.”

Kang closed his eyes, nodding. It looked like it was hard to open them again. “Alright. At least the Commission will get the word out.”

Korea didn’t respond.

‘Bastids.’ Hae’s cousin was already upset with everything he had to deal with in the hospitals. On top of that, they had to knock out their power and leave him and their patients in the dark, and call them liars.

America was the liar. The other foreigners were just too stupid to tell. Or so evil that they didn’t care.

“And…” Kangwon hesitated. “Did they say anything about Gangwon?”

Korea jaw twitched. “CCCP brought up summoning him to provide his account of his time fighting the germ warfare here. He was told Gangwon had already testified internally that I detained him against his will, and that he has no desire to spread our lies.”

Kang hid his fingers in his palms. “Did South Command him to say that?”

“Gang would *never* say that,” Hae declared. “Even if the Southern

One tried to make him. He'd fight back like SH did."

"It's just hearsay," Korea dismissed. "Our agents say he hasn't left his holding area or been visited in days, since before CCCP brought it up at the first vote. America hasn't had a chance to make him say anything."

Hae and Kangwon's eyes slid to each other, then away.

"Alright," Kang said tiredly. "That's as good as it can be."

Korea's jaw was twitchin' a lot today. "We're done here. Get back to work."

Kang gave a slow salute, shufflin' aside so they could get to the door. "Hae, take some plantain and ramps from your garden patch and make a poultice for your elbow every day."

She pouted as Korea dragged her for the door. "But they're itchy."

"You said you pick because you forget you're not supposed to," he reminded her. "If it's itching, you won't forget."

She reluctantly agreed to do it, even though she'd rather eat the tasty wild garlic and plantain leaves than smear them on her skin.

Kangwon smiled at her, but as she detached herself from Korea's side so she could shut the door, she caught him slumping down onto the cot and putting his head in his hands.

Her heart ached, but she couldn't go back in to hug him. Korea wouldn't like seeing how exhausted he really was. She'd already seen him eyeing the shadows under Kang's eyes, almost as dark as the ones under his. She'd just make sure to be extra cheery at her next blood donation.

Aw danggit. Since she was sick she wouldn't be able to donate until she was better.

'Stupid elbow.' And her traitorous hands.

Ever since the military hospital had got its pretty coat of teal and

white paint, it usually felt pretty big. But with the lights off, the hallways seemed cramped, like fox burrows. They felt so narrow that she couldn't forget they were underground the way she usually tried to, even with Korea's flashlight lighting the way. She wasn't allowed to cling to him with the nurses walkin' around with their lamps, but she stayed close, right on his heels, until they were back out in the wide-open bright.

Even though it was raining outside, and the summer heat immediately jumped on her like a musky-breathed puppy that really wanted to be pet, makin' her sweat in the uniform she couldn't take off, Hae was relieved.

She hadn't realized how used she'd got to electricity. Back during the Occupation, if the dark started gettin' to her, she just had to deal with it. Fires took too long to make and attracted enemy attention, lamp oil and candles couldn't be wasted just 'cuz she was a li'l… *not* scared, and matches only gave her a second of bright, then left the place feelin' even darker than before.

But after they'd got everything back up and running, if she worked so long in the office that shadows started to creep through the window, she could just reach over and switch on her lamp to keep working. If Hwang was out late and her room in Haeju started feeling too small, she could walk over to the switch and light the whole house up. And if the walls of Korea's windowless bedroom started closing in, and the warm dark behind her lids got cold, and his soft breathing wasn't enough to push them back, she knew she could lunge for the desk and brighten the room.

Korea always was enough to remind her she wasn't in the dark and lonely, in the hole. But it was still nice knowing she could make her own light.

But ever since the war, she couldn't depend on electricity anymore. Lights couldn't be turned on at the front, and even at the rear, lines would get cut or transformers would get bombed, and she was left with just her flashlight.

And now no one could depend on it at all.

"Korea," she asked as they headed away from the hospital. "Are we goin' to get electricity everywhere after the war's over?"

She didn't ask if it would be back on soon. Pyo had asked again a couple days ago, and he'd snapped at her.

"Yes," he said, not looking at her. "Rebuilding has to be the main focus, but we're going to work on electrifying all the villages as soon as possible."

That meant no one would ever have to worry about the dark again, even the people up in the mountains.

Hae gave a happy li'l skip, then startled as someone said, "A goal I can admire."

Korea didn't even flinch as Mao Zhilong slid into the space Hae's jump had put between them.

"Ah, sorry Little Tiger," he said, all innocent when she knew he *wasn't.* "Did I scare you?"

"No." Hae pouted, hoppin' over to Korea's other side.

She still wasn't allowed to hug him because Pong-ju and Man-won were behind them, but she made sure the Chinese guy could see she was walking closer to her Countryhuman than him.

"That's good," he said. "Just like bringing electricity to your country." He smiled at Korea from under his mask. "You want to 'light up the Peninsula from Hallasan to Paektusan,' isn't that what you told me awhile ago?"

Korea hunched, not looking at him as the red on his band got deeper. "Shut up."

Hae liked getting to see him do that since it was so rare, but she still asked, "Korea, where are we goin'?" before Mao Zhilong could tease him more.

He got to do that more than enough since he was allowed to sleep in his room *and* go to Jonsung complex with him (which she still

definitely didn't know the location of, nope).

She'd thought Korea would send her off once they were out of the hospital, but he'd turned for the rail line that ran along the river, toward where the Quarantine Hospital had been before the war.

"I'm going to Jonsung complex," he told her. *"You* are heading back to the bunker to rest."

Hae halted. "But ah want to get back to work!"

"Then you should have thought about that before you got yourself an infection. You are taking at least one rest day."

But Hae didn't want to be locked up in the bunker all day! She couldn't even use her flashlight 'cuz it would run out of battery and she'd get in trouble for wasting it. And Pong-ju and Man-won couldn't talk with her if they were standing guard.

"Ah can work, Korea, honest," she protested, scampering after him. "It's just weedin' an' makin' sure the fields are stayin' drained, and the paddies are stayin' wet."

"And *you* will get wet." He swept rainwater from his forehead, flickin' it at Mao Zhilong. "And then you'll get even sicker."

But if she was just sitting around doing nothin' she wouldn't be showing Korea that her an' Hwang got way more work done as two people!

"Ah won't," she protested. "Ah only got sick last time 'cuz ah was-"

She cut herself off just as Korea spun to face her.

"South Hwanghae, *I mean it,"* he growled. "I will *not* have you being made useless to me again. Regardless of whether we get a ceasefire soon or not, I need you active, either to fight or rebuild."

His narrowed eye added, *'**Don't** argue with me in front of China.'*

Hae pouted. She really *really* didn't want to go sit in the dark

lonely bunker.

But she also didn't want to make Korea mad.

She widened her eyes, silently begging him, but he just narrowed his even more, until it was just a slit of white. Rain pattered off his epaulets and they bent as much as him.

Hae hung her head. "Yes, Korea."

He squinted at her harder, then turned on his heel. "March. I'm escorting you to the bridge."

"So diligent," Mao Zhilong said, following him again as Hae trudged after.

"I just don't trust her guards not to give in to her," Korea muttered.

"Comrades Pong-ju an' Man-won wouldn't disobey you like that, Korea," Hae defended their honour, but quietly, just in case they hadn't heard him say that. "And ah wouldn't either. Ah'd never not do what ya tell me to."

Which was why she *wasn't* going to pick her elbow burns again. Even though it'd be real hard if it was just her locked up in the bunker with nothin' to do, just her and the pain and the dark-

'Nope!' Not happenin'. She'd keep the door open and talk to whichever one of her guards stayed close. Korea couldn't tell her not to, 'cuz Kang said fresh air was some of the best medicine there was.

Korea sighed. "For the last time- I don't want you to just do whatever I tell you to."

"Okay, Korea!"

He sighed again.

The rain poured down, soaking Hae's uniform as they walked along the railway. She usually liked the rain 'cuz it meant the fields

would be getting a nice drink, and it was especially important in July to make sure the rice paddies wouldn't dry out. But she didn't like how warm it was today, mixin' with the sweat coating her and making it run into her burns, stinging. As she tried to swipe the water off her face, only giving her bandages more to absorb, she couldn't help but think of how weird and spongy Pyobu had looked after he came back from drowning, his scabs having soaked up all the ocean water.

'Yuck.'

She'd get dried off and changed into her spare uniform at the bunker, *then* sit in the doorway.

"Comrade Nam Il says the Americans still don't intend to end their recess until the week is over," Korea told Mao Zhilong. "Still no word on the two thousand."

"You know," the Chinese man said. "I'm perfectly capable of staying updated on the talks and giving you the highlights. If you want to focus on your energy situation for now, I can handle the negotiation reports."

"I'm not letting you take control of reports for *my* country," Korea snapped, which Hae could've told Mao Zhilong he would do. He didn't even like the provinces takin' control of stuff like that. He had to read *all* the reports, even if they'd already read them.

Hae thought it was really impressive, especially since he didn't even like reading as much as Hwang did. She knew she couldn't read as much as Korea did, unless he ordered her to. And even then, she'd probably get squirmy and start pickin' her elbow again.

"I believe the word I used was 'handle,'" Mao Zhilong said. "But have it your way."

Hae envied the way he swished through the raindrops, like they weren't even touching him. They were- she could see that his olive uniform had got darker, but he didn't look all soaked like her and Korea. His scarf wasn't even plastered to his head. She thought if Pyo could see him right now, she might have to hold her back so

she couldn't hurt him.

She skipped along at Korea's side, even though she wasn't exactly happy about where she was headed. But her Countryhuman was stretchin' his legs so Mao Zhilong couldn't get ahead of him, so she had to to keep up. She only half-listened to what they were talking about, enjoyin' the rasp of Korea's voice more than the words, since he'd already updated her a few hours ago at the muster point, before she'd told him about her fever.

It was the same POW problem, the Yankees refusin' to give their people back, and a lot of numbers stuff that made Hae's head spin. They'd been saying a huge amount of the eighty thousand prisoners on Geoje Island didn't want to go home, then lowered it to five percent, even though all the press that visited were still sayin' they were all 'diehard Communists,' a term Hae didn't like much. Hwang said it was a good thing, but she thought there were better ways to say 'super loyal to Korea' that didn't involve the word 'die.'

Anyway, now the Yanks were admittin' that seventy-eight thousand of them wanted to come back north, but weren't saying anything about the other two thousand.

Hae didn't like that. She didn't like that at all.

She'd always known Korea was going to come for her when she was in the camp, 'cuz he knew she was there, waiting for him. But those two thousand didn't know that. They didn't know Korea had that big list of all their names that he kept in his bag, and that he was always saying they'd get them back no matter what. Those two thousand people could be being tortured right now as 'Merica tried to make them give in, and they wouldn't know that Korea was here fightin' for them. They might die without knowing it.

And Hae didn't like that Rhee was sayin' almost thirty thousand of the forty-four thousand civilians-that-probably-weren't-civilians were going to fight for him. And not just because it was illegal. They knew who some of them were, they knew some of them were their soldiers, but they didn't have every name. The Yankees had never handed over the full list.

Even Korea didn't know some of them were missing. Just like when he hadn't known Hae had even existed.

She could remember those final days in the hole now, sitting in the dark thinking she was never going to be rescued. That no one would ever know where she was. That maybe she wasn't even real. That she'd die the same way she'd lived- alone.

If it hadn't been for Eyebrows deciding to be nice, she *would* have died down there. The Japanese would've left Korea, and either 'killed' her themselves or left her to rot. Her body would heal in her recuperative coma, but even after she woke up she'd still be chained up in the dark and lonely, and the rats probably would've feasted on her while she was dead. She would have spent the rest of her life rat-bitten and starving, falling in and out of comas until one day Korea fixed whatever had made two Hwanghaes in the first place, and she would fade away. And no one would have ever known she'd existed in the first place. Not Hwang, not the Gen'ral, not her people, not SH or Korea. Not even her.

She didn't like to think that even one of their soldiers was locked up right now, dark and lonely and hungry, their only company the Yankees torturin' them, not knowing that Korea would come for them, not knowing that even if him and Hae and the others didn't know their names that they knew they were there, knew they were *real.* That someone out here remembered them.

She didn't want to think about it. But she knew she had to. Like the hole. She couldn't let herself forget what had been done to her, and she couldn't forget what was happenin' to her people right now.

'Not ever.'

Hae wrapped her arms around herself, feeling small and soggy as the rain beat down on her charred skin. She'd fallen behind Korea, and was about to start skipping to catch up when something moved in the corner of her eye, somethin' small and yellow slipping in between the rubble of the old hospital bloc.

Her eyes shot open. Could it be?!

She started towards the rubble, but glanced back before her feet could carry her away.

Even though it was all rainy, there were a bunch'a people out and about. Rain was good 'cuz it meant there was less of a chance the planes would come. The railway workers were taking the chance to make sure the repairs they'd done in a hurry were solid, and workers bustled around the ruined city, hustlin' back and forth from hidden warehouses and supply dumps Hae wasn't allowed to know about as they got stuff ready to ship to the front.

Korea had stopped next to the tracks to talk to a work crew. He looked over, realizing she wasn't at his side.

Hae tipped her head to the rubble. *'Ah saw somethin'.'*

He tensed, fingers twitching for his pistol. *'Danger?'*

She shook her head, then blinked reassuringly. Korea looked up at the sky.

Hae knew what he was looking for. The weather *should* make it less likely for planes to show up, but it wasn't windy, and she knew a li'l rain and clouds wouldn't stop the Yankees if they really wanted to bomb them. Nothing did.

But right now nothin' filled the sky but patchy grey clouds, and the hissing of the rain drowned out any far-away droning. Korea tilted his head, telling her she had permission to investigate.

Happily, Hae skipped off for the broken wall that surrounded the old hospital, before abruptly slowing down. If it was him, she didn't want to scare him.

"Comrade Hae?" Man-won asked, comin' out of nowhere with his gun drawn. "What is it?"

Oops. Right. They couldn't read her silent talk with Korea.

She told him what she thought she'd saw, and he relaxed, tucking his pistol back in its holster.

“Alright. I reckon it’s safe to check it out.” The big man squinted at a nearby dug-out built under the shadow of the crumbling wall, where a peasant woman was huddled inside, sewin’ up a shirt.

Her huge bodyguard could be a li'l menacing sometimes, so Hae leaned past him to give the woman a friendly wave. Her face softened as she saw her, giving a tired one back.

Then Hae set off into the wreck of the hospital, navigatin’ through the parts of the cement walls that were still standing, all the paint blown off them, weird steel wires twisting out of the grey chunks. She got snagged on one, and Pong-ju had to unhook her.

She popped out on the other side of the wrecked main building without finding what she’d seen. Some of the smaller structures were still mostly standing, so she planted her hands on her hips and squinted at them, lookin’ for any movement in the drizzly rain.

There!

Hae saw something flash behind the mostly intact wall of a bathhouse and darted over. The far side of the room had caved in, causin’ the ceiling beam to crash down and take out the other wall, filling the small building with shattered stones and clay.

When she found what she’d seen, she felt a li’l disappointed. But then her excitement surged back.

“Cat!” She grabbed for the scrawny yellow-striped critter sitting on the beam, but it slid in between the rubble before she could catch it.

“Oops,” she said out loud, ashamed as she remembered what Hambu had told her about animals. She wouldn’t like it if someone suddenly chased *her* into a dead end and lunged at her.

Hand over her belly scar, Hae backed up a li’l.

“It’s not a hound,” Man-won noted, comin’ to stand next to her.

No, it wasn’t. Hae had thought it was probably too small, but…

She still missed Ppang. She hadn't found him after waking up, and SH said he never showed up when she was in her coma. It'd been months now. He almost definitely wasn't comin' back.

It made her sad, but she hoped he was happy wherever he was. Maybe someone nice really had taken him in. Someone that had food to spare.

"Nope," she said cheerily. "It's a cat!"

She hadn't seen one in ages, since before the war. They didn't like loud noises like bombs and trucks and construction, so they'd made themselves real scarce.

Well, she'd seen some in the village barns. But she knew what had happened to those, so she didn't want to think about them.

"Ah want to pet it," she announced.

Pong-ju's small eyebrows crinkled. "Ah think that might not be the best thing. It could have fleas."

Right. And she didn't want to get sick again.

Hae squatted, peering into the shadows where it was hiding. Its big green eyes peered back, doin' that thing cat eyes did where they turned to shiny silver discs. She decided it was a girl.

She looked wet and bedraggled, the way the province felt. Her yellow fur was plastered to her body, and she could count all her ribs just as clearly as she could count hers. But it looked like she didn't have any mangy patches, and her eyes, ears, and li'l pink nose looked clear.

"She looks healthy," she announced, then looked up at Man-won, battin' her lashes.

The large man sighed. "Ya really want to pet it?"

Hae nodded vigorously.

"Alright. I'll check it fer fleas." He put on gloves and moseyed past

her for the cat's hiding place.

"Don't come at it from above." Hae tried to whisper so she wouldn't scare it. "Animals hate that."

It took Man-won a few *'jjeut jjeut jjeut'*s and a li'l reaching, but in a minute he came up with the cat's scruff firmly in hand. He wouldn't let Hae touch her until she put her own emergency gloves on and he was finished carefully examining it. The moment he was, she reached out a hand for the cat to sniff, then snatched it from him.

"Hi there," she happily greeted the kitty as she struggled in her arms. She kept a firm grip, stroking her until she stopped fightin' (mostly), and just growled at her low in her throat.

Hae's mouth opened excitedly then clamped shut. Maybe she *shouldn't* tell her guards it sounded just like Korea. He might not like that.

"She's so cute!" she cooed, and Man-won stoically agreed.

"Ah'm more of a dog man myself," Pong-ju opined.

The cat growled at Hae again, so she rubbed behind her ears, wondering if she liked being scratched there like Ppang. But the ear twitched and flattened, so she went back to stroking her sides instead.

It made her sad not to be able to pet the fur. Even all wet it still looked soft. With her glove on, all she could feel were the ridges of her li'l ribcage, like back when her skin had been unburned enough that she could still run her fingertips over her own ribs, feelin' the bumps.

Hae knew she should just put her down and let her run away again, so she could hunt mice and birds until one of the Anti-Epidemic Units caught her, but…

She held the kitty close to her chest, and it went limp in her arms with a wheezing sigh, like Korea the few times she'd managed to git him in on-the-spot sparring.

She turned and trotted back for the rail line.

Korea was waiting near where she'd left him, deep in conversation with Mao Zhilong now that the workers had gone back to work. But the second she trotted across the rails, his eye was on her, alarmed.

"South Hwanghae!" he hissed like the cat. "Put that down!"

Hae tilted her away, but before she could say anything, Korea was lunging forward, grabbing the cat by the scruff and yanking her away from her, tossing her across the ground.

"Korea!" the province cried, dismayed. "Don't be mean!"

She tried to go for the cat, but he grabbed her by the shoulder with one hand, frantically wiping the one that touched the animal on his pant leg.

Hae winced as fingers dug into her sore burns, cracking the crust of scabs on them. But Korea's eye was still wide as it darted over her, searching frantically as he stopped trying to get his hand clean to grab at her collar and pockets, so she didn't say anything.

"Ah'm fine," she told him. "It din't have any fleas. Just ask Comrade Man-won."

Korea jerked his head over to the man, lookin' all murdery, and Hae guiltily apologized to him in her head.

"It's true," Man-won said with a soldier's expression. "Checked myself. Wouldn't've let her hold it if it did."

"You shouldn't have let her hold it at all," Korea said icily, but finally let go of her.

'Owwww.' Deep pain throbbed through Hae's shoulder, but she tried not to rub it. It'd just make it worse.

She looked around for the cat, afraid she'd ran away or been hurt. But she had just rolled when Korea threw her, poppin' right back up. She was sittin a few feet away by the mess of the railway worker canteen, washing her li'l paws. Hae thought the look she

gave Korea was sort of offended.

She went to go get her, but *'oof'*ed as she ran right into Korea's arm.

"Are you *trying* to get sick?" he snapped at her.

"She's not sick, Korea," Hae protested. "She doesn't have any fleas or other bugs, and she looks all healthy. Ah checked."

It was really really surprisin' for a stray cat not to have any bugs at all. That must mean their insect eradication was working.

"And Kang didn't say any germs got dropped on Pyongyang recently," she added. "And ah don't think even the Yankees would drop cats."

Not 'cuz she didn't think they weren't evil enough to. But cats weren't light like insects or compact like voles and other rodents. If you dropped a cat out of a plane, all its legs would snap. And that meant it couldn't spread your germs around.

"It doesn't matter if it doesn't have anything to do with the germ warfare," Korea growled. "Cats still carry disease."

The cat padded over like she knew he was talkin' about her. Even though she'd been all flinchy when Man-won tried to pet her, she sat down near Korea's boot with no problem, even after getting tossed.

Korea raised his foot, but Hae jumped on him.

"Don't kick her!" she cried, knocking him off balance so he had to put it down again.

"I wasn't going to kick it," he said irritably, shoving her away. "I was going to nudge it."

"I could kick it for you," Mao Zhilong volunteered, sliding over.

"No kickin' cats!" Hae threw herself in front of the kitty, arms spread out. "You'll have to go through me!"

“Hmmm. Only a fool kicks a tiger,” the Chinese man decided, craning his neck to eye the cat behind her.

She eyed him back, then tilted her li’l nose up.

“Unpleasant creatures,” Mao Zhilong sniffed, tiltin’ his own face up in the exact same way.

Hae glared at him, but he kept his hands in his sleeves and his feet on the ground. So did Korea.

Satisfied her new friend wasn’t goin’ to get punted like Pyo’s football, Hae clasped her hands in front of her waist. She thought she knew what the answer was, but…

She batted her eyelashes at her Countryhuman. “Korea?”

“No,” he said immediately. “You aren’t bringing the cat back to the bunker.”

“But she’s lonely!”

“It’s a *cat.* They don’t *get* lonely.”

“Everyone gets lonely,” Hae fought. “Look!”

They both looked at the cat. She lifted her leg to wash her privates. Despite what she saw, Hae decided she was still a girl cat.

“You aren’t bringing it back,” Korea said flatly. “I didn’t let you waste your rations on that mutt, I’m not letting you waste them on a cat.”

“Cats don’t need people to feed ‘em,” Hae told him, frowning as he insulted Ppang. “Remember Comrade Du-soon’s cat? He kept him at the Secret Camp, and he never had to feed him.”

Son Du-soon had found the mackerel cat as a kitten in a village the Japanese had run everyone out of. His mama and everyone else had been cut open, like Du-soon’s own family. He’d brought him back to camp and raised him on broth and pig milk until he was big enough to mouse. He used to walk around with him on his shoulder, even

going up and down the mountain. Korea always told him he should throw it away, but he said he was a special Japanese-fightin' cat, and they needed him to protect the granary. The only time she'd ever seen the man feed him was when the cat would bring a fish back. Then he'd fry it up and save a bit of meat for him as a reward.

"So she can feed herself," Hae said, gesturin' at her yellow cat. "She could even keep all the mice away from the bunker so we don't have to!"

She didn't like killing the rodents much. She already felt bad about the good bugs.

"We keep the mice away so we don't get sick," Korea growled. "The point of that is negated if the *cat* gets us sick."

"But she's not-"

"South Hwanghae." His voice hardened as he glared at her from under his spiky lashes. "Go hand it over to the rail workers."

Hae went cold. She knew what they'd do to her. The same thing everyone knew to do with strays right now.

She looked down, swingin' her shoulders side to side. "…Do ah have to? Can ah just let her go?"

"And if it does get sick the next time Americans drop fleas on the city?" Korea asked coolly. "Are you prepared for the blood of anyone it infects to be on your hands?"

"…No," Hae admitted.

That was why she didn't want to hand over the cat to anyone. Then *her* blood would be on her hands. Even if she didn't do it herself, the critter wouldn't understand why she'd been so nice to her, just to hand her over to someone that would dash her on the ground or use one of the railway spikes on her. She'd blame Hae and wonder why she'd betrayed her, and she din't like thinking about that.

She yelped as Korea grabbed her by the arm, dragging her over to

the wreck of the canteen. He let go to glare at her, jaw working.

"Korea," Hae ventured, her finger burns hurtin' from how hard she was clasping them. "Are you goin' to make me kill her?"

He stared at her a few seconds longer. Then asked in a low voice, "If I told you to, would you?"

Hae looked over at the cat still sittin' in the mud, delicately washing its paws while exchanging snooty looks with Mao Zhilong.

"…Ayuh," she said quietly, hanging her head.

Even if the cat was cute, it was still just a cat. Hae didn't want anyone to get sick 'cuz she was too weak to do what everyone in the villages hit by germ bombs had already done. She knew what it meant when they visited Pong-ju's hometown and his sister said all the cats and dogs were gone now. It made her happy 'cuz it meant everyone was workin' together to keep each other safe. So if she wasn't willing to do it herself, that meant she was a coward. If Korea told her that, she knew it would be part of the ninety percent of the time he was right.

Korea stared at her in silence. Hae couldn't help but shrink in on herself.

"I'm not going to make you kill it," he said eventually, makin' her slump in relief. "But you are going to return it to the place you found it."

"Thank you, Korea." Hae made sure to sound grateful. It was better than havin' to kill her herself, or hand her over to know she might as well have.

Just 'cuz she would do it if he told her to, didn't mean she *wanted* to.

Korea's lip twitched, showin' a fang in a li'l grimace, and he walked by her without another word.

Hae trudged after him.

Back at the tracks, she scooped the cat up, being careful to hold her far enough away from her body that Korea didn't look panicked, even though he still tensed.

"Go put that thing back, then carry on to the bunker," Korea ordered, makin' sure Man-won and Pong-ju heard, too. "I have something I need to do."

"Yes, Korea." Hae tried not to sound glum. "Can ah get Hwang to come with me so we can work on the ri course stuff?"

She'd been excited at the idea of havin' someone there with her. Now that she couldn't take the cat, thinking about the bunker made it seem even darker and lonelier.

And she might've been too squishy just now. She didn't want Korea to start thinking that mergin' her with Hwang might get rid of that.

He filled her with relief by nodding. "I'll find someone to-"

He cut himself off, jerking over, his voice tense all of a sudden. "What? What is it?"

Mao Zhilong had straightened up, his head swivelling around. It made Hae giggle a li'l. That with what Korea had said made it seem like he was a huntin' dog.

But her amusement died almost right away. She could see the Chinese man's eyes under his scarf, and they were alert and serious. And it was never good when Mao Zhilong looked serious.

He spun south, gazing across the ruins of the slaughterhouse and the warehouse district, up at the sky. Hae's heart sunk as she followed his look.

She couldn't see anything but slate clouds and rain. But Korea was looking too, and he didn't tell Mao Zhilong to stop screwin' around. His eye darted over the horizon, searching.

"Small wing incoming," Mao Zhilong said after a few moments. "There."

He pointed a gloved finger, and Hae followed it to see a few specks on the horizon, the tiniest li'l ring spots on the clouds.

Korea was so tense his muscles were quivering. “Another fake nuclear run?”

Hae swallowed. Those were bad, the way the TNT bombs roared like monsters as they took out entire blocks. But they were better than a real nuclear bomb.

And they couldn’t tell whether they were real or not until they hit.

Thankfully Mao Zhilong said, “No. Mostly fighters, a few light bombers.”

Hae’s insides went watery in relief. She didn’t know how he could tell that’s what the li’l dots were, but she believed him. He had real good vision- he’d even managed to tell her what kind of hawk was circlin’ high in the sky one day, and when it came down to roost, he’d been right.

Korea *‘tch’*ed, more annoyed than stiff now. “More leaflets.”

“Maybe a bomb or two if we’re unlucky,” Mao Zhilong agreed. “The regular kind. Even with this weather, it’s too bright out for a germ bomb.”

That was good. Hae cuddled the cat close.

The air raid alarms went off, but that happened a lot. Pyongyang hadn’t been hit with any huge bombing runs in a couple months, but they had to alert even if just a few recon planes came by, just in case. They could still strafe people with their guns, and did. The last-last time Hae had been in Sariwon with Hwang, they’d seen a group of peasant women get taken into a field hospital after a Yankee pilot had shot them up while they were washin’ clothes by the river. One hadn’t made it.

But a few light bombers weren’t enough to make Korea run for cover. He took them over to the rail line workers to make sure they were ready to man their anti-aircraft guns or take shelter.

While they worked their way down the tracks, the drone grew louder until the planes were circling over the city. Their bellies opened up, sending papers spiralling from their insides in streams, or dropping packages that burst open halfway down, scatterin' them everywhere, the same way they scattered the fleas and flies.

Anger surged in Hae, imaginin' the kind of stupid lies 'Merica had filled them with. She hated to think anyone would read the choppy Korean on them and believe it.

The planes didn't stay long. They just added their toxic snow to the rain already coming down, then wheeled away.

Hae bounced in place, looking at Korea as he curled his lip, watching the final leaflets drift down over the distant buildings.

"Fine," he huffed, catching her look. "You can come pick them up."

"Ura!"

Hae loved picking up the Yankee pamphlets and murderin' 'em. Reading the lies they were spewing about them made her mad, but she didn't have to read them. She just had to tear them into shreds and light them on fire so no one else could.

"But you rest all day today *and* tomorrow," Korea ordered.

That was okay! She would have Hwang to keep her company, and it might not be so gross out, so they could sit outside to work.

"And drop the cat."

Hae pouted, but set her on the ground, pettin' her li'l yellow head one last time. The cat yawned.

She went to take her gloves off, but decided to keep them on. The Yankees wouldn't be bold enough to drop infected insects in broad daylight, but they had dropped blankets and stuff before that'd made people sick. She knew they did the same with leaflets.

"We'll go clean up the warehouse district," Korea said, marching

past them, eyeing the cat as he did. “It’s busy today.”

Since Pyongyang hadn’t been getting *too* bombed lately (not countin’ the transformer attacks and a few rail line strikes), they’d had time to build more underground ammunition dumps and warehouses hidden around the rubble. Which meant lots of workers to man them.

Hae skipped after him, not bothered by the warm rain anymore. It would just help dissolve the miguk-noms' filth before anyone could read it.

As soon as they stepped out of the ruins of the residential district and were able to see the rail lines of the marshaling yard splayed out over the gap between it and the warehouse district, Hae froze, the hairs on her arms shootin’ up like soldiers caught slacking.

Workers were hurrying back and forth around them, carrying crates and cases inside as they shouted at each other. But it wasn’t the happy hurry of people doing their jobs or the exhausted one of the workers earlier, the one too many were doin’ lately. There was a tension in the air that made Hae’s stomach twist.

“Somethin’s wrong,” she said at the same time Korea did.

A man in a railway uniform saw them standing across the tracks and sprinted over, a stack of pamphlets in hand.

“Comrade Korea!” he cried.

“Leaflets aren’t supposed to be touched,” Korea said, voice tight. “They could be infected. You need to burn them.”

“I know,” the man said, panting. “But-“

He thrust one at Korea and he snatched it, eye flicking across the paper. Hae saw his jaw lock.

“Air raid incoming,” he said grimly. “Large.”

Hae caught a glimpse of the words on the paper. *‘-CITIZENS EVACUATE. PYONGYANG WILL BE BOMBED BY THE US AIR*

FORCE. THE COMMUNIST REGIME IS OUR TARGET, NOT YOU. AMERICA WANTS YOU TO EVACUATE SO YOU MAY LIVE. YOU HAVE-'

Cold and hot flashed through her. Fear for their people, but also fury. Their Supreme People's Assembly wasn't even in the city! The Yankees were just goin' to bomb the warehouses and the factories and the train cars lined up in the marshaling yard again, and everyone that worked at 'em the same way they always did, then say they were Communists so they deserved it.

They *were* Communists, or they at least loved Korea, which meant to someone stupid like 'Merica they were the exact same thing. He didn't want *any* of them to get away, and he knew they couldn't. There was nowhere to go that wasn't the mountains in the rain, and it'd take an entire day to evacuate Pyongyang, even with just a few thousand essential people left in it.

He wanted to kill them all. He just wanted to look good while doin' it.

Hae tore the pamphlet out of Korea's hands, ripping it into tiny pieces and throwing it on the ground, grinding the scraps into the mud until they drowned it in.

'Stupid thick-faced Yankee.' Hundreds of people wouldn't even see these stupid leaflets or know to evacuate if they weren't told by the Party and People's Committee cells in charge of evacuations.

The cold won out in Hae's stomach.

The power was out. The radio stations were down. *Communications* were down.

"Korea-"

"I know." He raised his voice, shoutin' loud enough to be heard over the clamour. "Pyongyang is going to be bombed! Get all essential supplies hidden and make sure the supply dumps are camouflaged- don't let the enemy claim even one more warehouse!"

Hae could see it in his face, just for a second. He knew they would.

Korea gazed at the railcars as the workers pushed them along the tracks, tryin' to get them away from the marshaling yard which would be bombed for sure. His jaw pulsed.

"Sound the air raid alarm and spread the news!" he ordered their comrades. "Make sure any civilians know to evacuate to the bomb shelters! Remain calm- we have dealt with this before."

Almost every day for over two years.

"Long live Korea!" the workers all called, the ones with free hands throwin' their fists in the air to show them they heard him.

Korea's eye flickered. "Long live the Korean people."

To them he ordered, "Move out," spinning around. "Comrades Kim Man-won and Kim Pong-ju- get South Hwanghae and Mao Zhilong to Jonsung complex."

"Well that's not happening," Mao Zhilong said, and Hae agreed, jogging after him.

"Ah'll help raise the alarm, Korea."

"We don't have time to argue!" he snapped, leaping over rubble.

Mao Zhilong followed easily. "So it looks like *you* don't have time to stop us. I'll carry the news along the warehouse district, you get to your broadcasting station and see if you can get the word out."

Korea bared his teeth, looking between them. Then, "Keep her safe," he ordered Hae's guards before sprinting away.

"Meet up at Taedongmun in two hours or when the planes come!" he called back before he disappeared into the ruined streets.

Hae's heart skipped. 'Meet up' not 'meet me.'

"Don't worry, Little Tiger," Mao Zhilong said, flicking his long sleeve at her as he buttoned it up. "I'll make sure he gets back to you. Go cover the northwest in the meantime."

He took off before she could say anythin', off in the opposite direction, deeper into the warehouse district.

Trumpets blasted from across the city, more takin' up the call, joined by bells and whistles, all of 'em clamouring to tell everyone that the Yankees planes were coming to kill them again.

Hae took a deep breath, then put her shoulders back.

"C'mon," she ordered her guards in her best general voice. "Let's go evacuate folks."

For over an hour she ran all over Pyongyang, from Stalin Street to the Pothong, all through the crumbling school district and the cattle market, even clambering over the completely destroyed city center just in case people were sheltering there thinking it was too messed up to hit again, screamin' herself hoarse as she warned anyone listening to get to the air raid shelters.

The broadcasting system never came on, just like it hadn't for the past two weeks. But from the sudden amount of people on the more main streets, Hae thought the Party and People's Committee in Jonsung had got word and come down to help. And from all the ones she knew were civilians that were helpin' the militia herd other folks out of the city and into the shelters, she thought Korea had been rounding up volunteers.

With them helping, Hae left the cleared main roads and went to the places she hadn't seen pamphlets fall over, her shouting bringin' people out of the woodwork. Some of 'em took off for the nearest shelter, but the others hunkered down in place, ducking into their dug-outs buried under piles of rubble and earth, hoping it would be enough to keep them safe.

She didn't bother looking at the sky. She couldn't stop the deathbirds from comin'. Man-won and Pong-ju would drag her to safety as soon as they saw anything.

'Safety!' Hae turned on a heel and shot off towards the old Quarantine Hospital again, even though she knew the workers would've already heard from their comrades down the line.

A handcart flew by as she sprinted across the tracks, the men on it pumpin' away to get it and all the building supplies on it out of the city to cover. Hae flew past the crumbled walls, almost falling on her face as she slid to a halt in the slippery mud, barely keeping her balance.

"Comrade!" she called, and the peasant woman she'd seen before peeked out of her hole, still there like she'd been worried about, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Are the planes coming?" she asked in a wavering voice.

"Ayuh," Hae panted, hand over her side. She could feel blood soakin' the bandages there, hotter than the rain. "Ah'll take you to the City Hall shelter. Come on!"

But she shied away from her hand like the cat earlier. "M-My husband's at the rail bridge. What if he can't find me after?"

"You can come back here once the bombin's over," Hae told her, trying not to hop from foot to foot as her skin burned.

"We aren't near any important rail junctions," the woman said, tugging on her bun. "We haven't got hit here yet. S-Surely…"

Her eyes shone fearfully as she shrank back in the hole.

She was afraid. Which meant Hae needed to be the opposite of that, the way Korea was.

She made her shoulders relax, leaning up so she wasn't blocking the dug-out, putting her hands on her hips and a smile on her face, hopin' the lady couldn't see the blood soaking through her clothes yet.

"You could be safe," she told her. "But ah don't want to risk it. You're too close to the river crossin'. The Yankees say they're goin' to be hittin' us hard, and they don't know how to aim for things that aren't people."

The woman still hesitated.

“And ah’ll make sure you find your husband after,” the province added, trying to sound like there was no way she could fail, the way Korea did.

She knew he’d let her cancel her rest day if it was for somethin’ like that.

Before the woman could say anything, Kim Man-won said, “Comrade Hae.”

His voice was tense. Hae’s stomach twisted into knots, but she kept her smile up, holdin’ out her hand.

The woman’s lip quivered, then firmed, and she nodded. “Alright. But my things-"

Hae didn’t wait for her to finish, sliding into the hole and helpin’ her lay her few clothes an’ cooking supplies on a jogak-po before wrapping them up. She tried not to look like she was rushing as she helped the woman tie it to her back, then gave her a hand out of the hole.

“Bunker time!” she chirped, not looking at the southern sky.

The lady did. Her face went pale.

As they hurried from the wreckage of the hospital, Hae caught a glimpse of yellow waiting by the broken gate. Without stopping, she scooped it up, wedgin’ it under her arm as she ran, leading the woman for the City Hall shelter, passing her off to a Party member already in there and getting her name, promisin’ that if her husband didn’t find her, she would.

Then she took off, heading west around the City Hall so she wouldn’t get stuck in the rubble on the riverside streets, still shoutin’, trying to warn anyone else about what was about to happen.

But if they couldn’t hear her, they could hear the planes. That distant droning buzz rumblin’ on the horizon, getting closer.

Hae’s legs burned as she sprinted through the city, trying to reach

the meeting spot before they got here. The torn skin on the back of her thighs chafed raw under her bandages, sending sparks of pain through her legs, and the stitch in her side wasn't in her innards where it was supposed to be, but outside. Every time her body flexed as she took a corner or vaulted over a pile of rubble, sharp heat tore though her belly and chest.

But she didn't stop running. Korea would be disappointed if Man-won had to carry her, and she knew if he was at the meeting spot and she wasn't, he would come looking for her. She didn't want him to be the reason he made another wrong decision.

Hae burst from the narrow streets and took a sharp left onto Stalin Street, gainin' speed on the open road. People were streaming in the same direction, carrying supplies on their backs as they tried to flee the city. Hae called to them to be safe as she dodged in and out of the crowd, reassurin' them that everything would be fine and they could come back soon, trying not to gasp the words out.

Her boots thumped on the parts of the tram tracks that hadn't been bombed or salvaged as she passed the old bank, the blackened skeleton of the library, the husk of Choguksa Temple, before she finally saw the road to Taedongmun, and the charred gate towerin' over the rubble around it.

As she veered onto the side street, her heart pounded like her feet.

'C'mon Korea-'

He was there! Pacin' in the open area like a tiger, arguing with Mao Zhilong. The moment he saw her, he pounced.

"Where were you?!" he snapped as she screeched to a halt, his eye arrowing for what was in her arms. "You better not have gone back for that damn cat."

Hae gasped for breath, unable to talk 'cuz she'd been yelling so much.

"We went back for a civilian," Pong-ju assured him, pantin' too. "Had to get her to the City Hall."

Hae nodded and Korea opened his mouth when Mao Zhilong said, “Here they come.”

Hae finally looked back at the sky.

A hundred black dots lined the horizon like a swarm of bees taking flight after their apiary had been shaken, their buzzin’ growing louder than the rain as they swept over the southern plains. The sky was only getting darker, but she knew what they really were. Not bees, but a whole flock of deathbirds, coming north like they had two weeks ago.

There were a lot of them. Enough that no one moved, eyes fixed forward, all dreading the exact same thing.

‘Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease.’ They’d already been retargeting their other power plants after they started fixin’ them and Pyobu and the others said power was almost back on and ‘Merica *couldn’t* be doin’ this again so soon.

Hae pressed closer to Korea, crushing the cat to her chest as Man-won and Pong-ju drew closer to her, rifles drawn like they could do anything against the incoming swarm.

They all stood still, rain pouring down around them as the drone grew louder. Hae looked up at Korea, seekin’ comfort.

But he just looked blank, his lips and face slack as he stared out at the heavy grey sky. And his eye-

Hae quickly looked away, pressing closer, hopin’ he could feel her warmth through the muggy rain.

When Mao Zhilong spoke it almost made her jump.

“If they were veering for the coast, they would’ve by now” he said, taking a step back. “They’re all coming this way.”

It was an awful way to feel. Hae din’t *want* to feel it. Not when it was Friday so the kids would be stuck at school, missin’ their parents, not knowing if they would be there to pick them up tomorrow or ever again. Not when there was no way their

warehouse workers had been able to get everything to safety. Not when they were standing next to one of the few landmarks in Pyongyang that hadn't been bombed to the ground yet, in the open.

But she was relieved. It wasn't the dam. It wasn't their power that everyone had been workin' so hard to fix.

It was just everything else.

The same guilty relief flooded Korea's eye before it was shuttered by his General look, his spine going straight and his shoulders squaring, that look that made Hae's stomach churn leaving his face.

"Run," he ordered, then took off for Moran Hill.

Hae didn't need to be told twice.

Behind them, the deathbirds came in for the kill.

China: I dislike cats. They're arrogant, never listen to what they're told, have no sense of personal boundaries, and think the world belongs to them.

North and Hae: …

My beautiful aerial map of Pyongyang made by the American Army in 1946 where it shows they were conducting active reconnaissance and were already interested in things like gasoline storage, water tank locations, mining supply locations, and army arsenal warehouses. <3 And I also can't post here because the resolution is insane for me to be able to read it.

Love when American sources go 'and the super benevolent American army told the Korean civilians to leave the city before bombing it, how nice of us!' As if warning people you're about to obliterate their houses and places of work before doing it, making them homeless, jobless, and with no supplies is so heroic. You'll notice Israel does the same thing in Palestine. 'We warned them they were about to annihilate their entire residential block! You can't get mad. ><' As if it's

really simple to pick up and leave your home when a war is going on, transit passes are required due to the war, and you have no money, also due to the war.

Also ‘She needed to be there when he confronted the Southern One.’ She was… (Warring Pyongyang)

Assurances, Believed And Not

The drone of the jets got closer and closer, until Hae couldn't hear her own boots on the ground anymore. She kept her eyes on Korea's back, refusin to look over her shoulder. The cat struggled in her arms, smellin' the fear around them, but she didn't let go, not wanting her to run off into the city and get killed by a bomb.

The park, the lumber yard, the drone getting louder, buzzin' in her skull.

"Korea-"

"Keep running," he ordered.

The northern market, cratered and empty, the wreckage of the riverside warehouses, explosions behind them, the orphanage, Moran Hill looming too far up ahead.

The drone separated into distinct sources, louder than the bombs over the south of the city, reverberatin' off the clouds like they were trapped in a dome.

"Hate to point out the obvious, but we aren't going to make it!" Mao Zhilong called just as the ground shook under Hae's feet.

Bombs slammed into the warehouses they'd just passed, plumes of fire and smoke bursting into the air with an roar.

"They're empty!" Hae hollered up at the clouds as a fleet of bombers screamed past. "They've been empty since the first time you bombed them!"

She couldn't even hear her own words, drowned out by the ringin' in her head and the planes in the sky.

Korea cursed as the jets went shooting over Moran Hill, more bombs cascadin' over it.

“Cover!” he shouted, screaming the word loud enough to make it through the ringing as the deathbirds reeled back around.

He veered off the street, leading them for the cluster of buildings that used to stand at the foot of the hill. Hae followed, makin’ sure not to lag behind. Above them the fighter-bombers sprayed the hill with their machine guns as the anti-aircraft teams stationed in the crags targeted them, metal slugs pingin’ off metal wings, some of them falling back down to earth like painful raindrops.

The ground shook as the hillside in front of them erupted in fire, and Hae went reeling forward, almost falling. Pong-ju just caught her on his way by, hauling her up by the arm and pulling her forward.

She’d tried to shoot out her arms to catch herself out of reflex, letting go of the cat. She twisted in mid-air, hitting the ground.

“Wait!” Hae called in alarm, but her guard didn’t listen and she had no choice but to keep runnin’ so she wouldn’t slow him down.

They reached the destroyed buildings, Korea ushering them into one of the dug-outs that peppered the base of the hill like worm holes in an apple so the anti-aircraft units had somewhere to go when the bombing forced them to scatter.

The hill shuddered, debris rainin’ down on him, but Korea didn’t flinch, unslinging his Type 49 and gesturing them in. Mao Zhilong slid into the hole, followed by Pong-ju shoving in Hae.

Hae had just popped up when Korea spun around in a way she knew way too well meant he was about to take off.

“Korea, where are you goin’?” she called as dirt showered down through the ceiling of wooden planks.

“Up to join the gunners. Stay here.”

The ground around them shook and shuddered and Hae didn’t have time to think before she shouted, *“Grab him!”*

Pong-ju froze, eyes darting between her and their Countryhuman

like his brain was short-circuitin', but Man-won moved on instinct at her order, leaping from the hole and wrapping his arms around Korea. He thrashed furiously, but the man used his bigger size to muscle him in, takin' advantage of Korea not actually trying to hurt him.

"What the *fuck* was *that?!"* Korea spat as he tore free, forced to crouch like the rest of them by the cramped hole, like a tiger about to attack.

Hae cringed, knowin' he was real mad if he as willing to cuss at one of their people, and Man-won immediately dropped to his knees and slammed his forehead into the damp ground.

"I'm so sorry, Comrade Korea! You gave me orders to obey Comrade's Hae's commands-"

"Not when it comes to me!"

"Korea, ya can't take off!" Hae protested. "The hill's under fire and there's no cover left, you'll get-"

The dug-out trembled again as an explosion roared over her, close enough she could see shrapnel rain down outside.

"I need to join our gunners." He tried to move forward, but Mao Zhilong said, "More planes coming from the east."

They couldn't see in that direction, but quieter explosions rang out under the ones right above 'em. Hae had listened to Pyongyang being bombed enough that she knew they came from across the river.

"If the weather doesn't get worse, I think we can expect all-day sorties," Mao Zhilong continued. "And B-29 backup when the sun sets. You'll get your chance to man the guns. Perhaps *after* there's a break in fire and you're less likely to get blown up?"

Korea argued as the machine guns rattled outside, and Hae caught somethin' from the corner of her eye, head jerking towards the grey light coming through the hole, standing on her knees to see better. Her eyes shot open.

The cat was still where she'd dropped her, cowerin' under the shadow of a half-standing clapboard wall, pressed flat to the ground, her thin tail bushed out, ears flat to her head, makin' her look as earless as Hae as she looked up at the sky in terror. A fighter jet shot by high above, slugs slammin' the ground between them, and Hae din't know if the pilot had bad aim or could somehow see the cat and was awful enough to target her like she was a draught animal.

Korea was shouting at Mao Zhilong and her guards over the ruckus as they tried to convince him to wait for a break in fire.

The cat didn't even flinch as another blast roared from the hill, she was too scared. She should be getting to shelter but a cat didn't know what shelter was. She didn't know what the planes or the guns were or why people were screamin' and shoutin' or why the place she lived in was being blown up in at all.

Hae had seen Son Du-soon in Haeju on the temporary retreat, but she hadn't got to ask about his cat. He'd lived to see Liberation, but had he lived to see the war? He'd be old if he had. Had he got to go to sleep in his comrade's arms one last time, or had he been blown to pieces as bombs hit the apartment Du-soon and his wife had lived in? Or was he still alive, not knowing why Du-soon was never comin' home, why his friend had abandoned him?

Animals didn't understand stuff. The horses and oxen didn't know why they suddenly got pumped full'a holes while they were working the fields. The cats and dogs didn't know why the village people suddenly turned on them 'cuz they weren't able to understand what the Yankees were doin'. They didn't get why they weren't even eaten, why their bodies had to go to waste. Even the bugs that got dropped on them didn't know they were bein' used to kill people. The spiders and other ones that were good for getting' rid of bugs that ate the crops just wanted to help, but they got squashed and burned anyway, and they didn't know why. Just like babies din't know why they were suddenly being torn out'a their mother's arms and smashed on the ground. Just like a little girl didn't know why she'd been shoved into a hole just to be tortured.

Korea had helped her understand. But the animals never could.

Hae thought of a li'l yellow dog looking upwards and wagging his tail, not knowing he was about to die.

"South Hwanghae!"

She was already shootin' up out of the hole, sprintin' back across the open ground. Fingers grazed her ankle, but they didn't catch her in time. The ground under her feet shook, trying to buck her off balance as the bombs ate up her hearing again, but she kept going, straight for the cat.

"Stay!" she heard Korea shout dimly as a drone made its way through the high-pitched ringin' in her head.

She'd almost made it when someone slammed into her at the waist, sending her smashing to the ground. Clods of dirt went flyin', rapid dull impacts as the deathbirds' machine guns strafed the ruins.

Hae barely noticed. She'd been about to jump for the cat when she was hit, and the impact had sent her sprawling, straight into it, *onto* it. She still couldn't hear anything but ringin' and dim explosions, but she could feel the animal struggling under her, and felt the *snap* as she came down. She tried to sit up to see if it was okay, but Korea was on top of her, pressing her into the wall as the bullets rained down.

She hadn't wanted him to follow her! She didn't want him to get shot 'cuz of a cat! She should've known he would, but she'd wanted to save her and now she'd just hurt her and put Korea in danger-

He was screaming something at her but she couldn't hear it. She could only flatten herself against him, trying not to hurt the cat more and hopin' he wasn't going to get shot 'cuz of her.

Suddenly the vibrations of the bullets stopped and Hae was being hauled up, dragged for the dug-out. She kept her grip on the squirming cat as Korea hauled her forward. Up above she could see the fiery plumes of rockets shooting for the planes, drivin' them back for a second, just enough time for Korea to toss her into the hole like a sack of rice, sliding in after her.

Hae rolled, trying to cushion the cat. She hadn't gone deaf like Gang, the ringin' was fading, letting her hear her yowling, an awful pained wail that reminded her of Sincheon, and Korea shouting at her.

"You fucking *idiot!"* he snapped, eye blazin'. "You want to get yourself killed over a fucking animal?!"

"Ah'm sorry!" Hae cried to him and the cat still writhing in her arms, her back leg hung at an awkward angle, her howling filling the hole, stabbing at her 'ears' as she tried to hold her without hurting her, only making her scream louder and her eyes fill with tears. "Ah din't mean to, ah'm sorry!"

"You *would* be if you got us both shot!"

His hand locked on the back of her neck, trying to drag her away from the cat, and Hae wanted to tell him to stop 'cuz he'd be upset after that her guards were seein' how much she'd scared him but the cat was still screamin' an' thrashin' an' the guns were firing outside and it was too *loud-*

"Shut it up!" Korea snarled, other hand reaching for the cat as Hae tried to huddle around it, tried to keep it safe.

It was suddenly torn from her, not by Korea but by Mao Zhilong. He pinned it to the floor of the shelter by its throat and Hae cried out, thinking he was going to break its neck.

But he dug his fingers in behind its jaw, forcing its mouth open as it hissed and spat, and he pulled somethin' out of his other sleeve, shoving it into its maw and closing her muzzle, holding his hand over her face until she stopped moving, goin' limp.

"You killed her?!" Hae cried, breaking free from Korea to scrabble over.

"Put it to sleep," Mao Zhilong corrected, and her heart soared as she grabbed her and felt her li'l heart hammerin' in her thin chest, starting to slow.

Hae sighed in relief, cradlin' the hurt cat in her arms, before

yelping as Korea seized her by the shoulder again.

"You-!"

Fire cut him off, an explosion of heat blastin' from the entrance as they were all sent slamming into the back wall, a wave of mud and dirt washing in as a bomb went off way too close. Hae couldn't sit up at first, dazed from the force, just managing to cling to the cat so Korea wouldn't throw her outside to die. She didn't have any time to recover before she was being shoved into the corner, her head bumpin' Mao Zhilong's as Korea pulled them into him, hunching over them on his knees.

She knew what he was doin', but his arm was around her too tight to fight off. The only thing that made her stop trying was Man-won and Pong-ju managing to escape him, putting themselves between his back and the exit.

The ringin' was back but she was sure he was yelling at them, even though they were just doing their jobs and probably couldn't hear him either. She could feel the vibrations of his voice through his chest, then the way it cut off as the dug-out rocked again, dirt raining from the ceiling, more heat comin' in from outside.

The shelter wasn't sturdy, It was just a hole with planks and rubble covered in packed dirt, and the bombs had cracked open underground warehouses before. If one hit them dead on it would collapse, mud and stuff caving in on them, buryin' them alive in the cold damp dark, unable to breathe.

Hae stopped squirming, curling over the cat the way Korea was curled over her and Mao Zhilong, pressing her head to his chest as she leaned into him, squeezing her eyes shut as another wave of force roared into them, smashing her guards back into Korea, and her into the wall.

Korea had stopped yelling, all she could feel was the thump of his heart against her skull, poundin' like the cat's had been, like it was trying to smash his ribs and break out. Hae tried to focus on it and nothin' else, not the ringin' or the dronin' or the dirt shaking over their heads, threatening to crush them, drowning it all in the

sloshing of her country's heartbeat.

It almost worked.

Finally an explosion loud enough to beat through her murdered eardrums rocked the world outside, and the shaking stopped.

Hae tentatively opened her eyes, still crushed to Korea's chest, not able to see anything except the green-brown of his uniform and Mao Zhilong's grey and white scarf. Korea's arm pressed tighter around her, then he pushed her away, leaning back.

For a second his eye was as big as hers. Then it narrowed again.

"Ssi-bal," was all he said, turning to make sure Hae's guards were alright.

They were. All muddy and sooty, and Pong-ju was slappin' his hand on his ear, but alright. Hae sagged in relief.

Mao Zhilong sat up, fixin' his scarf and rubbing his head. Korea had shoved him away so hard he'd knocked it off the wall.

Bombs were still falling outside, but a li'l farther away. The bombers had moved up the hill to get whoever had shot down the plane Hae could see sending smoke up from down the river.

"Ah'm sorry, Korea," she panted, too loud. Her head was still filled with noise.

He glared at her, barin' his teeth, but then *'tch'*ed, looking away. Hae held the limp cat closer, guilty as she saw its broken leg again.

Korea rose to his feet, swayin' a li'l. Hae tried to grab him, but her legs were shaking too much.

"Comrade Korea," Man-won coughed. "Don't go out yet. Wait 'til they've left to refuel."

Korea stared at him, a muscle in his cheek jumpin' as he hunched slightly. Hae knew that look, but din't realize what was wrong until Mao Zhilong repeated the man's words louder.

“The next wave will just come,” Korea growled, staggering for the half-collapsed exit as he shook his head. “Whoever shot down that plane drew fire for us. I need to-“ His jaw locked down for just a second. “Help.”

“Their main targets are your warehouses and quarries,” Mao Zhilong said, loud enough Hae could hear him perfectly. “They’ll concentrate fire on the other side of the hill soon. You won’t have to wait long.”

Korea looked out at the scrap of sky outside the dug-out, dozens and dozens of jets and bombers spinnin’ over the south of the city like sick birds.

“If you go ah go, Korea,” Hae said, tryin’ to make her voice sound steady.

Her Countryhuman looked back at her. Hae saw his fist clench, blood soakin’ the bandaged palm red, but didn’t look right at it.

Another bomb shook the hill outside, and rocks an’ grit rained down on the rubble on top of their hole.

Korea didn’t say anything, just moved back to the wall, sitting down and pressing his back to it, keepin’ his spine straight as he fixed his eye on the outside.

Relieved, Hae crawled over to him. It was really too small in here, so he couldn’t complain when she snuggled up to his side. Even if he eyed her cat comrade in a way she didn’t really like. But he didn’t complain that she was holdin’ her to her chest. He did complain when Mao Zhilong slid up on his other side, even though he wasn’t touching him, but it didn’t stop the other guy.

Man-won and Pong-ju settled in front of them with their submachine guns on their laps, keepin’ her and Korea safe. Hae felt bad doing that to them, but she knew it was why she had guards in the first place. So she wouldn’t get kidnapped or bombed.

Even if when they actually went to do what they were supposed to, Korea told them to ‘stay.’

Outside the hole, Pyongyang burned. Bombs rained over the city, aimin' for anything the Yankees thought was a warehouse or a supply dump or just anything that could hide anything. The radio station, the debris in the city center, the City Hall.

Hae wished the sky would open up and douse them all with water, a big ol' flood like the ones that used to come from the Pothong to wash the planes down and stop them. But the rain just kept lightly fallin', enough to make everything grey and gross, but not enough to stop the deathbirds.

Shouting came from Moran Hill as the gun positions were struck again, and clouds of smoke billowed over the marshaling yard as the jets swept by, sleek and silver and deadly.

Hae didn't want to think about the people they'd seen there, the man with the stubble she'd seen balancing too many bags of grain as he carried them underground, the boys loading tools into carts, nervous but laughing as they kept joking with each other, the crew pullin' tarps over broken vehicles to try and keep them safe. The man that'd handed them the warning. She didn't want to think about how many of them were scared and hurtin' right now, or already dead.

But she had to.

A fireball bloomed over the warehouse district with an explosion they could feel from across the city, and Hae knew they'd either hit an ammunition dump or fuel storage. More detonations followed as the fires spread, fillin' the sky with an awful black smog.

She looked up at Korea. He was staring forward with a blank face, completely unmoving. Except Hae could feel his skin crawling under his uniform as it bubbled and split. It was a bad feeling, like he was full of bugs trying to eat their way out. His side throbbed against her, hot and wet. As she watched, a spot spread across it, an ugly red flower she didn't want to see bloom.

Hae pressed closer to him, covering it up.

His heart was still beatin' hard. She could feel it thudding against

her, and where every single one of his ribs pressed into hers. As she watched, the burns crept evilly out of the bandages on his neck, slithering up the underside of his chin like venomous snakes.

Hae knew he wouldn't want her askin' while people could hear, so she waited until machine guns were strafing the hill again to whisper in his 'ear,' "Korea. We're still goin' to win, right?"

He stiffened against her, his eye still on the deathbirds and their destruction.

"Yes," he said after a moment, loud enough for the others to hear and as confident as ever.

Hae relaxed, smilin' again as she snuggled into his side.

She knew they were. Either they'd win through an armistice and forcing 'Merica to hand their comrades back and agree to end the war for real, or he'd keep screwin' around and launch the offensive Korea said he was planning, and then they'd fight him off and march south again to put him down for good. Like Korea an' the Gen'ral said at the meeting of the Political Committee, they were prepared to win the ultimate victory.

She'd just needed to hear it from him again so her legs would stop shaking. She knew Korea would never lie to her, not about something that important. If he said they were goin' to win, then they were goin' to win.

And even if he could be wrong sometimes…

Hae shifted her cat in her arms, resting her head on the wall in a way that just so happened to leave it half-resting on Korea's shoulder as they watched Pyongyang burn and burn an' burn.

She chose to believe in that ninety percent.

—

The bombings went into the night, like China had predicted and North had known they would. All day, from noon to evening, the light bombers flew in from the south and east, sent from the

airfields in Gyeonggi and Gangwon, and the aircraft carriers off the coast of Wonsan. Waves upon waves of Shooting Stars and Sabres and Tornados whirling above Pyongyang in a silver storm, only hidden once the sun set.

And then the heavy bombers came, the B-29s and their nightfighters, spilling from the belly of the bulky carrier planes like piglets being torn out of a sow's slashed womb, strafing the heights where their anti-aircraft positions were, and the hills across the city where their fuel storage was, and the fields where their civilians had fled while the bombers rained destruction on the marshaling yard and the vehicle repair shops and the military headquarters and anything but Taedongmun because they needed that to locate where they were over the city because they'd razed everything else to the ground.

Bomb after bomb after bomb after bomb, each one shuddering through North's body, burning deeper than before, eating up his skin and flesh, sending a violent searing agony though every inch of his body until it was all he could do to cling to the machine gun he didn't remember taking control of and keep aiming at the things hurting him and killing his people.

High whistles and shrieks pierced the night, wailing over the roars of the jets as rockets and shells arced into the sky, sometimes finding a wing or a fuel tank, but more often soaring into the darkness to disappear. But the bombs never missed. Even when they didn't hit their target, they still hit *something.* A dug-out, a street, a person. Their own planes weren't enough, even the ones that managed to take off from Sunchon airfield, and the MiGs from the Chongchon. They couldn't trust that this raid wasn't just a distraction to draw them in and leave the Supung vulnerable so America could deliver a fatal blow to it.

Not now. Not when they were so close to fixing the power. Even if they could survive without electricity for longer, morale wouldn't survive that.

So the handful of MiGs they had spun and soared between the bulkier aircraft, leading their Sabres on chases and waylaying the B-29s, keeping them from hitting their targets for as many minutes

as they could. But the only casualties they caused were fighters, too overwhelmed to get to the heavy bombers. And the moment they were driven off, the beasts lumbered in to finish off the rail bridge or the residential district.

Hour after hour, blurring together into smoke and flame and scorched flesh and pain and pain and *pain* as North ran from position to position, joining his soldiers in firing up at the planes until they ran out of ammo or their guns were turned into scraps of hot metal.

It should have felt relieving to have a weapon back in his hands, the recoil of a heavy machine gun rattling through him and the blast of a 100mm air defense gun shaking his bones as he blew a Shooting Star out of the sky, to be able to keep at least one of America's butchers from going home.

But it wasn't. It wasn't enough. One wasn't enough when there were *hundreds* more, when each of them flew dozen of sorties, when even the death spirals ended in explosions of fire that took out another city street and crawled farther up his chin. When the deathbirds and their pilots were just out of reach, taunting them from above as they pinned them down, able to do whatever they wanted to them but utterly untouchable themselves.

It itched in his skin and burned in his blood, beating behind his temples with an overwhelming pressure, locking his teeth together and his hands around the machine gun as he fired and fired, barely aware of the person feeding the cartridge belt through the gun and pouring their canteens on it when it started to burn him from the outside too.

Another F-86 plummeted from the sky as it tried to strafe them, North's bullets peppering its wings, sending it into a wild spiral over the river, smashing into another plane, both of them crashing to the ground with a plume of fire and he couldn't even feel any satisfaction because it was overwhelmed by the feeling of the gash in his torso splitting open wider.

A B-29 and its escorts flew high overhead, too high for him to hit, but he fired anyway, trying to make them see him, to turn away

from their targets. He wanted them to hit him, to put a slug in his leg or bomb shrapnel in his side, something foreign he could tear out to stop the urge to claw at his own body as it melted.

But they didn't care about him, and more fiery flowers bloomed over the warehouse district, explosion after explosion that North tried to match with bullets, firing and firing and firing and firing and-

"-empty."

Not empty. He was filled with an awful aching pressure that wouldn't fade no matter what he did, no matter how many planes he knocked out of the sky or pilots died in the explosions they'd intended for his people. He was filled to the brim and he couldn't spill.

"-empty. Comrade, your gun is empty."

North was suddenly rocketed back into awareness, and he realized he'd been dry-firing the machine gun for… He didn't know how long.

But the planes were gone. The night sky above was still, and the lack of guns and bombs suddenly seemed like the deepest silence to have ever existed.

He let go of the gun, and his palms went with it. He stared dumbly at the bandages around what was left of them, melted and blackened from the heat of the firearm, melded so thoroughly with his skin he couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. His fingers wouldn't straighten or curl.

He tried to move back, but his legs were dead and he felt over, landing half on a cold body. North lay with his cheek in the chewed-up mud, staring into glazed eyes, black in the moonlight. The rest of the gun team lay scattered over the hill, and for a moment he couldn't remember if they'd been alive when he got here.

No, they had been. Three of them. Then that jet had passed and

this man had thrown him aside, out of fire. *Remember.*

'Idiot,' North thought at him, his forehead somehow touching the dead man's now.

"Do you need help up?"

His body tried to jolt, jerking uselessly. China. He was still there.

A surge of blind panic shot through him. If he touched him, North would attack. He knew it. The pressure was still throbbing inside him and with nowhere to go, it would try to spill over on the other country.

Part of him wanted to. China was an enemy he could feel, something he could fight off.

But he *wasn't* an enemy, and the Korean knew he wouldn't get any release by hurting him. It would just make this itching worse.

"Stay away from me," he clipped, trying not to sound desperate.

If he felt skin on his right now, going after his comrade wouldn't be a choice.

Thankfully China didn't push, standing up. North didn't. He'd got on to his hands and knees, but didn't move more than that.

"Ssi-bal," he hissed, his voice sounding muted from his abused eardrums. "My legs are asleep."

They were. But that wasn't what was stopping him from sitting up. Even just falling back had sent fresh agony sweeping through him, his skin bursting all over.

He stayed the way he was, head pounding, panting as he tried to brace himself without making it obvious to China, trying not to shake.

Fire roared around the city, the crackling of flames and shouts as people tried to put them out. He needed to go help. He needed to get up.

His heart was beating too fast, not giving him any time to steel himself for the next wave of pain his pulse brought. He had to get to work so he could forget about it. He had to get up.

"And what about now?" China asked quietly, looking down at him. "Would you be so merciful, if you had the chance to decide our enemies' fate?"

North answered with a snarl, far too vicious, but the only thing he could do to stop his throat from making the noise it really wanted to.

He was being weak. The other country could see it. Their ammunition production had just been crippled even more, hundreds of thousands of won worth of supplies destroyed. His people needed their neighbour's aid, so he had to get up. No one wanted to help a fallen ally up if they didn't help themselves.

North gritted his teeth, focusing on the crackling of the fire, picturing how the napalm had rained down on his workers, how the bombs had burst, sending shockwaves smashing into them, breaking bones and leaving them helpless. The feeling as the bullets had torn through the body of the soldier next to him, giving them a clear target to spare his Countryhuman, and how each of those things had echoed through his body.

That was the pain that mattered, those deeper aches under the burns on and inside him. The ones on the shell around them were nothing.

'Nothing nothing nothing nothing ***nothing****'*

North was standing. His body throbbed and tore as fresh fluids gushed from the burns. But he didn't feel it. It was nothing.

They were still on Moran Hill, though he knew they'd left at some point. They had been all over the city, but ended up back on it, on the west side now. North made his way out of the gunner's nest, stiffly walking to the top of the slope, refusing to limp even as every brush of his pants fabric against his skin felt like it was scraping against raw nerves. It didn't matter. It was nothing.

The night was filled with thick black smoke, billowing into the sky, blocking out the stars. The choking stink told him the rubber factory was beyond saving even before he was able to look down on it burning at the foot of the hill. Shadowy silhouettes ran around, lit by the flames as they tried to ineffectually put them out with water from the well, the safety tanks on the ground for that very purpose another victim of the bombs. A few stood to the side, watching in a daze.

Truck tires for the war effort, shoes for their soldiers and civilians, protective gear for their doctors and Anti-Epidemic Corps, conveyor belts for their factories. Those were just a few things the rubber produced by the Pyongyang Rubber Factory was used for.

It was far from the only place that had gone up. North could see fires burning across the city, concentrated around the warehouse and rail districts. They burned the brightest over the ammunition factory, turning the grey clouds a bloody red. It was still raining, but the weak droplets did nothing to douse the blazes, just like they hadn't kept the planes away. Shouts and sobbing echoed over Pyongyang, carried up to him along with the blaring of alarms as everyone tried to call for a fire brigade that wasn't coming.

And beyond it North could still hear that infernal drone as the planes returned south.

He shouldn't have felt anything when he watched that pilot burn to death in his own napalm. Nothing but satisfaction.

"He's trying to get us to break off the talks," China said from beside him, still sounding like he was coming from above water North was drowning in.

That or give up on their POWs. Though America had to know by now that no amount of destruction he brought on them would make them surrender. It only stoked the fires of Korea's people to fight harder.

But he would use the prisoners as an excuse, at least. That was what he would tell his allies. Just like he would tell the United Nations that the straw and clay huts he'd turned to ashes on the

edges of Pyongyang were troop billets or supply sheds or anything that wasn't a house and every other nation on Earth would be fine with it.

He'd tell them he'd broken off the talks and hit Pyongyang with the largest bombardment in months not to try and expand the war to China, but because he wanted to force North to give up on his people, to cave and accept that international law only applied to Korea. Like that was any better. Like it wasn't grossly unfair and arrogant and *barbaric.* Like he hadn't started a war he'd realized he couldn't win so now he wanted to kill as many of North's people as possible to try and prove that he was mightier, to make him submit, to turn Korea into the obedient colony he wanted.

And no one cared. Just like they hadn't cared about bombing the Supung once they realized China and CCCP weren't going to retaliate for it. No one cared what happened in Korea so long as it didn't affect *them.* Every single last one of North's people could burn to death and no one would care. No one no one no one no one no one-

"There are some that care,"

North's teeth clamped down. He didn't know what part of that he'd said out loud. The pain was nothing but it still filled his head, clouding it.

'Weak.'

"I thought my people and I had proven that to you by now." China turned to face him, though the Korean refused to look. "They're down there helping yours fight fires. They care."

'This time I hope to be the hand in a foreign land.'

The other country pulled his scarf back a bit, letting North see his eyes from the corner of his, painted crimson like his skin by the fire reflecting off the clouds.

"China cares."

'Is it really so strange that someone wouldn't want you to take on any

more pain?'

North didn't answer, starting down the hill, blood welling and running with each step. His entire uniform was plastered to his body with water and darker fluid, clinging to every bit of his skin, trying to strangle him.

"I don't intend to call off the talks," he said flatly, like there hadn't been any break after China's first statement.

They would be justified to when America had pulled back so unilaterally, and when he was refusing to budge on an issue that *shouldn't have been an issue in the first place*. But North wasn't going to give them the chance to call him bloodthirsty and war-hungry any more than they already did. He wanted *peace.* It was what he wanted from the start. It was why he'd let his army take that stupid fucking one week break after Liberating Seoul for the first time.

They *had* the draft armistice *done.* It had been for months. They had agreed that all prisoners of war would be repatriated. North and China had even conceded on paper that they wouldn't deploy their returned soldiers to the battlefield, since they were receiving more prisoners than America and his puppets, and hadn't suggested changing it even when they knew the enemy was using prisoners as agents and Rhee had boldly announced that he would send them to the frontline. If it wasn't for the bullshit the Yankee had pulled with the 'voluntary repatriation' and leaving all those names off the lists because he was 'worried they'd be killed if they were returned' while he burned Korea's villages and cities to the ground and murdered thousands of civilians, *they would have a ceasefire by now.* They could have had a ceasefire over a year ago, when China had proposed all foreign troops leave Korea so the Koreans could work it out. The war could have been *over.*

North could have his brother back.

If America wasn't going to agree to peace, then he was going to have to show the world that *he* was the one that wanted war. North wouldn't be pulling back, no matter how many times they bombed his power plants or razed his capital. He was going to sink his claws into the negotiating table and prove that he wanted peace and that

it was the rest of the world that craved war. They would have to choke it down that all their 'concerns' for Korea's people were bullshit to make themselves feel better about being useless Yankee puppets and bloodthirsty Imperialists. That no matter how much the Western and colonial powers tried to pretend, they were the same unjust rulers they always had been, the same bloodthirsty savages they tried to paint him as.

And still they wouldn't care about North and his country. Except for Korea, no one ever had.

1,254 sorties. In one day. On one city.

Chapter 300 comrades!! We're still on track for two books. We will see how long that lasts. This, the last chapter, and the one after this were all supposed to be one chapter.

Some of Hae's feelings towards animals come off as if she'd be vegan or vegetarian if she had the chance, but she's actually one of the least likely to be. She believes that an animal's purpose is to be eaten by people. She doesn't like cruelty towards them because she doesn't like cruelty, but she also specifically doesn't like if an animal gets killed not for food or in a way that means it can't be eaten. Because bombing an ox or soaking a pig in napalm means it can't fulfill its purpose. At least a cow got to work and help people before it died, but by removing its ability to be consumed, the pig has now lived for nothing. And this makes her very sad. Hae loves animals very much, on and off her plate, but is remorseless when their deaths are necessary. She'll fight tooth and nail to stop North Hamgyong from killing a spider in the house, but if there's a leaf bug on the rice plants, she'll cheerfully kill it. Bugs that help crops = fulfilling their purpose of helping humans. Bugs that destroy crops = going against their purpose, must die. If she was told to kill a non-food horse in the prime of its life modern day (so there's food factories, no one actually *needs* its meat) she'd be really upset. But if her pet horse reached the end of its life, she'd happily have it cut up for steaks to bring home, even if they're low quality.
To her, the greatest respect you can give an animal is to use it

to help you and the people you love live. Because that is what they're made for.

Alternate universe where China never told the provinces he was here, and the way they found out is when the war is almost over, North accidentally calls him by his human 'given' name.
"Zhilong, come here."
stunned glances from the provinces
***alarmed* "Ssi-bal, did I just call him China?"**
"CHINA??"

Fraying

1912

"Do you think we have provinces?"

North didn't look over from where he was using a floorboard splinter pinched in his off hand to carve a tally mark into the wall.

"If Japan hasn't killed them."

He'd thought about the possibility before. His common sense told him that it wasn't just the Korean Countryhuman that had been dissolved, but all of their old Provincehumans. So new ones should have formed to replace them, like North and South had replaced the Korean Empire.

'A colony replacing an empire,' he thought bitterly, digging harder at the roughhewn wooden planks.

There was a thud as South swung his legs off the wall he'd had them stretched up, sitting up.

"Do you think he did?"

His other half sounded worried enough that North gave up on the tally for the time being, turning to him.

His brother's brows were furrowed, a bruise still on his cheek from where the guard had hit him for singing so late at night. He was starting to look skinny. Skinni*er*. Three small bowls of rice a day was enough to live on, but not enough to grow fat. Japan supplied them with just enough that the hours between meals stretched out torturously. His own stomach was filled only with a hollow ache.

He imagined the thirteen provinces imprisoned in this exact same way, locked up and beaten, subject to the same torments his brother was, but with no North to protect them.

It would almost be better if they were dead. Especially if they had any females. The only other alternative was that they were living freely because they had easily pledged their loyalty to Japan where North and South had refused.

And if they had, then death *would* be better.

"If he did kill them, there's nothing we can do about it," North said to his brother.

It was why he hadn't brought it up before. He hadn't wanted him to fret over it.

"We have ourselves to worry about," he added, trying to stop him from dwelling.

His fist clenched around the splinter, the other one spasming as pain shot through it, still tender from being dislocated.

'The hand that dares raise against Japan must be taught not to.'

If the Japanese country had been treating Korea's provinces the way he was treating Korea, then once their people freed the nation, there would be a reckoning.

"Mm, I guess," South said. He tapped his fingers on the floor for a few moments, running imaginary scales before he asked, "What do you think they're like?"

North's common sense gave him impressions of brightly-coloured silks and headpieces dripping with pearls and jade, horsehair hats and long robes. Faceless men and women with sharp swords and green veils.

He shook his head irritably, getting rid of the 'memories.' They weren't his, but rather the collective memory of the Korean people that made up their common sense, as fragmented as it was. And they were of the old provinces anyway.

"Who cares?" he said bluntly.

"Meeee," South whined, flopping back down on his stomach to

watch him as he went back to carving. "Don't you think it's fun to guess? We're going to get to know them once we get out. If... If they are alive."

North sighed. "I'm sure they are. Why would Japan kill them if he hasn't killed us?"

There was a reason. Japan wanted a stable colony to steal from. A Provincehuman wasn't needed for their province to exist. But a country needed its Countryhuman.

North wasn't sure if he believed that. But Japan had to. Otherwise...

He glanced over at his brother, his chest tightening.

South didn't seem to notice. North's words had perked him up.

"Yeah, you're right," he said. "Japan wants Korea stable, right? That's why he didn't just kill the Korean Empire. I bet the provinces are all just locked up like us."

'Just.'

"Sooooo," South hummed. *"Since* they're alive, and we're going to meet them one day, whaaaaat do you think they're like?"

He kicked his heels in the air as he pouted at him, face cradled in his hands, begging him to entertain his game.

North didn't see the point, just like he didn't see the point of talking about all the food they would eat once they were free. It just made you hungrier.

But he sighed. "What do *you* think they're like?"

"Mmmm." His other half's face screwed up, like he hadn't actually thought of it himself. "Hwanghae was a... scholar, right? So maybe he still is. Or she, I guess. Oh, but girls can't be scholars like that, can they?"

"There's no reason Hwanghae would be anything like the old one,

male or female," North said, still scratching at the wall. *"We* aren't anything like Joseon."

He didn't think.

"Maybe we could be if we were in a palace like he was," South suggested. "We could wear fancy clothes and have feasts. We'd probably be more like him. We'd be respected and stuff."

North didn't want to be like the old Countryhuman. 'Respect' wasn't the word for it.

And that wasn't where they differed. They were far lower than the glory days of Joseon, but not far removed from the final ones of the Korean Empire. It made him grit his teeth to admit it, but North's common sense insistently 'whispered' that Japan's official annexation hadn't been the beginning of Korea's decline. It had came long before that. They were far away from the luxurious life Joseon had lived up until the last, but their pride shared the same tarnish.

The old Countryhuman had signed away their country. *That* was the real difference. North and his brother would never do that.

"I know." South went quiet for a moment, fiddling with a loose thread on his dirty shirt. "Since we're nothing like Joseon, that means we won't have to... treat the provinces the way he did, right?"

"Yes," North said immediately, knowing what he was talking about.

Joseon had ruled for over five centuries as a 'divine' being. Like so many other Countryhumans, he had been entitled to claim whatever he fancied, including human women. And their own female provinces.

The idea disgusted North, and he intended to have no part in it.

"Concubinage dies with us," he told his brother firmly. "Even after Japan is gone."

It should probably die for the entire country. Though North had no idea how you would go about doing that.

"Good," South said, relieved. "Yeah, that stuff kind of... grosses me out. But that just means we can be friends with them once we're out."

"Provinces aren't friends," North told him.

"Then what are they?"

His other half didn't have an answer for that. So he said, "You're being noisy. It's distracting."

"Sorry, I didn't realize your brain was so small that you need all of it to make a tally mark," South said glibly.

North gave him a withering glare, and he smirked.

"I still don't see why you need to make those at all," his brother said, wriggling over to him.

He hadn't been as injured as North after the last major beating. The punch to his face hadn't affected his ability to squirm across the floor like a worm when there was no good reason he couldn't walk.

"We need to keep track of how long we've been here," North said, not for the first time.

Every day spent sweltering in the thick summer heat or freezing in the winter's grip, every day spent being beaten for talking too much or singing too loud or trying to reach freedom that shouldn't have been taken from them in the first place needed to be marked. And when they did meet the provinces, North would get their tallies, too.

Every single day needed to be avenged.

"Then you should make them in the morning so you won't forget," South pointed out, reaching him and resting his chin on his thigh. "If you keep leaving it 'til the last second, you're going to forget someday."

The orange light of sunset had already faded, setting on the other side of the prison shack. It was getting harder to see the line he was digging.

"We won't be here much longer," North dismissed.

And he couldn't start the day by carving it into being that they would still be here when it was over. He would make them at midnight, if he had the light for it, the moment the moon disappeared above them.

He would try and snag a stone the next time they attempted to escape. A sharp one, not like the round pebbles that sometimes got kicked in, and that South had figured out sucking on could make them a little less hungry. That way he could carve the lines in the dark.

'No.' Next time they escaped would be the final time. They would be free and he wouldn't have to worry about the tally anymore.

But until then, a day wasn't marked as done until he was sure they hadn't escaped on it.

"Right," South said confidently, but quietly, so he wouldn't be heard outside. "You're busting us out of here before the summer's over."

North nodded. "We'll try again tomorrow."

His brother's eyes widened as he sat up. "Tomorrow?"

"The two-year anniversary of the annexation is in two days," North reminded him. "We have to try."

Just like last year.

"Doesn't that just mean they'll be expecting it?"

"We have to try," his brother repeated.

South sighed. "Alright. I just wish you'd wait until your wrist fully healed. Or your ribs at least."

He gently poked his other half's side, below his aching ribs.

"They're fine," he assured him. "I can throw a punch and run."

He'd come up with a new escape plan while he watched South sleep. Without the maple, he had been forced to get creative. Especially when neither him nor his brother were tall enough to boost the other over the wall.

"And if anyone tries to hurt you again, I'll kill them," North promised, fists clenching as the echo of a skull cracking off hot cobbles thrummed through them.

"Right." His brother looked down, then leaned his head on his shoulder. "Thanks again for standing up me for last night. I was being stupid."

"No you weren't," North said sharply. "I asked you to sing for me. And I shouldn't have fallen asleep."

He should have just dealt with the pain.

South frowned. "I would've sang for you anyways, even if you didn't ask. And I really was singing too loud."

Anger shot through North. "No you weren't, South," he growled. "You should be able to sing as loud as you want. Those bastards shouldn't have any control over us."

"But they do."

But they did.

North took him by the shoulders. "It wasn't your fault. It was theirs."

"Alright," South said after a moment, leaning his bruised cheek against his good hand. "Then it wasn't your fault, either."

It was. If he hadn't drifted off, he could have stopped the guard before he'd slugged his other half across the face with his fat fist.

"Exactly," North said out loud, resolving to school his body more, to try and overcome its pathetic need for sleep, just as he had conquered the hunger hunger hun-

Even if South ever learned how to stay up to keep watch, that wasn't enough. The thought of someone coming in while he was asleep and his brother wasn't, spiriting him away, leaving the shack half-empty, filled him with a wild panic that made him want to sink his nails into his other half.

He knew the other option was more likely. If Japan ever decided that killing a Korean Countryhuman was worth the risk, it would be North that fell under his sword, the one that always led their defiance and had dared to kill one of his 'holy' subjects. But at least he could fight back. And even if he did die, at least his brother's survival would be almost guaranteed.

But he wouldn't. Tomorrow they would be gone. Free.

North finished the fifth and final stroke on the 正, the only character he knew how to make, finishing the one hundred and forty-sixth one.

Leaning back, he examined the tallies. They had started big on their first day here, in the middle of the wall, then gradually got smaller and smaller, cramped together to save space.

Seven hundred and thirty days. That was how long they had been in this cage. And it would *be* how long they were in it. He had just made his final tally. Tomorrow night, they would escape. And on August 22nd, 1912, the beginning of the third year after Joseon had signed away Korea and all its people, North and South would be free.

He would have rather not had a complete 正 as the final mark. It brought more satisfaction to imagine Japan staring at the first stroke, never to be finished. But it still put him in a good mood. Enough that he suddenly jumped on his brother, knocking him to the floor.

South yelped happily as they rolled around, pulling at each other's

clothes and pawing at each other until he managed to get his hands under his brother's dirty workshirt to spider his fingers across the ribs on the side he hadn't been kicked in. North hissed, scrambling back as his other half lunged at him, intent on tickling him, which he *hated.*

Still, he let South knock him over, struggling ineffectually for a minute while his brother had his fun torturing him, making him writhe as he tried not to just buck him off.

"Oh yeah, you're not ticklish at *all,"* South crooned as he got a *"Mrgh"* out of his brother.

Then he yelped as North suddenly threw him off, leaping on him and pinning him firmly by his wrists, trapping his legs so he couldn't move. No matter how much his other half struggled, he couldn't get free, though North didn't want their wrestling to end yet, so he eventually let him knock him over so they could roll around on the floor again, until they crashed into the rickety chair and sent it falling to the floor with a clatter.

The Koreas both immediately froze as a harsh voice shouted, "Shut up in there!"

South cringed under North, who was on top of him again. Anger flared through him, hating that the Jap guard could change his brother's mood with just a few words.

He narrowed his eyes. Then, even though his other half was giving him a look that said *'Please don't,'* North shouted back, "How often do you hear your 'father' say that to your mother and the waste collector?"

Fear flashed across South's eyes, but he also bit his lip to stifle a grin.

"Fucking brat!" the man spat from the other side of the thin door. "Was last night not enough of a lesson for you, chosenjin?"

North tensed, ready to jump off of South and onto the man to see if their escape would come a day early.

But the other guard muttered something, and the first *'tch'*ed.

"You're lucky I'm eating dinner," he grumbled. "Stay quiet or my chicken will have to get cold."

North and South were quiet for a few seconds, then the former collapsed on top of the latter, his brother quietly snickering into his chest. His other half allowed himself a silent snort.

"I won, by the way," he said as they sat up, brushing each other off.

"We were interrupted," South protested.

"I won."

"No way, it's not over. Rematch tomorrow."

"We'll be out of here tomorrow," North reminded him.

"Oh. Right."

The air inside the prison shack was heavy and oppressive, burgeoning with late summer heat. Even the brief tussle had made them both sticky with sweat, so North avoided the thin futon to lean against his tally wall. South pressing to his side immediately made this useless.

"You're damp," he grumbled, then flinched as his brother wiped his hand on his forehead and smeared sweat on his shirt. "And I hate you."

"And you aren't ticklish at all," South added.

"I'm not."

North instinctively put his arm around him, despite the heat. The smell wasn't even a consideration. They were both wearing two-year old clothes and hadn't had a single bath in that same amount of time. It wasn't even noticeable anymore.

Perfumed oils and delicate scented lotions in earthenware and celadon

jars. The chime of silver pins on a woman with vivid green skin.

North shook his head, trying to get the fly out. None of their provinces were living like that now. If they were, they didn't deserve to live at all.

But then... the old provinces *had* lived that way. While North's common sense told him the people below them had starved, barely scraping by. It was why the Donghak Rebellion had started. Part of it, anyway.

The word 'rebellion' didn't sit quite right in his head. Even if that was what it had been.

There wasn't really any point thinking about that. No matter how the Korean provinces were living, Korea was living in chains. They would never know if they were too until they were free. Just like there wasn't any point in guessing what they were like.

But the tally marks he was rubbing his fingers across, and the promise that there would be no more, kept him light. And he wanted to bring back his brother's cheer from before they were yelled at.

So he heaved a sigh to let him know he didn't really *want* to ask this, and said, "You gave up on guessing what the provinces are like."

South raised his eyebrows. "I thought you didn't care."

"I don't." But he did care about making his brother happy.

"Well," his other half said with mock haughtiness. "I guess I can make some more guesses anyway."

He didn't really though. He mostly just talked about how they could all live together in Gyeongbokgung Palace, not in this tiny shack on the grounds but in the real thing, and wear silk choson-ot and eat pheasant and sing as loud as they wanted. Surely no matter what the Korean Provincehumans were like, they would want that, too.

"When we get out, are we going to go find them?" his other half asked, leaning his head back against the grooved wall.

"Maybe," he replied, meaning 'No.'

Even when they were free of this shack, Korea wouldn't be free of Japan. North wanted to join their people in protesting the Occupation, but his number one priority would be taking care of South. And he couldn't risk even one of the Provincehumans being loyal to Japan.

Surely no Korean province would be. He *knew* they couldn't be. But when it came to his brother... he couldn't risk being wrong. If they were in a situation like theirs, he would try and get them out of it. But nothing more.

They wouldn't be meeting their provinces until Korea was truly free. And then they would do... whatever Countryhumans and Provincehumans did.

No. North didn't want to do what Joseon had done. The concubines and the tribute and the slow decline. He didn't know what he wanted to do, but it wasn't that. They couldn't, or else their country would just end up the same way.

South talked about the old provinces and Joseon like they were mighty, respected figures. But that wasn't the impression North got from his common sense. It was in there, of course. The admiration of soldiers back when the males had still taken to the field, long, long ago, the loyalty of court officials whose entire careers had been made off of Joseon's favour bowing before the throne. Centuries of thoughts and feelings condensed into a bleary impression of the men and women that had once represented their country.

But those threads were hidden under memories of cold eyes behind emerald fabric, and harsh light glinting off of sharpened blades and jewellery that cost more than you could ever make in your life. Knees and brows grinding into dust, never daring to look up too soon or speak out of turn or even brush the hems of those priceless robes unless they wished to pay for it.

The collective memories of Korea's representations didn't say their people had admired or cared for them. He supposed it was respect, the kind of respect that made Japan's soldiers tremble and drop to their knees when he arrived. But not love. The people of Korea had not loved Joseon and his provinces.

They had feared them.

North didn't know what their provinces were like. He didn't care. And he wouldn't care until they were free and he knew none of them had been lost. But he did know that no matter what, they couldn't be like the ones before them.

And neither could he and his brother.

—

1952

The sun was rising when North stumbled his way back to Jonsung. He thought he had done that at least. One moment he was on the ground in the marshaling yard, directing men with hoses hooked up to portable water tanks to spray down the burning rail station and pulling bodies even more charred than his from wet ashes and steaming rubble, and the next he was in the narrow, dark halls.

He knew why he'd left when Hyon Chol-hae came to get him. The same reason he snarled at China to leave him alone and head back to the bunker if he knew what was good for him. But he couldn't remember the walk. Only the pain that pulsed through him with every step. It was nothing compared to the woman weeping over the bodies in the streets and the soot-smeared workers with exhausted eyes, but it still devoured the in-between moments. He still needed to be stronger.

His General's bodyguard was next to him, and the halls were busy as his politicians went back and forth with candles and flashlights in hand, some heading out to survey the situation now that daybreak was here, and others coming in off of firefighting duty. It was good. Their masses needed to see them on the ground.

But it meant he couldn't compose himself before he entered the office. He couldn't let anyone see him like this.

North stepped carefully up into the room, shutting the door and bracing his hands behind his back, spine twinging.

His General looked up from behind his desk. There was a black smudge near his ear. A dirty cloth sat on the desk next to him, and his black eyes were tired.

But he was alive.

"Were you-?" North tried to ask if he'd been caught in the bombing, but his voice came out cracked. He'd been screaming commands and shouting over the roar of planes and fire now for hours, and the inside of his throat felt thick with ash from breathing in the smoke.

It suddenly felt too tight, the soaking bandages closing in, squeezing his burns as they throttled him.

"Jong-il," he croaked instead.

His General and his son had been at the military complex today. The buildings over it had been decimated.

"Jong-il and Kyong-hui are both fine," his General soothed. "We made it back an hour ago. Comrade Song-ae has him now. He's sleeping."

A bit of tension went out of North.

"What did you need?"

The man did what he'd known he would, and placed a roll of bandages and a cloth on the table, pushing it towards him.

"I need my country to take care of himself."

North's grip around his wrist tightened, sending a burst of nothing up his arm. "If that is all, then I need to return to my duties."

"The city will still be there once you've tended to your wounds and had some rest."

The city *wasn't* there. That was the problem.

"No one else is resting," North said flatly. "Our people have been tormented through the entire night by the enemy, yet they are still in the streets, putting things right. How can their Countryhuman do any less?"

"Our people don't have to bear the burden of being burned with our city." The man held up a hand before he could force his words out. "No one wounded by a bomb or affected by the napalm is conducting relief efforts."

"It isn't a burden." It was just what he deserved to feel.

"Yet I would still like to see it lessened," his General said. "And I suspect there isn't anyone out there right now that wouldn't."

It didn't *deserve* to be lessened. There was still too much to fix. With first response almost over, he would need to assess the damage in the daylight, see what could be salvaged and what supplies would need to be supplemented with increased production in other factories or by importing. And there were still people buried under the rubble that he needed to save.

"If you won't do it for yourself, do it for our people," his comrade said into his silence.

His eyes moved observably downwards to North's muddy boots, then back up to his shadowed eye. He didn't need to speak for North to know what he meant. It was why he had taken the chance to get away from his workers and China, even knowing his comrade would try this.

It was good for their people to see their Countryhuman on the ground after a bombing, working just as hard as them to put things back in order and rescue who they could. It was good for them to see him with ash and blood smeared across his skin like it was theirs, a bold commanding force in the flickering firelight and

shadows, refusing to bow in the wake of the enemy's attack.

But with the sun up, they would see him too clearly. His cheeks hollowed out, the eye not hidden by his patch sunken in like a Yankee's, and the drab green of his uniform turned entirely dark red-brown, even though there hadn't been any ground combat. In the dark he looked battle-worn. By the light of day, he would just looked exhausted.

'Weak.'

He wasn't. The pain was nothing and neither was his lack of sleep. He could keep going.

But that wasn't what anyone would see. His General was still just as skilled at aiming for a kill point as he was during his battlefield days. Just like he was still just as tactical, sending Hyon Chol-hae to get him instead of someone else in the Party, knowing North wouldn't dare delay when his Premier's bodyguard had left his side.

"...Fine," North forced out. "I'll change and... bandage my wounds."

He didn't know how he was supposed to cover the ones on his chin. He couldn't ask Kangwon. He would find a way.

"But I can't sleep until I find my provinces."

He'd ran into South Pyongan after the bombing was over, down in the warehouse district as she hauled rubble off the roads to clear the way for the water tanks to be dragged in, and he had taken Hae to Jonsung complex as soon as he had the chance, making sure she got inside himself (after ditching the cat at the door). He knew she wouldn't try to smuggle it in or take off idiotically again. He had told her not to.

But he needed to know if the others were okay. Aside from North Pyongan and North Hamgyong they had all been in the Pyongyang area today. He had wanted to keep them close after the meeting of the Party Political Committee because it took too long for messages to pass between their capitals with the power out. If one of them was taken, he wouldn't know until hours after it happened.

And if he had been even an hour later when North Pyongan was abducted, he could have lost him.

They had been in the city when the raid started, or out in the fields or the hills. Kangwon could have been returning to the Quarantine Hospital, Chagang could have been at the troop barracks, if Hae hadn't been with him she might not have even got the warning and ended up trapped outside the city with only a shallow dug-out to protect her. Or nothing. That still could have happened to his other provinces.

The panic he'd been managing to force down all day surged up.

"I need to go find them." His voice broke from the strain of the words but for once he didn't care, already halfway out the door.

"Comrade," his General said before he could fall out it. "They're all safe."

North whirled back, eye narrowed, suspicious that he was just trying to stop him from leaving, even though he knew the man wouldn't lie to him.

"Comrade South Hamgyong came to the military headquarters before we left to ask me to tell you that she personally accounted for the safety of our provinces in the city," the General told him. "Comrade Chagang had left the complex to assist with the evacuations, but she told me even he was well. The only one she couldn't find was Comrade South Hwanghae, but I reassured her she was safe here."

"Where was South Pyongan?" He trusted his General was telling the truth, but part of him said SH was lying, trying to trick him into resting, predicting that they would be having this exact conversation.

"She didn't inform me of exact coordinates, but she said she was helping clear rubble around the industrial sector."

Which the warehouse district was part of.

"North Pyongan and North Hamgyong-"

"The Supung Dam wasn't the enemy's target this time," the General interrupted him, giving him a small reassuring smile. "There isn't any reason they wouldn't both still be safe."

'Safe.'

The rush of relief in North's body made him want to sag, though he fought it. His provinces were okay. Not burnt by white phosphorous or napalm or lying at the bottom of a bomb crater or stolen by America in the chaos.

Good. He couldn't afford to lose any more good soldiers.

"...Alright," he rasped. "I'll... rest."

Just until his voice came back.

His General nodded. "I put some clothes on your cot for you. And a spare uniform will be here for when you wake up." He foresaw North's protest by adding, "I sadly think that one has reached the end of its lifespan."

North looked down at his shirtfront and grimaced. Even when it had less holes in it than it would after melee combat, only a few tears he could've easily patched, the fabric was soaked in blood. Too much to be washed out. Even if he scrubbed it for a day, it would still bear noticeable stains, especially over his left side. He would lower the KPA's prestige by wearing it even casually.

"Thank you," he muttered.

"I live for my country." Kim Il-sung got to his feet. "I have a conference with our comrades, but I'll hold it in one of the halls. I'll lock the door."

North's skin was still itching, pressure boiling inside him, and his chest was tight. Even with the door locked, he knew he would keep jolting awake as a voice raised in the hall or someone knocked, looking for the man. Part of him wanted to crawl under his General's desk and curl up in the leg well like when he hid from China, dignity be damned. Part of him wanted to ask him to stay.

But that was childish. So he bit his tongue and nodded, going to grab the bandages, unable to hide his limp now that it was just them. He saw there was a bowl of clean water behind the desk, too.

His General didn't leave immediately, drumming his fingers on the other side of the desktop, a serious look in his eye.

"What?" North asked, hackles going up as every name of their close comrades that could have died in the bombing flashed through his mind.

"The Soviets got a message to us his morning," Kim Il-sung said after a moment. "They said to take this with skepticism, but it seems America has returned to the United States."

The foreigner had taken off before, but the weight with which the General said it told North it wasn't just a simple visit home.

"For good?" he asked, fingers sinking into his abused palms.

"The rumours say," the man replied. "He left yesterday. There wasn't an announcement or any declaration, but our comrades seem convinced he has returned to his country, at least for some time."

'Returned to his country.'

North's eye went to the map on the wall, starting from the Korean Peninsula, tracing across the Pacific Ocean to the west coast of America. Then farther, over the lines and place names to the dot on the map labelled *'Washington, D.C.'* The place the American Countryhuman could return to or from whenever he wished. Not just across the sea, but on the entire other side of the *world.*

Whether he was gone for now or not, America could do that whenever he pleased. Fly away from Korea to a place with no war, no fires, no choking clouds of smoke. Fly back to his brainless sheep living their fat lives off of the suffering of other nations under a blue sky and electricity no one would dare snuff out and leaving behind North's under a shroud of death he had brought here in the first place.

America could forget about this war, relegate it to how much

money it cost and made, to casualty numbers that meant nothing to him, to far-away death and destruction he hadn't even cared about when it was outside his door. There would be no burns to cling to his skin to remind him of what he had done, what he was still doing. No food shortages, not power outages, no buildings to repair. He could live comfortably and forget about the war *he* had started.

But Korea's people couldn't forget. They woke up hungry and suffered through air raids and sabotage and combat every day, and North couldn't even take down the planes doing it without his body and his land paying for it.

His teeth ground together, the fire in his skin seeping into his chest as he fought the urge to lunge across the room and plunge his knife into the General's map, to mutilate the other country until it was unrecognizable. That pressure throbbed against his temples and he heard his skull start to creak-

Then the pressure burst, replaced by fear as he surged forward, slamming his hands down on the desk. The lump in his chest tried to make its way into his throat, blocking his words, but he forced them out.

"South? Did he take South with him?"

"The South is still in Korea."

This time the relief weakened him too much. He slumped forward, forehead on the cool desk.

He hadn't taken him. Not yet.

"Did America move him somewhere?" he demanded. His head was too heavy to raise right away, so he tilted it slightly to look up at his General. "Did he lock him up?"

The tension in his stomach wasn't relieved as the man answered, "I don't know. I only know that America arrived in Washington alone, and that a contact of Comrade CCCP's believes he may be staying."

North's jaw feathered, and he added, "But I've already had an order sent out to confirm the South's location."

That was all they could do.

'That's as good as it can be.'

North's teeth grit. It *shouldn't* be. He shouldn't have to worry about his brother being swept away across the sea, Kangwon shouldn't have to worry about his trapped in the south. They should have been invited to the Security Council vote, Gangwon should have been able to testify, they shouldn't be at war in the first place.

"It is just a rumour," his General repeated. "But I wanted you to hear it from me."

North paused, raising his head, mustering the strength to push his upper half off the desk to look the man in the eye.

They were serious, piercing into him.

"If America has truly returned to his country, and the South hasn't been imprisoned, there is a chance his security will be weakened." The General's gaze bored into his.

North's heart skipped at what he was implying, but his ragged nails curled against the desk.

"We agreed that I shouldn't leave again," he said, trying to keep his tone neutral.

"I told my country when we first met that I was willing to Liberate both of our Countryhumans." His General laid a worn hand over his heart. "And I told you last year that I wouldn't stop until you got your brother back. If there is a chance, if you think you could convince the South to return to us, then I will consider this necessary. I know you would be fully capable of infiltrating Busan. And without America there, the risk would be significantly less."

North knew he could do it as well. Even if South was being detained somewhere. This wasn't like the Occupation, when agents had been hard to come by and usually had no real resources. And better than that, he had the cord connecting them now. No matter where his brother was in Busan, in the south, in Korea, he would be found. And North would go to him. He was certain he could

infiltrate Busan and manage to talk to him.

He would only be in danger if he raised the alarm.

"So," Kim Il-sung said solemnly. "Do you think you could?"

Two years ago, North would have said yes without thinking. He would have leapt at it. Even just four months ago he would have. His brother had been sorry. He had seen what sort of country America really was, how cruel and violent and self-serving. He had left that message to let him know that he'd made a mistake, that he should have followed North when he asked him to at the Raktong. With America across the sea his brother wouldn't be so scared. The moment North arrived and held out his hand, he would take it, without him even needing to speak a word. He could save him. He was *sorry*.

'잘못했어.'

"...I won't go." North was careful to keep himself steady both inside and out. "Whether or not I could convince him, it wouldn't matter. Even if he made a hundred statements after I brought him back here, no one would believe he was with us willingly. They would accuse us of abducting him and likely escalate the war."

Whether by declaring China complicit in the abduction of a foreign Countryhuman and using it to justify declaring war on him or dragging him in front of the UN again, or simply using it to delay the armistice even longer. Or with the atom bomb. Whatever it was, North knew America wouldn't simply cut his losses on Korea if his brother came home with him.

'If.' He didn't think there was a word he hated more.

He could see on his General's face that the man clearly recognized his dodge. But he said nothing. Nothing but, "Are you sure?"

North grit his teeth, keeping his face neutral. "Yes."

He wouldn't drag this war out even longer just to make sure South was safe. So long as he was in the country, he could have an eye kept on him. And America couldn't afford to kill him. He *could*

afford to slaughter tens of thousands more of their people.

And even if he went to just talk to him, to make sure he was safe, to demand the truth, to let him know North forgave him and always would forgive him...

What did it mean, if South *wasn't* imprisoned?

He couldn't risk their country. He would see his brother when a ceasefire was signed, and it was time to work out a real end to the war. Not before.

"Alright." His General's expression didn't give away what he thought about his decision. Or why he would be willing to accept North going at all when he had been so adamant about him being safe when he'd left to retrieve Choe Jong-ok.

'I wanted you to hear it from me.'

'Tch.'

"But if America is gone, we should take advantage of it." The words sounded far away, not trapped inside his skull the way they were when the jets blew his eardrums out, but coming from somewhere far outside it. "Redouble our attempts to get me a phone call with my... with South. Don't bring it up at the negotiations, I don't want them to latch onto it as us trying to cause an issue. Keep going straight to the United Nations. Comrade China says he has no spine. He might bend."

"It will be done," his General assured him.

"This air raid seems to... confirm our intelligence." North's head was ringing again. "America wants us to pull away from the talks. He must be building his forces for- for another offensive. We'll need to..."

His voice broke and he swallowed, his throat flexing dryly.

"To..."

"Comrade." The General put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Rest.

We can talk tactics later."

North nodded. His throat wouldn't form any words.

The man left, taking his flashlight with him. His Countryhuman stood in the dark, listening to the lock click.

Had South heard something similar after America had left? The *'snick'* of a lock as he was shut away in a dark, cramped room like the shack they had spent nine years in? Alone in the dark like North, but with no latch on the inside he could undo?

His own cooking body smelled like the thick black smoke that came off a burning city. The fires that had raged in Seoul had been even hotter than the ones here today. And the people in it hadn't had anyone to evacuate them.

'잘못했어.'

'Maybe he-'

North tore his clothes off, the strangling feeling suddenly too much, and stood panting in the dark. He just wanted to sleep so he could get back to work, but he knew if he didn't clean himself his General would send Kim Yong-hwan after him.

He couldn't let her see him like this. Not her, not Kangwon, not *anyone.* Not even his Comrade Kim Il-sung anymore.

By the white glare of his flashlight, lens cracked by the bombing, he scrubbed his body down, trying not to look at the chasm that crossed his torso, or the singed pink muscle twitching within it, and trying not to flinch as he scraped skin off with the grime. There wasn't really any difference between the dirt and the crisped flakes.

He wanted antiseptic. He wanted to pour it inside that gash and watch it foam white until it hurt more than that deeper ache. But Kangwon said not to put it directly on burns, and he didn't want to waste any.

And he knew it wouldn't work.

Mechanically he wrapped new bandages around himself, leaving his throat bare, then cursing himself and wrapping it anyway, trying to pretend he didn't feel it closing in on his windpipe. Like the pain, it was nothing. He would deal with covering the chin burns when he woke up.

The bowl of water was now dyed a deep muddy red, scraps of burnt flesh floating on the surface like they'd never been attached to his body. Something foreign and unsightly that made him want to shatter the clay on the wall and dump it all out.

He moved it behind his desk, not liking the image of his General staring into the murk with downturned eyes while he slept.

The man had left him his canteen. He took a sip, refusing to guzzle it the way he wanted, then dressed in the loose white peasant shirt and baggy pants Kim Il-sung wore when he wasn't in uniform or his suit.

North turned off his flashlight and curled up on the cot, burying his face in the rough fabric and inhaling his comrade's warm scent, trying not to listen to the sound of shoes in the hall or feel the burning in his skin, both of them telling him he couldn't afford to rest, he had to go help.

A few hours' sleep. Just enough to satisfy his General. Then he could.

He wanted to shut his brain off, but thoughts of his brother refused to be stifled.

Was he alright? Had he heard about this air raid? Did he hear about all of them? South wasn't the type to read reports, and surely America wouldn't have been telling him about them, wanting to hide from him exactly how much destruction he had been inflicting on North and their people, on *Korea.* Surely...

But he had burned Seoul. And he had seen the burns on North at the Raktong. He wasn't an idiot, he had to know they were worse by now. It wasn't his fault, it wasn't like he could stop them-

'잘못했어.'

When America had taken South to Japan, North had been terrified. He had been terrified today at the idea he had taken him to the US. When the planes flew back in from the north, when the warships docked in Busan after raining death on Wonsan, when the bombs falling on the frontline made blisters rise on his skin, barely an echo of what they were doing to North...

Was his brother ever scared for him?

That old chicken bone lodged in his throat, and the noise he'd been trying not to make for hours leaked from it. He seized his neck his hand, crushing his own windpipe, his cheeks going hot with shame.

'Weak.'

Gritting his teeth, he forced his legs straight, still lying on his right side. He wasn't a child, he wasn't going to sleep curled up in a ball the way- He wasn't. But his back was too burned to sleep the way he usually did. And his left side was obviously out.

It didn't matter. And it didn't matter if South would come with him if he asked or not. If he would raise the alarm the moment he saw North's face. He couldn't go for him. Not when it would just draw the war out. So there wasn't any point in thinking about it. He didn't want to *think* about it.

His back ached under the burns, yearning for the feeling of pressure against it, no matter how much it would hurt. It was embarrassing, and stupid, but when Kangwon had pressed against him the night after the power went out, it had felt better than any poultice he'd ever made for him.

The memory made him ache more, a phantom itch he couldn't scratch, and North rolled over to stare up at the dark ceiling, not caring that his skin scraped off under the bandages as he did. He squeezed his eye shut.

Even if he couldn't s... Even if he couldn't go rescue South yet, he

still hoped America had left for good. It would be good if he had, a tacit acknowledgement to his puppets that their master couldn't get the victory he had wanted. And it got him away from North's provinces.

'Keep your promise.'

He grit his teeth.

But he couldn't relax. The relief that had flooded him as he heard his provinces were safe had still been tinged with anxiety, and more of that helpless, itching pressure.

His northern provinces were safe, for now.

But his southern provinces weren't.

The next escape attempt the flashback talks about is the one where North kills his second person. I can't wait to do the flashback chapters in order eventually.

American plane made last year: I am old and frail and my parts are falling off *sickly cough* I need to eject an innocent passenger out my door in mid-air.

Soviet plane made in 1980s: I am young and hale and in the prime of my life. I will never die.

I think CCCP (the Russian Empire territories that made him before he formed) and America were very similar people when they were 'young.' Especially 'Russia' (the one who became the original Russian SFSR). Both children who were desperately trying to get approval from a father who was more a ruler than a parent, who eventually realized what a tyrant he was and rebelled against him with great ambition, going on to reject any claim of fatherhood he had over them. But CCCP made a clean cut. He killed the Russian Empire and broke free. 'I am not him. And he is not my father.' But Britain is still alive, and America has more family ties that keep him connected to him, like Canada. No matter how much he says it, he can't change

that he's Britain's son. He is all the bad parts of him, and worse. And he's so obsessive that even the idea that the old man attributes his successes to himself drives him crazy. Britain is very firmly in his shadow now, but he still casts one over his heart. America has to prove he's better than him, that he surpassed Britain's expectations and *he* is in control now. CCCP resolved to become a father himself, a better one than his, that wouldn't inherit his legacy. But America in some ways is still that child desperately trying to earn his father's approval.
Don't tell him that though. He'd shoot me dead.

Puppet On A String

'Scraaape.' The shriek of metal on ceramic was loud and grating in the nightclub hall, as if the Yankee squatting in their country had never departed at all.

The Southern Korea flinched, his hand spasming 'round the knife as if he wished to drop it and pretend the sound had been produced by someone else.

There was nothing South Chungcheong hated more than a man that refused to take responsibility. One who crept around with his head down, apologizing for every breath like he were a woman. Men had the right to take up space, to declare their presence known. Yet *this* man refused to. He had claimed the head of the table so easily, yet it seemed almost as if the eyes of the other patrons turned to him, he would hide under it.

Yet they did not. The long table tucked away high in this terraced corner of the club was dangerous territory. Too long a look, too intentful of one, may get one accused of gathering information for the enemy. And they knew what that would mean.

South Chungcheong's knuckles tightened on her lap, hidden from sight under the flowing white tablecloth.

Her seat had been set to the left side and other end of the table from the southern one in an attempt to keep him as far away from her crystal glass and silver utensils as possible. She had switched it to the end so she would not have to sit next to those she was forced to call her relatives, facing him and turning it into he who was at the foot and she who was at the head, facing him.

Her steak sat on the plate, a warm slab of barely-browned meat leaking watery red fluid. She *despised* red meat.

The hall around them was packed. 'Twas July 17th, 'Constitution Day,' and it had brought the cockroaches out of the rubble. There

had been no choice to attend this year. South did not bother trying her door only to have it slammed in his face again. He had simply had her jailors drag her outside and into the waiting car.

"This is good," South said, having finally cut the steak with his blade, stuffing it in his mouth with his brass chopsticks. "You should try some. It's rare. The only way to eat a steak."

He smiled in a tentative way that was surely meant to be encouraging. It was met with a heavy silence by the southern provinces.

His lips wavered, and he quickly took a sip from his glass of dark red wine.

"Come on, eat," he said, more confident with the bloody liquid lining his gums, ruining it by immediately adding, "Please?"

"We're not-"

"-hungry," the Jeollas muttered in their shameful way.

They had not deigned to wear the Western-style dresses that had been delivered to them in their prisons. As South Chungcheong had not. She had no intention of baring her shoulders and calves like a Yankee whore for the degenerates that shared this hedonistic establishment with them. The only ones that had worn the rags were Gangwon, thin and nervous in his black suit, Jeju, as obedient as ever, the front of her dress low and the back high, and South Gyeongsang, somehow still idiotically thinking that she had a chance to get through to the Southern Korea if she played along.

She would not. There was no victory in a fool's game. And there was no denying that South was a fool.

"How could we be hungry when people are starving?" South Chungcheong's imbecilic brother demanded, the chunk of meat on his plate going untouched for once in his life. "You expect us to gorge ourselves on foreign crap when I could walk outside and find someone who hasn't eaten in a week in under ten minutes?"

His words should have been impassioned. But before they had

even left their vehicles, the Command not to raise their voices had been issued. Instead the violet man sounded oddly neutral and strained.

"You sound like-" South's lips flattened in displeasure. South Chungcheong knew what was coming a moment before he ordered, "All provinces- **eat."**

Caught unawares, her idiot cousins picked up their tableware in sync with a clatter, immediately cutting into the meat, faces twisted as their mouths were pried open and their jaws forced to work.

South Chungcheong could not afford to resist long. But she had the presence of mind to aim her chopsticks for the kimchi in her bowl, opening her mouth willingly before the Command had a chance to make her.

But she could not keep up with their pace. Barely had the piece of salty pickled cabbage went down before she was forced to pick up another, and another, the force telling her body to **eat eat eat-**

South looked alarmed at their sudden frenzy, and even more so when Gyeonggi started to choke, even his fat mouth unable to keep up with the desire to *devour.*

"All provinces- **stop,"** the puppet quickly ordered, and they all dropped their utensils with a clatter that pierced the music in the nightclub, drawing eyes for the briefest of seconds.

South Chungcheong lay hers delicately down on the porcelain chopstick rest.

"So much for 'Commanding them'll just make them want to listen to me less' or whatever," North Gyeongsang muttered, voice thick from the food lodged in his throat.

The South tried to disappear in his navy pinstriped suit as resentful eyes turned on him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that. Can you just… eat normally? Please?"

Grudgingly, most of them did, wishing to avoid the prying fingers of the Commands further sullying their minds. South Chungcheong

did as well, picking at her kimchi and rice bowls with delicate bites, ignoring the Western fare on the plate.

Though the puppetmaster was gone, she was not safe. His strings were long. And with what the southern one now knew, she could not risk drawing his ire. Small men would always turn the meanest when they were scorned.

North Chungcheong crossed his broad arms over his broader chest, staring defiantly at the Countryhuman.

'Fool.' Did he not see the time for meaningless gestures was long past? It had died on the floor of the interrogation room as Gangwon bled.

South sighed, taking another gulp of wine. "You're acting like I'm trying to feed you like, pig scraps or something. I worked really hard to get this."

"And by that you mean you got it from Japan, yeah?" North Chungcheong challenged.

The South took another drink.

"How much did it cost?"

"Does it matter?" the puppet deflected. "You didn't pay for it."

"It *does* matter when every time you go running to the Yankee for something you tie us tighter to his wall-"

"All provinces," South ordered. **"No talking about politics. At all. Any kind."**

South Chungcheong felt the Command tighten around her brain, making her teeth grit. As if she had had any intention of doing so.

North Chungcheong's jaws clacked shut, though his eyes continued to glare.

South took a deep breath, then gave their table a smile that held a pathetically desperate plea at its corners. "I invited you all here to

have a birthday dinner. Can we *please* just have a nice one?”

To have a nice dinner with the Countryhuman who had whipped one of their own with his own hand, like the both of them were common chattel. The idea was preposterous.

They of course could say nothing of it, no matter how the idiot Chungcheong strained to. Those Commands had been the first beat into their wills after the event.

“This isn’t our birthday,” Gyeonggi pointed out between bites of steak. Despite his earlier refusal to eat, the glutton clearly did not disdain doing so. “We don’t have birthdays.”

“I know North-“ The name left his mouth reluctantly, as if he did not wish to remind them of the man’s existence. “Is… weird about birthdays. But you can have one now.”

“If I was going to have a birthday, I wouldn’t choose the day a fake constitution was drawn up for a-"

Whatever defamation North Chungcheong had been about to spew they would never know, as the Commands closed his throat, leaving him to splutter.

“I also wouldn’t,” South Gyeongsang said, hands smoothing the vulgar rayon fabric of her deep green dress over her lap with repetitive motions. “Especially when the constitution apparently doesn’t mean anything, if Rhee was able to change it on a whim.”

South’s jaw feathered as he took another drink. His glass was empty now.

“It wasn’t on a whim,” he said. “The National Assembly voted on it.”

They had all been given the paper. Ostensibly a reassurance that everything was progressing democratically, far more so than in the authoritarian north. But as idiotic as South Chungcheong’s cousins were, they were able to read between the lines as keenly as her. One need not study Korea’s dialectical materialism to predict who would be winning the election in August.

“And you aren’t supposed to talk about politics,” the puppet reminded them petulantly.

“Am I?” the orange-patterned woman asked distractedly. “I thought that was just a fact.”

But South Chungcheong could see down the table to her right, and observe the way the hands brushing the skirt trembled, fighting to stay unfocused enough to get the words out.

“No,” South said. “It’s Communist propaganda.”

He was starting on his second glass as he said, “Can you guys all just have fun? Even if you don’t want today to be your birthday, it is mine. You didn’t get me presents, the least you can do is have a good time. I- I mean, I didn’t want presents or anything,” he said quickly. “I don’t mind. I just…”

He swallowed into the stiff silence. “I just want us to have a good time together.”

A good time, as their country was occupied and bombers, foreign invaders marauding across their lands, plundering and raping, with the man who had betrayed them.

This ludicrous statement was met by more silence, as one would expect. Gangwon shrank down in his seat, not looking up. The puppet looked down at his plate, taking another quiet bite of meat.

The clink of chopsticks and scrape of knives on plates was the only sound that came from their table.

Stupid. Why would they be served slabs of meat they needed to cut themselves? The chef should have done it. Rhee’s puppets truly were lazy.

South Chungcheong refused to touch it still, sitting with her hands in her lap and her eyes straight ahead.

South was directly before her, his head ducking and eyes darting as he attempted to avoid her gaze. She did not let him make it easy.

To his right was Jeju, meek and pathetic, needing no Commands to mechanically cut and eat the steak, nor to behave. She kept her head down, shadowed eyes focused on the tablecloth. To his left was Gyeonggi, apparently dubbed the least threatening, as he should be. The boy was half a child, his lack of guile entirely unfeigned, unlike the little northern bumpkin. His mouth kept half-opening as if he sought to break the awkward silence before he changed his mind and quickly stuffed it with food once more.

Next to him was South Gyeongsang, her expression disgustingly sorrowed as she snuck glances at South. The Jeollas sat next to her, any separation of themselves they had managed to accomplish now entirely undone by the prolonged isolation. Their chairs were pressed together, thighs touching as if they could merge into each other's slender frames. Across from them was North Gyeongsang, pushing his thick glasses up on his face. They had been replaced after they reached Busan during the second retreat, but a new crack reached across one lens. Somehow the moron had broken them in captivity, likely by tripping over nothing.

And to South Chungcheong's left and right, respectively, sat the idiot she was supposed to call a brother, and Gangwon.

He shook in his chair, hand trembling as he tried to keep his grip on the chopsticks. As he attempted to lift a piece of nearly raw cow meat to his mouth, his wrist twitched and it fell onto his lap, the utensils landing on his plate with a crashing sound that made South flinch and the province jump.

His white eyes went wide as his shoulders hunched, cowering as the Countryhuman turned to him out of instinct. They were fixed on his plate as his shuddering increased.

"S-S-S-Sorry," he stuttered, green face drained of colour, his nails digging into either side of his chair. "S-Sorry. I'm sorry."

The southern one had downturned his eyes the moment he spoke. "…It's fine," he said, making a poor show of sounding casual. "It's okay." He said it louder, remembering the man was a cripple now.

Gangwon's face screwed up, his eyes squeezing shut as he gripped

tight to his chair.

Was it solely the whipping, the isolation that was so much like what he had endured before the war, according to South Chungcheong's information-gathering, or something that the Yankee had done on one of his secret nighttime visits that had broken the man so? She knew not. Nor did she care. The result was the same.

'Pathetic.'

The southern one looked away from the shaking man, straight into South Chungcheong's eyes. She stared through him and his gaze darted away, trying to find one of the other provinces' faces. But they all kept them down, glaring mutinously at their plates.

All but North Chungcheong, who was glaring at her.

Clearly the puppet boy had placed the Chungcheongs and Gangwon in the farthest seats from himself to protect himself from them, whether physically or mentally. But did he have to seat her so near *this* imbecile?

He was glowering at her from under his thick brows the same way he had after the whipping, as if t'were *her* fault that the trembling green fool had been caught and scourged.

It had nothing to do with her suggestion that it might be Gangwon who had been in contact with Pak Seo-nam. It had been entirely because of his extended stay in the north and refusal to renounce Korea. And America's need for a sacrificial deer.

South knew the truth, after all.

But this idiot did not. And South Chungcheong had no intention of enlightening him. Sharing secrets with fools was how you lost.

So she would bear the resentful looks he and the others cast her along the long table, as she had borne their hateful ones after she had executed the agent. She cared not what the small-minded thought. Per usual, the only opinions that mattered were those held by men with power.

She met the other Chungcheong's gaze haughtily.

'Traitor,' it said.

She turned her face away, looking bored.

She had fallen into observance too easily, even with no one to share her findings with. It mattered not what condition the others were in. Gangwon had only brought it upon himself.

He had been *safe.* Even in a world where he had been whipped solely for her lie, how had she been supposed to know he would do something so idiotic that he would end up in the puppet's clutches once more?

She did not know what exactly he had done. They had not seen him before the whipping and they had not seen him after. He had been left unsilenced after the deed, but had fallen unconscious soon after from the pain of his back being carved open, and been carried away by the Yankee's minions before he could wake.

But she knew who he had been during the Occupation, and how he and his northern half must still be. The sort of fool whose soft heart would drive him to do something reckless enough to be captured, even after going so far as to maim himself to avoid being Commanded back.

'Twas not her fault he had ended up a demonstration. The blame lay solely on the Yankee and his puppet.

Yet the tension quivered over the table, her cousins dividing their scornful looks 'twixt her and the Southern Korea, as if they were anything alike.

South Chungcheong ignored them, gaze roving the club with disdain.

The floor was lit by muted light cast by globe lamps positioned at intervals around the walls, and filled with dancers, men in dark suits and military uniforms dancing with harlots in heavy garish paints and dresses that left nothing to the imagination, the way America's slattern dressed. Ankles kicked and hips twisted as they

moved to the sound of the obnoxious curved Western horns played by the band on the raised stage at the far end. ‘Jazz,’ the heathens called it. She despised it. She could barely imagine a sound less Korean.

Round tables spotted the edges like swollen ticks, diners gnashing at rich meats and swigging foreign liqueurs, bloody juices running down their chins as they laughed and bantered. The eyes of the men proved hungrily over different meat, straying from their partners to coiffed blonde locks and curled black hair, skimming over low necklines and slender ankles, saliva practically gushing from their maws.

Many of them were foreign, war correspondents and diplomats and Yankee officers. Most had the brown skin and slender eyes of South Chungcheong’s people, but none of them were Korean. All of them were wealthy and 'important.' Powerful males with beautiful, useless females.

In here, in this microcosm of foreign lands rife with the stench of cooking meat and perfume, jaunty music and animalistic howls of glee, and clothes imported from across the sea, ‘twas if the war outside did not exist, nor had it ever.

South Chungcheong knew these types well. She had worked for them for long enough. The women on their backs in the filthy brothels, the children taking men for money, even the soldiers of the Yankees and their puppet army dying at the front meant nothing to these degenerate sycophants. Just as those suffering under the Jap regime had never meant anything to those upholding it from the offices she had cleaned for them.

She would never make the admittance, but she had been one of them for long enough.

No. Not one of them. She had *never* been one of them. That made it even more deplorable.

A woman that had used to be Korean laughed, a high, feigned sound, as a man with fish belly-pale skin rested his hand on her lower back. He did not move it, and she laughed again, shriller, but

refusing to order him to lift it, or even to ask. She only poured his drink and said everything but the word ‘No.’

‘Idiot girl.’

She would be taken in an alleyway before the night was over, or a cheap hotel. Perhaps even in the toilet room, dress rucked up around her waist. South Chungcheong knew how these things went.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

She made herself turn away, facing the foot of the table once more, staring at the painting of the eastern coast behind the Southern Korea.

His gaze roved over the dancers, focusing on stretched mouth smiles and hands resting on waists, on people leaning across tables to talk intimately, far more desperate than the lechers, but for something different, what his smile had been pleading for earlier.

‘Twould have been less pathetic if it was flesh he craved. Men were meant to desire it. Her disgust with him was deepened either way.

‘I can’t help you next time, South Chungcheong.’

She did not want him to. She had needed it that night in the warehouse, but she had not wanted it. There was only one man she would ever deign to receive protection from, and she knew he would never offer it. Clearly. He had taught her to protect herself, to learn the moves to escape the game.

Even if thanks to him they were useless now.

South tore his bitter eyes away from the celebration in the room, reaching for his glass. Finding it empty, he began to pour a third.

South Gyeongsang’s brows furrowed. “I think you might’ve had enough.”

More than enough. The bottle he had brought had already been half empty when he led them into the club. It was almost entirely

empty now.

"This is a party," the southern one replied, a defensive edge to his voice. "You're supposed to drink at parties."

"But you've been drinking… a lot," the woman ventured.

"No I haven't," the Countryhuman said sharply.

"Please," South Chungcheong scoffed. "We are all aware you have been as drunk as a sow ever since the northern army retreated the first time. It has only grown worse."

He had been laden with liquor when he came to lift the silent Command two days after Gangwon's punishment, swaying on his feet as he slurred at her that she could speak again, and repeated the order not to throw household items at him.

Drunk or sober, it mattered not. Either way, he had not believed her.

His eyes flashed as he jerked over to her. He did not share the silent language they did, but she could read the look on his flushed face clearly.

*'Call his army what you **really** want to call it.'*

She could not forget. This was no longer the boy she could snipe at and insult without retribution. With the whipping, the gate to the temptation of a man's power had been opened. She did not think he had the mettle to truly cross it. But he could try.

She was still afforded the freedom of self-defense. But with only a few words, he could strip it from her.

And if she were forced to her knees in front of him, her back scourged bare under his whip as the other provinces watched on with looks that said it was just what she deserved…

Her pride would not bear it. *She* could not.

"Yeah, I'm kinda worried you're becoming an alcoholic," Gyeonggi

chirped.

'Twas only one of his inane comments, said thoughtlessly around a mouth of half-chewed potato. But it made South shoot up, the red on his cheeks flooding across his entire face.

"I'm *not* an alcoholic!" he cried, staggering slightly, grabbing on to the table and missing, pulling the tablecloth and causing his glass to fall, shattering on the floor with a sound that stopped the band.

The silence over their table spread, smothering the nightclub as all eyes turned to their corner. South stood frozen, staring at the shards of glass and puddle of wine on the floor, as if by holding still he could evade their judgement like a rabbit evaded foxes.

He quivered, and for a moment South Chungcheong thought he might flee from the scene and put an end to this farce, though she knew she would still be trapped here.

Then someone quickly commanded the band to pick up their hideous noise, and all heads turned from them with an almost audible crack of vertebrae, not wanting to witness something they should not. Not when martial law still lay over the city.

South sank slowly back down into his seat, shoulders hunched around his ear slits as a waitress hurried over to clean the mess, apologizing for some accursed reason as she did.

Not one of the provinces made a sound. Even North Chungcheong did not even snicker. From the corner of her eye, South Chungcheong could see that the look on his face was one of overwhelming disgust. The others were mixed with embarrassment. South Gyeongsang only looked pitying, a deep, deep pity that any man should wish to take his own life for ever inspiring in a woman.

'Disgust' was not enough for what the Southern Chungcheong felt. There was no word in any language to capture the revulsion that coiled inside her at the look of drunken shame on the face of the man who was supposed to be half of their country. 'Twas somehow far worse than when he had been heaving into her sink, or even that little smile that had been on his lips as his whip tore the flesh

from Gangwon's back.

This bumbling puppet boy was who she had required to spare her from America's wrath that night? How pathetic. How truly, utterly pathetic, for the both of them. How utterly miserable.

She wanted to leave. She did not want to sit at this table, surrounded by these degenerates and the scathing glares of those who thought she had taken the life of one of their people because she wished to return to bed. By this farce of a colony. She did not wish to be subjected to this grating music and stupid Yankee slaves and to sup on heady wine and meat that was practically still breathing while a few streets over a starving peasant girl was being raped in a back alley so her mother could afford to make her supper.

She did not want to play this game anymore. She had *never* wanted to.

"I'm not an alcoholic," South muttered.

"I want to go home." The words had been too honest. If her voice had not been chained, she might have cried them.

'Pathetic. Pathetic pathetic ***pathetic.'***

South Chungcheong straightened her shoulders, looking snootily down the table.

"I wish to return to my demesne. Release me from these Commands."

South looked at her, his eyes wide and glistening, soft and vulnerable.

Then they hardened. The way men's hardened when they remembered they had power over you.

"No."

South Chungcheong's jaw tightened. "I do not wish to play pretend with you and these simpletons. Release me."

"No," South repeated, louder. He stood, setting his jaw. "I invited you here, I invited *all* of you here, because I wanted to do something nice for you."

"You invited us here because your puppetmaster left and now you have no one to distract you from the things you do not wish to think of."

South Chungcheong knew she should hold her fool tongue, but if she was going to be forced to keep paying this fool's game, then she may as well get her cuts in and speak like one.

"That's not true," South protested. "I tried to invite you guys last year, too, but you all said no. You said no when it was just you and me on the first Liberation Day. You slammed the door in my face!"

"Because I do not wish to be part of your doll set," she sniffed. "You believe setting us around a table and making us eat your foreign food will make us a family."

She cut her eyes to him. "It does not."

His hands balled into fists, weak and ineffectual. "We *are* a family. I'm Korea and you're my provinces."

The others had been watching the exchange, not leaping to back her up as they would have each other. But now North Chungcheong growled, "You aren't. And we aren't *your* provinces. We're *Korea's* provinces."

"I *am* Korea!" South whispered a shout, slapping his palms on the table and making Jeju and Gangwon cringe, not raising his voice even when he was the only one with the freedom to.

South Chungcheong said nothing. She would not push her limits.

But Gangwon lifted his head, looking down the table. He trembled as the words left his lips, tripping worse than North Chungcheong as he fought to work around the Command not to call the northern one Korea directly.

"Y-You aren't *our* Korea."

And still, rage was not the first expression to twist the southern one's face. Instead it was a childish hurt, filling his eyes with tears. But then it darkened.

Again South Chungcheong knew what was coming.

"All provinces," South said coldly, straightening up, his voice low. **"You will call me Korea. I *am* Korea."** He spoke the words like he was trying to Command them to be the truth. **"And my brother is *North."***

He had issued those Commands before, but now he followed it with another one.

"And **you will not talk about him again."**

South Chungcheong felt the tendrils wrap around her brain, reaching down to hold her tongue, ready to restrain it if she tried to speak the name of her Countryhuman.

She had no intent to, but North Chungcheong let out a gagging sound, clearly attempting to defy the Command.

'Idiot.' They were all idiots. K-K-

For a moment she couldn't even *think* of him, and the feeling of her thoughts being stifled was somehow even more violating than that of her body being moved against her will. When the thought came, it still burned.

*'Korea, you **idiot.'***

The tablecloth bunched under the southern one's hands. The regret on his face was clear, as was the vicious triumph. He did not rescind the order.

"America is going to win," he told them firmly, gripping onto the table. "You need to get that through your heads. I don't want to do this stuff, but I have to. Once the war's over, I won't. So just **behave until then,** okay?"

His other Commands- not to talk about politics, not to spread

Communist messages, not to converse with their people or harm anyone, not to throw jasu hoops at his head- all ammounted to the same thing. But this new one still tightened around her bones, sinking into them, taking control of her body.

Behave.

So many years she had spent 'behaving,' believing she had no choice in it, believing she had *any* choice in it. How humiliating it had been to have that blind arrogance stripped from her by that stupid stupid man.

And still it came nowhere near to this, to not having a choice at all.

"I want you guys to like me," the southern one said, dripping with desperation that made her want to strike him. "I want us to get along. I'm not going to take North away from you- he's going to become part of me."

Gangwon's jaw feathered and North Chungcheong bared his teeth.

"We're all going to be together," the puppet said, pleading for it to be true. "We're going to be a *family."*

None of them looked at him. With their spirits shackled, it was the only defiance they could give.

"And every night will be like this." He gestured sloppily to the dance floor filled with foreigners and slaves, his eyes filled with a desperate hope that sent South Chungcheong's kimchi churning in her gut. "I *know* you've always had it hard, I know North never let you rest. But you *can.* You can tonight, if you just stop acting like him and have some fun for once."

When South Chungcheong could still hear his brother's voice ringing in her ear slits, every annoying speech, even the ones she had not wanted to hear, the ideas she had not desired to be taught, this one seemed lacklustre in comparison. The man seemed even more so.

South looked around, searching for some response, some sign that

he had reached them, that they would betray the ideals they had fought and suffered for over decades in exchange for jazz and steak.

No one looked at him. No one but South Chungcheong. And she was a fool for doing so, as ever.

He finally met her gaze. And for once she saw resolve in it.

"I know none of you know how to be normal," the southern one said, his hands fisting on the table. "I know Japan and North and fighting for the Communists all those years messed you up. You're still brainwashed."

"Whose brain is washed?" North Gyeongsang demanded in his ridiculous lisp.

He was ignored. "I was messed up, too. America had to teach me how to be normal. I know you don't like him, but if it wasn't for him, I'd still have no idea how to act around people."

America had not taught him to be normal. He had taught him how to be a puppet state.

And how to be a man.

South Chungcheong did not speak. His eyes were still boring into hers.

"I can teach you how to be normal, too. I can teach you how to enjoy life. You know North never would."

The life of a Provincehuman was not meant to be enjoyed. It was meant for destroying stupid games and freeing their people from the obligation to play, Liberating them from being pawns in a game they could never win.

"You're going to have fun tonight," South said, the words bordering on a Command. And then they were one.

"South Chungcheong- **come sing with me."**

She stiffened. "No."

But her body was already trying to stand, legs trembling, and no matter how much she fought to keep herself on the chair, she could not stop herself from rising.

"You'll like it," South said, smiling, and she wanted to claw it off his face. "I won't make you sing one of Rhee's army songs or anything. You know *'Aegukka'* by heart, right?"

He made her confirm that she did, her mouth opening and closing against her will.

"Hey," North Chungcheong said, standing. "No. Leave her alone."

"I do not require your protection," South Chungcheong forced out. The imbecile never learned.

"I'm not letting him take you out on stage like you're a damn baltal puppet." The words fought to be loud, to announce it to the club. They could not be more than a mildly heated statement.

"South Chungcheong doesn't like performances." South Gyeongsang volunteered, her brows furrowed as she looked at her. "If you want someone to sing with you, I will."

The woman's teeth ground. *'I do not want your pity.'*

"Or me!" Gyeonggi almost appeared excited by the idea.

"No," South said, his small mind made up. "South Chungcheong is the one that needs this the most."

The room was loud, the murmur of filthy lechers and their wenches distorting around her, crowding her skull. They would whisper as they watched her sing, eyes crawling over her as she was moved like a marionette, made to perform for their pleasure. Whisper about how attractive she was, what the body under her thick choson-ot looked like, what it would be like to have her in their beds or bent over their desk, the same whispers that had followed her for ten years.

"If you do this," she said lowly, piercing into him with her angular eyes. "Then you will *never* be my Korea."

South stared back.

Then he shrugged. “I will be. I’m going to be the only Korea.”

He crossed to her, linking their arms together. She wanted the skin under her sleeve to crawl, but it refused. As much as it rankled, he was still a Korean Countryhuman.

“All provinces except South Chungcheong- **sit,”** he ordered before North Chungcheong could move towards him. And as he led South Chungcheong away from the table, he glanced back and Commanded, “And **look at *me.”***

No matter how hard she tried, South Chungcheong could not stop her feet from following. She strained and struggled, but all she managed was a twist of her ankle that almost sent her to the ground, and would have had South not caught her.

“I’m not doing this to be mean,” he murmured as they crossed the floor, weaving between the dancers. “I just want you to have fun.”

No, he wanted to prove to her that he was a man. That no matter how weak and pathetic and submissive he was, he still had more power than her and always would. Even someone like him was more capable of winning than South Chungcheong had ever been.

He wanted the rest of their days to be like this night. He wanted the game to last forever because of course he did- it had been made for him.

“I helped you,” he reminded her, barely above a whisper. “Do you know how mad America would’ve been if he found out? I really stuck my neck out for you.”

Men were meant to protect women, a Countryhuman was meant to protect its Provincehumans, and even if one of hers had refused the charge, ‘twas still better than this one treating it like it was a favour. Her heart should not have pounded as she waited to see if he would reject the order to Command her, it should not have been a question of if he would choose a Korean province over a foreign invader.

“And you treat it like an obligation,” South Chungcheong scorned. “Something that I owe you for.”

“I don’t think you owe me,” he said, shame flashing across his face. “I just mean… I- I still have that handkerchief you gave me when I was… I still have it. You helped me and I helped you, even though you’re a-"

He cringed, eyes darting to a man in a black suit gorging himself on soup as he watched them, not daring to speak the word, and South’s Chungcheong’s jaw tightened.

She, a traitor. When *he* was the one obeying a foreign nation’s will as he sought to turn their country into a colonial slave once more.

Satisfied they were not about to be dragged out in chains, he turned to her, fervently whispering, “I *care* about you, South Chungcheong. Even if you haven’t given me any reason to. I want you- *all* of you- to care about me too.”

“If you care about me,” South Chungcheong said quietly, legs shaking as they approached the stage. “Then you will not make me do this.”

He faltered, and for a moment she had a faint hope.

Then he shook his head.

“If I just keep letting you walk all over me and don’t try to unbrainwash you, then you’ll never like me,” he told her. “And you’ll never be happy. You want to be happy, right?”

He searched her angular face desperately, as if South Chungcheong had ever desired something so meaningless. As if she could ever be happy when the game existed.

Again his eyes shadowed, and he tugged her forward once more, grip tight, even with the Commands preventing her escape.

“You’re going to do this. And one day you’re going to like it. I promise.”

Eyes were already on her, watching her head for the stage, arm in arm with their nation-traitor Countryhuman, tracking the hem of her skirt, waiting for a flash of lavender skin, expecting her to entertain them because she was a woman and that was what women were good for.

South Chungcheong put up no more fight. She could not resist the Commands. She could only struggle and choke and demean herself even further. She would not do that. She could not. She could not. She couldn't-

They reached the stage and the man whose arm she was on said something distant to the band. Then he led her up the stairs.

She was before the audience, all faces turned to them now that it was clear they were expected to, tracking over her, taking in every inch of a Provincehuman who had not been seen in months, if ever, from her simple slippers to her flowing black skirts to the chest covered by her purple jeogori, and the golden province on her face. She could see the other provinces out of the corner of her eye, heads having swivelled to follow South, unable to take their eyes off him. She did not think they were blinking.

"Hey everyone," South called, the nightclub quieting as he spoke. "Me and South Chungcheong thought it might be nice if we sang our anthem for you for Constitution Day."

She could tell he had stopped just short of saying 'If that's alright with you.'

How pathetic. Puppeteered by a man who craved attention so desperately, yet cringed now that he had it. Puppeteered by a puppet. How useless, how worthless, just like every single one of these trophy whores staring at her.

"South Chungcheong," South whispered from the corner of his mouth. **"Smile."**

And to her horror, she felt her cheeks lift, her lips upturn and stretch, her teeth poking through as she made an expression she never had before in her life, giving a pleasant smile to this room full

of traitors.

South blinked, looking stunned, then gave his own grin. “Wow, you really are prettier when you smile. Isn’t she?” he asked the crowd, and the men jeered and whistled, filling her face with heat and her stomach with useless roiling fury.

The worst part was that she knew he was not attempting to taunt her. The words could have came from America, but they were bereft of his mocking edge. She could not ascribe malice to him, only ignorance. He was just an ignorant, *stupid* man who still thought he was a child, heedless of the fact that he wielded a man’s power, a *country’s* power.

For the first real time in decades, she wanted to grab one of the blades from the fat diners’ hand and plunge it into her throat. She wanted to tear herself open with her nails and spray his face and those of these creatures watching her with her blood. She wanted to crack her skull open on the edge of this stage, to bash her head off the wall until it split wide open and the Commands fell out, to escape this humiliation forever.

But she could only smile.

“South Chungcheong,” South said after lifting the Command to keep her voice quiet. **“Sing.”**

‘Twas useless and she knew it, but some part of her did try to fight, to keep her jaw shut. But the strings pulled and cracked it open, and out came the notes of *‘Aegukka.’*

“Until the East Sea’s waves are dry, Paektusan worn away,
God watch o’er our land forever, our Korea manse.”

The man’s voice was high and pure, melodic in a way a male’s should not be. Her own was a lower counterpoint, unused to producing songs, the words emerging stilted and off-key, even when she was not trying to resist, flooding her body with even more shame, so much she felt she would burst.

‘Twas not one of Rhee’s songs, but it was one of his. The anthem

of a puppet state, and he had her singing it to this room full of those tied to the same strings he was, showing that *she* was tied to *his* strings, cementing her as *his.* A traitor, a puppet.

"Oh hibiscus, thousand miles of range and river land;
Guarded by his people, ever may Korea stand."

Eyes were on her, degrading her with their focus. Up here on this stage she existed for them, turning herself into nothing more than a utility like every other nightclub singer in a slinky dress. Something to entertain, something to be used. The men saw her as an object to undress in their minds, to covet and conquer, and the women saw her as just like them. Under the greedy gazes she was no longer something untouchable and superior, no longer a province or even truly a woman.

She was just an object.

"Like that Mt. Namsan, armoured pine, standing on duty still,
Wind or frost, unchanging ever, be our resolute will."

The words poured forth like bile, torn from her gullet. She wanted to run, to escape, damn her dignity. But when she tried, the Commands slithered over her, wrapping around her limbs and holding her in place, putting her mind in bondage, leaving her unable to think of anything but the next words.

Sing

"In autumn's arching evening sky, crystal and cloudless blue;
Be the radiant moon our spirit, steadfast, single, and true."

The man put his arm around her shoulder, a physical string to match the mental as he forced her to sway, to not be so stiff, to soften in front of all these glittering eyes and slobbering tongues, and now her skin did crawl, writhing over her body as it tried to tear off it and escape.

He did not even see what he was doing to her. He was tearing her spines out and leaving her vulnerable in a way she could never repair, and doing it in front of vultures who already though they

were owed whatever they desired.

The shame beat in her breast like a living thing, something that wanted to claw its way out, but could do naught more than burn and burn and burn and not even do the courtesy of immolating her body and erasing her from this wretched world.

She did not deserve this. She had learned her lesson long ago, she need not learn it again. She was useless, powerless, a pawn in a game she wanted nothing more than to destroy. She *got* it, she *understood.* These women thought she was no better than any of them and they were *right*. She was nothing more than a helpless little girl and she always had been.

It had been supposed to *change.* They were supposed to *change it,* he had *promised.* Yet here she was, the scraps of real dignity she had managed to wrap around herself over the years of fighting to free their country being torn away, baring her to these greasy-fingered freaks and a boy who thought he was Korea.

“With such a will, such a spirit, loyalty, heart and hand,
Let us love, come grief, come gladness, this our beloved land.”

She was being torn apart, the edges of her sanity crumbling away as her will was ravaged. She wanted to cry, she wanted to scream, she wanted to die, wanted to die, to die to die die die die-

“Oh hibiscus, thousand miles of range and river land;
Guarded by his people, ever may Korea stand.”

It was her only defiance. She was no wilting damsel and never had been, even before he had taught her to fight for them. She *would,* the only way she could.

As she sang the last line, her voice faltered on ‘Korea,’ the Commands refusing to let the word pass her lips.

And yet her rebellion went unnoticed. As the last words of the anthem splattered the crowd, they burst into polite applause, whistles and shouts of "Happy birthday, Mister Korea!" The man with a flag on his face was too absorbed in their praise to pay

attention to her, his arms raised and eyes alight, face flush with more than alcohol now.

South Chungcheong was left twitching and sore, the Commands carved deep into the matter of her brain, muscles aching from trying to flee. The pressure in her skull, in her body, crushing in on her from the audience, was too much, too much.

A Yankee in a double-breasted suit thought her blank stare was directed at him. He winked at her, and she felt something in her mind strain.

Song finished, she was freed from the stage. She stumbled away, tripping down the stairs, drawing chuckles from the pigs with empty eyes, thinking she was a drunken idiot like the man behind her, drawing concern and amusement and pity.

Her numb legs carried her past the table. Gyeonggi was crying, huge tears rolling down from his unblinking white eyes. North Chungcheong twitched, but could not tear his gaze from the male on stage. She knew he would not follow her if he could.

South Chungcheong fled out the door before her mind could break for good, mouth still stretched in an unbearable smile.

Guy that desires attention and praise more than almost anything from other people so can't comprehend why anyone would genuinely not want them vs woman to whom attention and praise are part of what she fears most. Entirely incompatible.

If you're interested in what South Chungcheong got from North, it's the 'I am going to genuinely lose my mind if I am publicly humiliated.' Amongst other things that should be obvious and will be even more obvious because the next chapter is a chapter I've been waiting to post forever UqwvjEjwpiejgqpiOaDgnqxgf <3

The bourgeois used to eat fancy luxurious foods and now it seems they just eat fast food. And children. What happened? Actually wait. Because of globalization (distribution and

‘lower’ prices(not really but you know what I mean) we now have access to every food they have. So they gain nothing by eating their tiny-portioned, unseasoned food over delicious, designed-to-be-addictive junk. It’s like how in Britain the rich used spices until they became available to the working class, then stopped using spices. And the one food no working person can eat normally now (not counting famines and such) is… Somehow the idea that the rich eat human flesh solely because it’s a rare commodity others can’t is worse than if it was just tasty, or even getting pleasure from consuming those ‘lesser’ than them. There’s a clinicism to it. Though all of those reasons are worthy of death.

An Interlude: Fool's Game

1910

An inkling of existence, a stirring of consciousness, and then-

“There she is!”

The words didn’t make sense at first, clunky, foreign gibberish, as incomprehensible as everything else swirling inside of (her?) her.

Woman, man, province, country, Sinsi emerging from the great white mountain in the north, Gojoseon raising his walled cities before falling to Han, replaced by Goguryeo and the other lesser states, Jin rising in the south before shattering into the Samhan confederacies, merging into Baekje, Gaya, and Silla until Silla absorbed them into herself before declining, usurped by those who stole the names of the old Three Kingdoms once more, Balhae’s fall, Koryo’s unification, then Joseon. A thousand wars of conquest and resistance, a million battles, invaders, conquerors, losses and victories, the sheer unadulterated force of *history* expanding in her mind like it had always been there, like *she* had always been there.

Joseon stretched on, five centuries of culture and progress and regress and language- Language. Her common sense came as words now, Korean, as Joseon’s borders tightened against invasion and foreign influence, until being pried open by greedy fingers and shaken by those who toiled rising up, a slow death, unmitigated by a new name, an abrupt termination by an unfair treaty, a real death, and-

And the rest was hers.

South Chungcheong’s eyes snapped open, and the man wielding a gun jolted back, alarmed by the sudden movement. Those with him raised their own weapons, surrounding her, a small, naked girl standing in the center of Taejon village.

Her cheeks flushed as her body discovered what shame was, her hands instinctively trying to cover herself.

The men, Japanese men, Korea's old nemeses, her common sense told her, laughed, and her body discovered something else.

Anger.

Her jaw locked, and her throat worked, until the words, "Get me clothes," came from it. Her voice was husky and sharp.

The men stopped laughing, and the one nearest raised his brows. "I think she thinks she's in charge," he said in a language different than the one that had left her lips. "Well, you're not, girly- Japan is."

"I'm aware," she said stiffly, trembling. "And I want clothes. Give them to me."

Another man smirked. "She's a feisty little mite, I'll give her that. Here." He shrugged off his jacket, tossing it at her. She barely caught it, her body still fresh and awkward. "It's long enough to serve as pants. Airing your bits out will do ya good, too."

The men laughed as she quickly shrugged on the jacket, doing it up all the way to her chin, despising that she was wearing an Occupier's clothes, but preferring it to being naked. Being bared only put her in more danger, she knew, the common sense of the old female Koreas coming to her, the common sense of being a woman.

Danger. She was in danger. Surrounded by foreign men in an isolated village that had likely been emptied in anticipation of her arrival. Men that had been waiting for her, men that served Japan. A male country that owned Korea, owned her, like men already believed they did.

She couldn't fight. She was barely a woman and women couldn't fight, let alone a girl-child with no clothes who had barely started to comprehend that she was alive. Tears tried to tremble on her lashes, but she forced them back.

When one of the men grabbed her shoulder, all she could do was cringe and hiss, “Don’t touch me!”

He only laughed, grabbing her harder and pulling her close, starting to drag her though the city at gunpoint, while she clumsily stumbled alongside, her legs too short to keep pace with him.

“Feisty’s good, it’s fun,” he taunted. “But best not to get *too* feisty, or His Divine Majesty might come pay a visit.”

She had to avoid that. She had to keep herself safe.

“I want a job,” she said out loud, her voice wavering as she clutched the jacket close. “I want to be useful.”

“A job?” the man asked, his grip on her tight, his sweat stinking in the summer sun. “I can think of a few for a pretty girl like you.”

“You’ll have to discuss that with whoever gets set up as the new Provincial Minister,” the man who had thrown his coat at her said. “Or even the Governor-General. Might take a few months, though.”

A few months surrounded by men like this, with nothing to protect her, while the Japanese swept in to finish claiming her country that had already been no better than a Japanese puppet for years.

As South Chungcheong was hauled through the dusty streets of her provincial capital that the Japanese called ‘Taiden,’ she had her first fully formed thought of her own, her eyes narrowed at the back of her captor’s head.

‘Bastards.’

—

1910

Three months later

“Here’s your desk, here’s your supplies, and *here’s-"* The stocky man that had trained her *‘thunk’*ed a huge stack of papers down on her desk. They were yellowed and smelled of mildew. “Your first

task. These are the records of Chuseinan province from the past twenty or so years. You'll go through them, organize them by date, and throw out any that could be considered seditious to Japan's rule. Think you can handle that?"

South Chuncheong, whose jaw had clenched at the Japanese name of her province, nodded.

"Good." Her trainer leaned on an elbow, lowering his voice. "Because you've received official sanction from Japan himself to work here. And if you screw up, *both* our asses are on the line, understand?"

South Chungcheong nodded again, and he straightened up.

"Then get to work, girl."

She did. It was slow going with her only recently learned characters, and the old papers left an unpleasant residue on her fingers. But she spent all day squinting at dusty records, sounding out the words in them, cross-checking them with her list to see if anything could be considered 'seditious.'

At the end of the long, arduous workday, she had a stack of neat, ordered papers to be filed away, and another to be burned. She picked up the former, casting another look at the ones she left on her desk.

That was Korean history, as inconsequential as it might be. Genealogical records, recordings of celebrations, important events. It was *her* history, set to be burned.

This was her first time walking through the long, straight halls of the Provincial Office alone. The heels they had assigned her pinched her feet as she tried to walk as silently as possible, passing male politicians and female secretaries.

The former had no fear of going unnoticed, striding down the halls, loud and boisterous, while the latter scurried quite pathetically, their heads down, only raising them when hailed by a man, flashing them a quick, tentative smile.

South Chungcheong had come to despise those smiles over her last two weeks of training. The woman were so soft-spoken, always curving their lips when spoken to by a male, even when it was clear they wanted to do the opposite. They smiled and laughed even as they were blocked into a corner or trapped at their desks.

Even as she passed through the halls, she could see through a crack in an office door as one of the office workers pinned the young woman that had brought South Chungcheong a glass of water earlier to the wall with his body without even touching her.

“Forget the drink,” he purred. “I’m more interested in spending time with you.”

The girl laughed, a panicked, fluttering sound that was still attempting to be friendly, as she stammered through a dozen ways of saying no without ever actually saying the word, pretending to be so stupid as to not know what he truly meant.

South Chungcheong turned away. It was what the girl deserved, hustling around, acting eager to serve. The province had only been alive for barely over three months, yet from simply observing during her training, she had already realized what all these foolish women didn’t.

Those lowered eyes, fake smiles, and defensive cheerfulness were not a shield- they were a lure. The feigned stupidity did not protect them, it only made them more desirable to the men that wanted them. They were practically asking to be victimized.

Which was why when South Chungcheong entered the archives, finding the correct place to file the old records and removing a new stack, intent on proving herself useful, and a shadow fell across her, she was ready.

She hadn’t turned around as the door had creaked open, or as heavy footfalls came her way. Men did not need to creep. They moved through the world assured that it would bend to their wills.

“Chuseinan-do,” a smooth voice said from too close behind her in the small, dim room. “I had heard I had the honour of working with

a province. It's a pleasure to meet you."

South Chungcheong turned, unsmiling, her files held under one arm, not clasped in front of her. "I am sure it is."

Pak Jung-yang, the new Provincial Minister of South Chungcheong province, blinked, momentarily taken aback by her blunt, informal speech. But it didn't last for long as a smile rose under his well-groomed black moustache.

"You're just as lovely as I heard," he said, his eyes scanning her lavender skin and black and white choson-ot. "Though I'm sure you'd be even lovelier with a smile."

He flashed his yellow teeth at her. South Chungcheong's lips remained flat.

The man smiled because he wished. The women that worked under him smiled because they felt they had to.

South Chungcheong did not.

When she didn't answer, the Minister leaned forward, bracing one arm on the shelf behind her.

"I've been keeping tabs on your progress," he said, as if she would not notice that he had just said he was seeing her for the first time. "You worked fast for your first day. If you keep that up, you could even be my personal secretary."

His voice lowered as he reached for her arm. "Does that sound good to you?"

"Have I given you the impression that I am a woman you can touch?"

South Chungcheong's scathing tone stopped his hand an inch from her slender wrist.

"What did you say?" Pak Jung-yang asked, too confused to sound as threatening as he likely intended.

“Are you deaf as well as lacking in wits?” South Chungcheong asked, arching a brow as she took a step forward, forcing him to straighten up. “What I said was, ‘Have I given you the impression that I am the same as these other empty-headed harlots?’ Because I am not.”

The Minister sputtered, outraged at being spoken to in such a manner by someone who should by all means be meek and docile. “You can’t speak to me like that!”

“Oh, but I can.” South Chuncheong straightened further, looking down at him despite how he loomed over her, the way she had been practicing. “You may have been appointed by the Japanese, but *I* am Chuseinan-do. My authority comes from my very being. I am your better. *You* are just a peon.”

She tilted her chin, barging past him, leaving the moron dumbstruck as she pointedly slammed the door to the archives.

Her heart beat hard in her bosom, and her tongue felt filthy for having said her name in Japanese. But she could not afford to use her Korean one. Not if she intended to walk this line.

Her heels clacked on the hardwood floors as she passed the office she had before, the door now closed tight.

Let the other women smile and simper in an attempt to spare themselves. It would only lead to their downfall. South Chungcheong would not play their losing game. She would play to win.

She marched to her desk, taking the stack of old records to be destroyed. History was nothing, not compared to her pride.

With that done, she sat back at her desk, starting on the next set of records, intending to finish them before the last worker went home and she must return to her little prison house.

Men only let women learn to read and write when it allowed them to serve them better. And the women had to smile and play along, lest they be kicked to the streets, where they would be forced to

find other ways to serve lesser men. Better to be violated by one than a hundred.

South Chungcheong abhorred the idea of working for the Japanese and their puppets, such as that degenerate nation-traitor Pak. But it was preferable to the alternative. She would be violated by no man. She would wield her demeanour like a blade, and the little bit of power she had been given like a shield to prevent herself from losing her position, as Silla, Gaya, and every other female 'Korea' and their subdivisions had.

She would be an obedient little secretary. She would make herself useful, too useful to discard, to be locked away in obscurity where she could be treated as her jailors pleased.

South Chungcheong would keep her dignity, if nothing else.

—

1913-1919

South Chungcheong's heels clicked purposefully as she shoved open the door to the Provincial Office, head up, ignoring the voices that called to her as she marched past them.

"Good morning, Miss Chuseinan-do!"

"Looking good today!"

"You really could smile more."

She paid no heed to any of them, sliding behind her desk, adjusting the bouquet of hibiscus on it before removing the year's budget from a drawer, picking up where she had left off yesterday, unswayed by the myriad of distractions that the lesser beings she was forced to associate with attempted to inflict upon her.

"I brought you some water, Miss Chuseinan-do."

"Did I order you to? Pour it out and cease these useless appeals."

"Think you could shrug off your bodyguards and come eat ramen

with me?”

“I would sooner starve than let such a vulgar dish pass my lips.”

“You know, your speech is so weird, I sometimes have trouble understanding it.”

“I speak the tongue of early Joseon, back when Koreans still had dignity. I would not expect *you* to understand it.”

“Chuseinan, I wanted those reports on my desk an hour ago!”

“They are. You set your tea down upon them, and now the title is obscured by your cheap drink.”

“…Ah. Get me a new report, readable this time.”

South Chungcheong had quickly risen in the ranks, if a secretary could be said to do that. She engaged in no gossip, took no breaks, worked overtime, and with a ruthless efficiency that had no match among the pitiful women she worked with. It had come to the point where Pak Jung-yang had indeed appointed her his personal secretary, sacrificing the ability to have a woman on call to kneel under his desk for him for the ability to scare off any unwanted meetings.

Not that he did not have his women. South Chungcheong made no attempt to warn the girls that followed him to his office. They would not heed her anyways, too hopeful that by providing their superior a brief moment of pleasure, they would be securing their futures. They were too stupid to realize that they were only cementing his opinion of them as office utilities. And utilities were easily replaced.

They were fools. And South Chungcheong had no pity for fools. ‘Twould get her fired if she did.

She brought the man his reports, examined proposals for him to sign, new roads, new public buildings, more laws, less freedoms. She brought him his teas and his snacks and his meals, counted funds, went over budgets, ignored any and all attempts to make meaningless conversation from the tools that inhabited the office.

They made her sick, acting as if they had any say in their country or any power over this small city. They were puppets, all of them. And unlike her, they did not even realize it.

She worked long into the night, rebuffing Pak Jung-yang's newest attempt to sway her into whoring herself out to him, then left, kicking the least annoying of her guards awake from where he had been sleeping in the lobby, and marching home to her one-room house to change into a different choson-ot to sleep in, slumbering the moment her head hit the pillow, plagued by dreams of miscounting or misfiling or being unable to escape the Minister's advances before waking to do it all over. And over.

"Good morning, Miss Chuseinan-do."

"Looking even better today!"

"Still no smile? But it's so nice outside!"

She sat behind her desk, scanning the proposal. Historic preservation. 'Twould never pass. Pak had a penchant for destroying cultural buildings.

"I got you a glass of tea, Miss Chuseinan-do."

"Is there no brain 'twixt your ears? If I desired a drink, I would fetch one."

"No ramen, but how about raengmyeon?"

"Did you think 'twas the pronunciation that made it vulgar? Begone."

"Okay, but *why* do you talk like that?"

"I do not get paid to explain myself to imbeciles."

"Chuseinan-!"

"Here is the copy of the report. Acquire a coaster, you possess the funds."

In 1915, Pak Jung-yang transferred to Seoul, relinquishing the title of Provincial Minister for the more 'illustrious' one of Privy Council member, advising the Governor-General how best to rule their country. After a year, her skill and status caught the attention of the new man himself, Hasegawa Hoshimichi, after his predecessor had transferred back to Japan to lord over his own people as Prime Minister, and South Chungcheong was freed from her obligation to work for a pervert and forced to work under someone worse- a Jap.

The surroundings and pawns were changed, but the game was the same. She woke up early in her two-room house in the city center, walked a few streets over to the aging City Hall, sat down at her desk, and went over the demographics of Seoul- the quickly rising Japanese population and the slower Korean one; public opinion surveys, which neighbourhoods held lower views of the Occupation; budgets, how much money had to be allocated to keep a country sufficiently leashed. She worked through them all while having to teach a new batch of public servants that they were, in fact, servants, while *she* was not.

"Chuseinan-do-ssi, would you like something to drink?"

"It is Chuseinan-do-*nim,* and do not ask again, wench."

"We're going out after work, do you-?"

"Why *yes,* I will simply inform my bodyguard that I will be going clubbing tonight. No. Do not ask again, peasant."

"You speak really-"

"*You* will not be speaking at all, soon. Silence, peon."

"Chu-"

"I brought you two copies of the report, one is on your desk, the other is filed, and I have allocated enough funds for coasters for the whole office in this year's budget."

The only difference was the power. The men around her had more of it, which put her in more danger. But at the same time, *she* had more as well. She was a Korean Provincehuman working directly

under the Governor-General, which didn't change once he was replaced by Saito Makoto. No mere office worker would dare touch her without sufficient drink in them, and she would never put herself in that position.

She spent her days cold and aloof, working even later into the night, until her eyes strained most arduously and her lavender fingertips were stained with ink. Then she kicked awake her least annoying guard in the lobby and ignored the other five as they escorted her the block to her gated abode, where she fell into restless sleep where she dreamed of hanging on a rope for forgetting to burn something properly, and men she could not say no to, before waking up to do it all over.

And over.

And over.

And over.

Until *he* had the audacity to show up at her door.

—

1920

April

Arise, walk, ignore, sit, read, write, ignore, fend off unwanted advances, get up, kick, ignore, walk, slum-

'Thump.'

South Chungcheong shot up before she could reach the 'nightmare' slot in her schedule, disdaining the way her heart pounded as she sat up in her futon, listening.

Silence. Far too much of it. Where were the usual irritating murmurs of the men outside as they played cards or smoked?

Was this the work of more radicals, emboldened by the March First Movement or the failed attempt to assassinate Saito

yesteryear? Or had her so-called guards finally decided to make some coin on the side by whoring her out to their friends?

Here in this dark, empty apartment, she was stripped of what made her untouchable, left only with her small body and the smaller letter opener she clutched in her hand.

She would not allow it to tremble. When they came for her, her grip on the blade would be steady as she drew it across her throat.

The key rattled in the lock, a more stealthy requiem of the sound she heard every morning, and the front door creaked open.

South Chungcheong rose, going to stand by the window, unable to see more than the moonlight that filtered through the shoji paper, the bars behind it obsidian pillars that threw shadows on the room.

'How pitiable.' A daughter of Korea dying colonized, any warmth left in her body likely to be used by whoever was invading her house.

At least she would die with dignity.

"Go in," a man hissed in Korean, audible through the thin door, likely goading on his partner in crime.

"Alone?" someone whispered back, her voice just as small as his. A woman, shockingly.

Perhaps instead of having their way with her here, she was to be trafficked instead. Though she could not fathom why her 'guards' would ever agree to that. Violating her would not affect her work-spiriting her away assuredly would. They would certainly face punishment from their 'kami' for that.

"Yes, alone," the man snapped quietly. "That's why I brought you."

"Oh." The woman sounded pleased. "Of course."

"Hurry."

There was a soft knock at the door to her room before it gently opened a crack. South Chungcheong brought her blade down from her neck, not wanting to give the invaders the satisfaction of thinking they had frightened her.

But she kept it ready.

"Pardon the intrusion," the soft female voice whispered as a head poked itself into the roof.

Her pale eyes widened, and South Chungcheong's almost did as well.

A Provincehuman, her skin so snowy white it almost glowed in the filaments of moonlight, matching her almond-shaped eyes. South Chungcheong had spent far too much time pouring over maps of the country not to recognize the red outline on her face as that of South Hamgyong province.

Those gleaming eyes flicked to the letter opener in her hand, and South Hamgyong opened the door further, her palms spread peacefully, as if she did not have a pistol at her hip.

"Hello," she said, smiling. "Don't worry, we aren't here to hurt you. Korea, she's here," she said over her shoulder with far too much excitement. "And she's decent."

South Chungcheong stiffened at the name, stopping herself from flinching as someone strode by the province, into her room.

The Korean Countryhuman, the skin revealed by his cloak just as white as South Hamgyong's, though interrupted by the red and blue taegeuk and its black dashes. Not the flag of Japanese Chosen, though that meant little.

He was not a man, but a boy, as was the province. Their voices were small not from whispering, but because they were but children.

His sharp eyes flicked around the room, as if an assailant might be hiding inside her wardrobe or under her futon, before settling on her, stabbing into her own.

“South Chungcheong,” he said, not a query.

The province straightened her shoulders. “I trust you have a good reason for intruding on my rest?”

“We’re here to save you,” South Hamgyong said, glancing over her shoulder before stepping into the room.

There were others outside.

“I was not speaking to you, girl.” South Chungcheong kept her eyes on the male. “What have you done to my guards?”

“We killed them,” Korea said bluntly.

South Chungcheong arched a brow, irked. “You realize the trouble this will cause for me? How am I supposed to explain their deaths?”

“You won’t need to,” he replied. “Like South Hamgyong said- we’re here to get you out.”

How irritating.

“I must have forgotten that I sent a communique indicating that I need your help,” she said, eyes narrowed. “If I did, then disregard it. I do not.”

“You don’t want to be free?” the female asked, sounding stupidly baffled.

“I *am* free,” South Chungcheong sniffed. “I have a salary, a house, and steady access to groceries. Whereas I assume you intend to recruit me for some venture that involves traipsing across the wilderness, starving, in a badly-stitched Jap uniform.”

She eyed the crooked stitches on the female’s cloak and tunic. The girl’s cheeks turned red to match the province on her face, but her lips lifted in a smile.

“It’s a chance to free our country,” she urged.

Korea stepped forward. “We’ve almost reclaimed all of our

provinces. Once we have, we can take the fight to Japan and retake Korea."

"So 'tis you I have to thank for my increased security," South Chungcheong said with disgust.

'Twas not solely the March First Movement and its aftermath then, nor the growing malcontent of those chafing under the Japs. 'Twas this *male* gallivanting across the countryside with his utilities that had gained her further restrictions.

"I was rather more free before you took up this crusade." She let her irritation show. "Thank you *ever* so much."

"You *weren't* free," the girl insisted, still attempting to be warm. "You're slaving away for Japan, helping him Occupy our country."

They had been watching her. That had been the creeping feeling that had followed her this past week as she was ferried to and fro work.

"How did you find me?" she demanded. Had it been some misplaced 'benevolence' from one of the fools she worked with? If so, she was going to find out whom.

"I'll only tell you that if you come with us," Korea said, staring into her eyes. "Will you?"

"No." She lifted her chin. "I am a lady. 'Tis not my purpose."

South Hamgyong's fists clenched, her smile visibly tight. How pathetic.

Though before she could speak, footsteps sounded on the tatami floor of South Chungcheong's sitting room.

Another male barged into the bedroom, a boy, taller than Korea. He moved with confidence and purpose, and it made South Chungcheong's lip curl. Her lip curled even further when she saw the gold sigil on his violet skin.

"Hey, little sister," the male that could only be North

Chungcheong province said, his teeth flashing in the dim room. “Nice to meet you.”

“I am no one’s sister,” the Southern Chungcheong said stiffly. “Let alone ‘little.’ Show some respect to a woman you know not.”

His dim-witted smile fell as he looked ‘twixt the other two, realizing their less than pleased stances. “What’s going on?”

“She doesn’t want to come with us,” South Hamgyong said with petulance.

“What?!” the male that had attempted to lay familial claim to her exclaimed.

Korea shushed him harshly. “Be quiet.”

“How can you not want to come with us?” North Chungcheong demanded of her, quieter. “Don’t you want to free our country? Don’t tell me the other half of Chungcheong is a collaborator?”

“I am not ‘half’ of anything,” South Chungcheong scorned. “Just as I am no collaborator. I desire to see the Japs gone as much as any true Korean. But ‘tis not my duty. ‘Tis yours.” She jerked her chin at he and the Countryhuman, not the waif.

“It’s *all* of our duties,” South Hamgyong said, her voice brimming with vulgar emotion. “We’re Provincehumans.”

“I am a woman first,” she dismissed, not deigning to look her way. “Do you think Silla ever lifted her hand personally ‘gainst Tang? No. Let the men fight their wars. I will stay where it is safe.”

“You can’t just-"

“South Hamgyong,” Korea cut her off, and she quieted obediently.

What an idiotic girl. Did she not understand the dangers of travelling in the wilds with men? Did she think she was safe solely because the boy with the sharp eyes was their Countryhuman? It was not as if Koreas of the past had not taken liberties with their territories before.

He had far more power than her. And South Chungcheong could tell that South Hamgyong let him have it. She would pay for it, someday.

Korea turned back to South Chungcheong, his face set. “You have a duty to our people-"

“Spare me any speeches.” She sliced his words in half with her tongue “I have a duty to myself and no other. I will not go, and that is final.”

“We could just knock you out and take you,” North Chungcheong suggested.

“And will you?” She ignored him, raising her chin haughtily at Korea, looking down on him, daring him to lay a hand on her.

“No,” he said immediately, not accepting her challenge. “I only need willing fighters. If you aren’t, then you’re useless to me.”

“So we’re just going to leave her?” North Chungcheong asked incredulously. He spun to her. “You realize they’re going to crack down on you even more now, right? You’re not even going to be able to *breathe* without them watching. You’ll be lucky if they don’t lock you up!”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Yours!” he cried, frustrated, though still low.

“Japan’s,” Korea corrected. “It is his fault and his alone.”

“Screw this.” The male province turned away, stomping from the room. “If my ‘sister’ is a nation-traitor coward, then I don’t want one.”

The front door slammed.

South Chungcheong was pleased. Good. She had no desire for a brother, either. Brothers were useful for three things- being head of the household after the patriarch died, marrying you off, and dying in wars. They had no father nor household, she had no desire to

marry, and considering he likely would die once their little crusade caught the attention of Japan, there was no point in forming an attachment.

“You should depart as well,” she said, turning her backs to them. “I must wake at my usual time tomorrow, if I wish to avoid any suspicions over the deaths of my guards.”

“You can’t really want this,” South Hamgyong said, disbelief evident in her purposefully soft voice. “You can’t really want to stay here and keep selling yourself to Japan.”

“I am no woman marketing herself in a back alley,” she said cuttingly, casting a glare over her shoulder. “I am a government employee.”

South Hamgyong’s delicate face contorted, finally losing her mask of fake gentility for the briefest of seconds before it returned, her brows furrowing in a way that was sure to leave wrinkles.

“So you truly won’t come with us?”

“No.”

“But-"

“South Hamgyong.” Korea tilted his chin to the door. “Go. I’ll be out in a minute.”

The girl’s clearly callused and blistered hands furled into balls, but she departed, casting one last look at South Chungcheong, something between concern, bewilderment, and a darker force.

South Chungcheong cared not. She only cared that she was now alone with Korea.

Her grip tightened on her letter opener.

“I said spare the speeches,” she said, keeping her voice strong. “I have made my decision. I am not some waif that will bend as you please.”

“I wasn’t going to make a speech.” Korea’s eyes narrowed, piercing into her, though he made no move in her direction. “I only want you to know that you are not free. And if you stay here, you never will be.”

“Says who?”

“You.” His voice was low. “You know that no matter how hard you work, it will never be enough. No matter what you do, how much you slave away, you will still be *nothing* in their eyes.”

South Chungcheong’s expression cracked, her teeth grating off of each other as the words sparked off her heart as flint and steel.

“What do you know of my work?” she demanded, trying desperately to match his ice. “What do you know of *me?”*

“I know it chafes that they all look down on you,” he replied, still with his eyes locked to hers. “Every time they force you to do something for them, every time they laugh behind your back, it reminds you that you are powerless to stop it. That they are above you, and they could do *anything* to you and you wouldn’t be able to stop them.”

South Chungcheong’s chest rose and fell rapidly, her hand clenching rhythmically around her blade. “They cannot lay hands on me. I am a Provincehuman.”

“You are Korean,” Korea replied icily. “And they are Japanese. And you will *never* be one of them.”

Her lips wobbled and pressed flat.

“Pretend you’re content, pretend you’re fine with going through life being looked down on in your own country,” Korea said, his voice simmering with an ire that rivalled hers. “But no matter how much you do for them, there will always be bars on your window.”

He still stared into her eyes, pinning her to the wall without even touching her.

“So don’t pretend that you are free.”

He turned for the door.

How *dare* he. How dare he walk in here and speak to her like he knew anything about what she had gone through over these ten years. How dare he speak as if he were anything like her.

How dare he be right.

He said it all as if she were not aware. As if she had not long ago realized that the game she was playing was one that could not be won. That she was just as naïve as the fool girls in the office who batted their lashes and gave false smiles like it would protect them. As if she did not know that it was Japan's world, and more than that, *men's* world, and she was just living in it, trying to play by their rules while they leered and laughed at her for thinking she was a player like them, waiting for the day they would prove she wasn't.

"Which Provincehumans have you yet to acquire?" she asked suddenly, once her voice could be trusted not to sound like the waif's. "Aside from myself."

Korea half-turned. "The Gyeongsangs and Gyeonggi. He was in the Governor-General's residence on Namsan, but we think he was moved."

South Chungcheong flexed her fingers again, then said, "One week. I will get you the information you seek. But do not return here and do not attempt to converse with me ever again. Just because you stride in here as my Countryhuman does not mean you can simply get what you desire from me."

His eyes did not flicker at her words. "I desire our country's freedom. If you can do anything to get us closer to that, then that's all I need. Whether you join us or not, so long as you remain Korean, Korea is yours, and will be waiting for you once we win."

Korea left without another glance. The door shut and South Chungcheong was, once again, alone.

She would not follow him. She would not give her life into the

hands of a man who, even if he held some honour, would lead her into battle against those who had none. She had power here, even if it was only a little, even if it could easily be seized from her. She still *had* it.

Out there she would have nothing. She would be just another girl at the mercy of the men that were undoubtedly hunting them.

South Chungcheong knew she could never win this game. But she would push back her loss as far as she could, for even one more day.

And now she was going to roll the dice and risk everything she had built for even the chance of what that irritating boy had said in his parting shot.

She was a Korean province. Korea should be *hers.*

Her eyes narrowed at the door, her hands clenching once more around her letter opener until her lavender knuckles turned almost as white as her country's flag.

'Bastard.'

If 'twere anyone lesser than she, they would not have been able to remain… at work. But she was able to.

All it took was tearing at her clothes, tugging the collar of her choson-ot askew and pulling at the goreum until they were half-undone, opening both the door to her room and that to the outside, then- after a grimace at how uncouth she was about to be- screaming at the top of her lungs.

'Twas not long before the pounding of feet sounded outside as those who guarded the next door manor burst in, their batons at the ready as they looked wildly around her small sitting room.

South Chungcheong quickly emerged from her bedroom, not wanting to let them set foot in it, clutching the collar of her jeogori.

“It took you quite long enough,” she said scathingly. “The fiends escaped before you lackwits even breached the gate.”

The eyes of the men darkened at her words, but she interrupted before they could say anything inane.

“Where are my guards? Are they not supposed to keep me safe from hooligans trying to accost me?”

“Ah, bad news Miss-"

“Ma’am,” she corrected icily.

“M-Ma’am,” the man said awkwardly. “Your guards are all dead.”

“Then what was their use?” She straightened. “I will not sleep here tonight. Take me to the Governor-General’s residence. I demand to speak with him at once.”

A bit of coercion and she got her wish, being taken to the residence at the foot of Namsan, where a bleary-eyed Saito Makoto listened as she recounted the false event with a suitable level of aggravation. Quite simple, since she *was* incredibly aggravated.

Perhaps the Governor-General and his men harboured suspicions on how a gang of thugs had infiltrated an affluent neighbourhood, eliminated six men without flaw, and vanished before anyone could arrive on the scene. But if they did, they were ground to dust under South Chungcheong’s heel as she demanded more guards and safer quarters so that there would never be a repeat of the incident.

What if it had not been Korea at her door? What if it truly had been a gang of hooligans, either radicals or simply those that believed they could make money off of a female Provincehuman? Or what if Korea had been the sort to take liberties with his subdivisions? The idea that her guards could be taken out so easily was unacceptable. And the more she had, the more difficult it would be for one of them to convince the rest to enact her initial fear from when that thump had first awakened her.

And perhaps it would keep those two fool provinces and their Countryhuman from attempting to sway her again.

In the end, she was given ten new men to watch over her, armed with batons and pistols, and a room at Namsan.

She did not approve of sleeping in the same building as men, or the Governor-General, but she accepted that the walls would provide some safety, as would having staff members nearby. Not that she trusted that any of the lower-class men and skittish women would be of any help in any situation, let alone one where her dignity was at risk.

Saito offered her the next day to rest, but she refused it. If she took days off, her usefulness would lower in his eyes. Yet if she went in after a traumatic experience, it would rise. She would become even more irreplaceable.

*'You will **never** be one of them.'*

Very well. But she could at least avoid being tossed out as trash.

Her routine returned to normal, with slight variations.

She arose in the morning, climbed into the personal car, was driven to the City Hall, entered, ignored the mundane greetings from the office filth, sat at her desk, went over proposals and laws, another against the wearing of white clothes, more police, bigger prisons, more Shinto shrines, more obedience to Japan.

She found her fingers digging into the papers, leaving inkstain fingerprints as she sorted them into order of importance.

Ignore those around her more, fend off unwanted advances, work late into the night, march by her guards, all awake and waiting, be driven back to Namsan, fall asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. Arise and do it again. And again. For three more days.

On the sixth after Korea had so presumptuously barged into her life, she deviated. Not suspiciously so. It was not the first time she had supped with the Governor-General's wife. Drinking tea and nibbling on expensive foods with a woman of such high status was a way to claim even more of it for yourself, after all.

And for some reason, Saito's wife was enamoured with her, despite

South Chungcheong making no effort to curb her tongue in her presence. The middle-aged woman invited her over far too frequently, even before she had shared a domicile with her. The province usually declined, since she could not stand the miserable wench.

"And then *I* said, 'I would say that obi adds twenty pounds to her *at least.'*" Saito's wife burst into titters at her own remembered comment, while South Chungcheong sipped her tea from the delicate, sakura-patterned cup.

"Quite," she said, then scrunched her face. "You," she snapped at the maidservant standing by the door.

The girl jumped. "Y-Yes, Miss?"

"That's ma'am to you, peon. Do you call this tea?" South Chungcheong tipped her matcha at her to display the vivid green liquid. "I understand you Japanese think this swill is palatable, but I posses a more refined palate. Bring me something that does not taste like grass."

The girl looked askance at Saito's wife with wide eyes, and the woman waved a hand.

"Go, go. Chuseinan-san is a guest, serve her what she likes."

The servant bowed at a sharp angle, then scampered out of the parlour with her head down, long skirt bustling.

Saito's wife took the opportunity to pull a small bottle from the pocket of her blush pink foreign dress, downing it in one swig. Judging from the reek of her breath, it was not her first of the eve.

South Chungcheong looked away in disgust, examining the white Western-style furnishings and gold-lined wallpaper with an equal amount of it.

For however much the Japs enjoyed imposing their aesthetics on Korea, they seemed to enjoy imposing Western aesthetics on themselves. It made sense, she supposed. Saito Makoto had studied in the United States of America, another meddlesome country with

no sense of architectural integrity.

"I think you scared Kazuko-chan again," the woman giggled, another bottle downed, her usual formal Japanese washed away by it.

"A strong breeze would scare the waif," South Chungcheong said with disdain. "She lacks a spine as well as brains."

Saito's wife laughed. "Chuseinan-san has such a pretty face, but such a mean mouth. She'll never make a good bride."

"I have no desire to be one."

"No?" Saito's wife asked, frowning. "Every girl should want to be a bride. You're the perfect age for it. The younger you start, the better chance you have of bearing a son."

"I cannot bear children," South Chungcheong replied bluntly. And if she could, if ever were she forced to engage in the act to conceive, she would slit her throat before her stomach could start to swell.

"Truly?" The woman's brows furrowed. "I'm so sorry."

She was like all the other females, pasting on a gentle expression as if she were sorrowed, instead of revealing the darker emotion the province could see glittering in her eyes.

Saito's wife's voice held none of her envy as she said, "It's a shame that you wouldn't make a good bride. If you did, you might be able to marry Japan-sama."

"Bite your tongue," the province said sharply, but the woman had sunk too deep in her drink to pay her any heed.

"I suppose your standing isn't high enough, anyway," she sighed, slumping onto the table. "A country as powerful as Japan-sama could never wed a foreign province. It's a shame. Do you think the Korean Countryhuman is a woman? Maybe that's why she hides herself away. Your women used to do that, right?"

The province did not reply, letting her babble as she waited.

"It would be nice if your country and mine could wed," Saito's wife murmured. "Then we could… all get along, and everyone could be… happy."

She trailed off into a snore, able to sleep untroubled, though every joining of her country's and South Chungcheong's had always been forced, and always would be.

South Chungcheong wasted no time. The Governor-General had went on one of his 'tours' today, hosting banquets for the rich landowners and Western missionaries, which meant his private rooms were empty of all but his unconscious wife. And the hapless serving girl would still be in the kitchens, engaged in the time-consuming process of making proper tea.

The man's room was large, with more Western-style furniture, not even his private life free of foreign influence. The son of a samurai sleeping in a four-poster bed, an apt description of his country's empty 'Nationalism.'

South Chungcheong rummaged through one nightstand, moving swiftly and silently, deftly replacing anything she pulled out. Medals, matches, ammunition.

The other nightstand was the same. Despite this being a shared room, his wife had left little imprint on it, even in seven months of living here.

Her heart pounded as she sifted through useless trinkets and memorabilia. If the Governor-General returned and found her here, alone in his room…

Cursing Korea, she searched faster, hands shaking, and then, under a photograph of Saito Makoto dressed in a uniform, thirty years younger and forty pounds lighter, she found it.

A key ring, and on it, an old brass key.

She slipped it free and clutched it tight, its cold teeth cutting into her palm.

Success.

With a quick glance to make sure she had left nothing out of place, she departed, quickly marching down the hall to the parlour. She had barely slid back into her seat when the serving girl came back into the room with a tray in her hands.

“Here you go, ma’am-"

“Does it look like we are still taking tea?” South Chungcheong asked snootily. “Use your eyes, girl. My hostess has drank herself into a coma again. Escort me from her suite.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.” The girl ducked her head and led her from the rooms, docile as a lamb.

She would be taken advantage of eventually, either by a member of the guard, a fellow servant trying to feel powerful by dominating one of the few people he could, or by the Governor-General himself, bored of his aging wife.

South Chungcheong did not care. She had acquired what she had came for.

The next step was simple. She knew where she needed to go. She had spent five years of her life in that miserable City Hall. She knew where every filing cabinet was, every office.

Every locked room.

She went to sleep, the key hidden inside her shift, and fell into an uneasy sleep plagued by dreams of men bursting into her room, tearing her clothes from her, taking the key alongside her dignity.

Arise, drive, ignore, sit, work work work, rise.

She gathered up her papers as usual, neatly tapping them on the desk, leaving those that the Governor-General would want out, while she put the other under her arm, striding through the dark, empty corridors.

Her heels did not click. They never did at night, when the lights

were off and the offices were empty. The sound would be a beacon, letting any man still stalking the halls know that there was a woman with him. That they were alone.

Thin grey light seeped from the glass windows that showcased the offices, coming in from outside. It brushed her skin as she travelled through the darkness, down to the ground floor.

As she passed through the lobby, she paid no heed to her guards gathered by the door. They were already used to her ignoring them, as she had for the past week.

Her path brought her to the back rooms, where she filed away her paperwork, as expected. But tonight, she did not depart for the lobby at once. Instead, she found the stairs to the subterrain floor that housed the archives, the one that almost no one ever visited.

But *she* had, when sorting the old records of Seoul in an effort to be seen as even more dedicated to her job. And once, when she had been hidden among the dusty old shelves, selecting every file she could find from the year 1900, she had overheard the new Governor-General be informed by Japan's aide that he would be kept updated on 'their movements,' and that he in turn would update Japan. That everything that was known about 'them' was to be kept confidential, at risk of being charged with treason.

Information about Korea was to be kept top-secret.

The words had stilled her, as she had realized if she was caught overhearing them, even by accident, she would be in danger. She had quickly extinguished her candle and crouched among the old records, waiting, listening as a door was opened, then shut. When she had confirmed the two men were inside, she had hastened away. Returning later had confirmed that the old door, half-hidden by shelving sagging under the weight of its history, was locked.

She went to this door now, finding the lamp she always kept down here, and pulled the brass key from her shift, inserting it into the lock.

It didn't turn.

What a fool she would feel if she could not keep her word. She would be glad that she would not be forced to look upon Korea again, in that case.

She grit her teeth, removing the key and forcing it in, twisting it hard. This time, the mechanism turned, and the door swung open.

Heart racing, she stepped inside.

The room was small and dusty, along with most of the shelves, filled with old binders and scrolls. But the low light of the lamp revealed that one section was cleaner than the rest, the dossiers in it recently disturbed.

South Chungcheong went to them, examining unmarked spines. She pulled one down at random, flipping it open to find a grainy sepia-toned photo of a province with a snarl on her face, looking into the camera like a prisoner, a blur around her as if she had not been sitting willingly still.

'Heiannan-do, 1919,' the spindly kanji under it said. South Pyongan province.

She spared no time for the rest of the words, placing it back onto the shelf, pulling the others down, glancing briefly at the photos or sketches attached, along with the names. There was not time to find out who these people were. She had not desired to these past four years and she did not desire to now.

Gyeonggi's was the third she pulled down, a round-faced boy with an attached photo, his big eyes staring into the camera. She flipped through the thin dossier, noting his past locations, finding his current.

There. Last year he had been moved to a demesne outside the city, a Japanese politician's Korean home.

South Chungcheong brought out the paper and pencil she had shoved into her choson-ot, swiftly copying out the information before placing it back on the shelf, searching for the Gyeongsangs.

She found Korea's folder, thicker than the rest, glanced at the

picture of him, four men restraining his arms and one with his hand squeezed around his neck, forcing him to look into the camera with furious eyes, and shoved it back. He thought he knew her. She did not need to know why. He was a male. He could never understand how she had been forced to survive.

South Gyeongsang's was thinner than Gyeonggi's, her photo only a sketch. She had never been in official Japanese custody, then. Her whereabouts were listed as 'unknown,' though her last known location had been South Chungcheong's own lands, ironically enough, two years ago.

North Gyeongsang's were unknown entirely. His last sighting had been in South Jeolla, but it had been in 1913, near the beginning of the Occupation. Near useless.

South Gyeongsang's information may as well also be. She had been sighted walking down a country road in the middle of nowhere with an unidentified woman. Two years was plenty of time to take that road anywhere.

But South Chungcheong had retrieved Gyeonggi's. She had done what she had said she would. Korea could not say she was not Korean now.

She replaced the dossiers just as she had found them, turned for the door, then spun irritably back, checking the first page of the remaining folders, ignoring South Hamgyong's, beyond noting that she had a photo, and that she wore a fake smile above the collar of an expensive-looking kimono, proving that her claim of South Chungcheong 'selling herself to Japan' had merely been projection.

North Chungcheong's only had a sketch. A boy in a white shirt with bags of grain slung over his broad shoulders, his face half-turned with a slight grin, not even aware that someone was capturing his likeness to create a profile.

She did not let her eyes flick over the words, putting it back with force.

She had gotten what she came for. She should leave. She needed

to hurry.

Yet her hand reached out for the folder next to North Chungcheong's, pulling it down and flipping it open.

Her own portrait stared back, angled brows that were not yet arched enough, looking too concerned, a slight curl of the lip, but not enough to convey utter disgust at having to sit still for the photo, eyes that held more anxiety than disdain. A little girl that was pretending to be a woman.

'Chuseinan-do, 1910.' Her likeness had been captured on her first day of work.

Despite being in captivity since the beginning, her folder was one of the thinner ones, with only three pages, barely half-filled. The first held her physical details, her measurements and colouring. The second was her actions, detailing her start at Taejon with Pak Jung-yang and leading up to the current day, a timeline of her servitude. The final was a profile of her personality, listing traits and observations made by… whom? Pak Jung-yang and the Governor-Generals? Her unpleasant colleagues? Her guards? Or some other unknown observer?

'Subject 3 is a hard worker. Tendency to rise early and leave late. Irascible. Does not work well with others. Skilled at finding vulnerable points in conversation. Occasional use of anti-Japanese language seems to be a part of her general disdain for all around her; have a suspicion she would use anti-Korean slurs if she weren't one of them. Subject displayed no interest towards the uprising in March, and has referred to the riots following as 'fool radicals.' Once alerted task force to attempt to kidnap her made by anti-Japan group, May 1919. Despite her general bearing, there seems to be little threat of her willingly joining Subject 1 or compromising Subject 2. Loyal servant of His Divine Majesty.'

South Chungcheong's long nails scraped the back of the dossier as heat rose in her breast, tightening her jaw.

'Loyal servant of His Divine Majesty.'

There was a note under it to clean up the language as whoever

saw fit before turning the notes over for Japan's personal files.

The idea of that country sitting across the sea, reading those words about her…

She deliberately placed the dossier back on the shelf and walked out, keeping her pace even and her expression cold. Precision, poise, grace. She had never been able to afford hysterics and she could not now.

In the lobby she walked past her guards, chin held high, ignoring them as usual, the key safely secreted back in her choson-ot to be replaced in Saito's nightstand on the morrow, loose, as if it had merely slid off the ring, in case he had noticed its absence.

Once outside in the damp spring air, she let the scrap of paper in her sleeve fall, not turning as it fluttered to the ground.

The men around her noticed not. Their eyes were focused outwards, seeing her not as a threat, but as a 'loyal servant.'

But if the fool boy with the sharp eyes and his falsely cheery female were watching as sharply as they had been, then they would get what they sought. If they were not, then more the fool them.

Either way, South Chungcheong could wash her hands of this business.

—

September

Of course, 'twas hard to keep one's hands clean when one's… distant acquaintances were off making theirs bloody.

In August, for some reason that the morons around her refused to elaborate on, South Chungcheong was suddenly sentenced to house arrest, no longer allowed to visit the City Hall for work or to even step outside of Namsan.

And the window in her guest quarters had been renovated. Bars now graced it.

South Chungcheong grit her teeth as she passed her fingers over their cool surfaces. The windows here were built in the Western style. There was not even any shoji paper to allow her to pretend she was not caged in.

Certainly it had been something Korea and his bands of fools had done. Perhaps they had found the others, and now she was the last province to remain in Japanese hands.

Which meant she could look forward to this imprisonment for the next few decades, or however long it took for them to win their war, if they even did. Lovely.

She was still brought work- proposals and budgets for her to look through. But she was no longer able to fetch the Governor-General reports or file them for him. She could not intimidate meetings into postponement or instruct others to get their work done on time. Staying up into the late hours to work was now pointless, as no one would see unless she descended to the sitting room, in which case she would be flaunting herself, practically daring any servants prowling the halls to accost her.

She could not stop them. They were not lesser workers toiling under her. They had their own, separate hierarchy that she was not a part of. She could see it in their eyes that whenever they heeded her demands for fresh bedclothes or more tea, they were simply humouring her at Saito's request.

No amount of bullying or scathing criticism could convince the Governor-General to release her. Because in the end, he had been the one to give her power to her.

And now he had taken it back.

South Chungcheong had not yet lost. But she would soon. The longer she stayed locked up in this manor, the less she became a secretary and the more she became just a woman in a room. A girl, undefended and alone. A simple household utility, like all females, ready to be used like one.

Her fingers wrapped around the bars, squeezing.

—

October

Arise, work on embroidery until her work was brought to her, there was no one to ignore or fend away in the room, so she could only work work work work work work with no one to bear witness to the hours she spent so dedicated and focused, be unable to fetch more when she was finished, so embroider more until someone came to collect what she had done, turn down an invitation from Saito's wife, pretend to be a proper lady by embroidering more, slumber, be visited with dreams of the door unlocking from the outside and portly Saito Makoto striding into her room, not even needing to creep, arise and do it all over and over and over and

—

November

Arise, embroider, work, finish, be unable to be useless for even a single minute so embroider again, hand over her work, embroider more, finally accept Saito's wife's invitation to come upstairs for tea.

Visiting her was a fine line. Drinking tea with the lady of the house imparted status on her. Yet now that she lived in the same house as not solely a guest, if she came at her beck and call, that status could be considered 'servant.'

"Your embroidery is so nice," Saito's wife squinted in the yellow light at the flowers South Chungcheong was stitching onto her jasu hoop. "I taught you how, but you're already better than me."

"You did not teach me," the province answered stiffly, threading the needle through the fabric. "You simply provided the materials. And you would be more skilled if you drank less."

Saito's wife laughed, her hands trembling on her tea cup. "My honoured husband likes me better when I drink. He says I act more like I did when I was young and fun."

"You are forty-seven," South Chungcheong said. "He should desire

you to act like a lady."

"'Good wife and wise mother,'" the woman murmured, her eyes distant as she took another sip of her drink, tossing the tea back in a decidedly unladylike fashion. "Or maybe I should be more like you."

"You could never be like me," South Chungcheong denied. "You are far too pathetic."

There was no true danger in insulting the woman. She had no say in household affairs. So long as South Chungcheong remained of use, Saito Makoto would not discard her.

"You're such a bitch," Saito's wife slurred, resting her head on her arms, nuzzling into them.

South Chungcheong did not react to the epithet. 'Twas far from the first time she had it bequeathed unto her.

She had to be a bitch, a harpy, a cunt. She had to be whatever men wished to call her, so long as it was not 'seditious.'

"That's why I like you so much," the woman said unexpectedly, half-raising her head to look at her with a soulful brown eye. A strand of black hair had come loose from her artful bun to hang across it. "You're not afraid of what people think of you. It's like you *want* them to hate you."

"Is there a point to you telling me this?" South Chungcheong inquired, arching a brow. "Or is the drink simply running your tongue now?"

"See?" Saito's wife giggled. "I could have you caned for that. But you don't even care. You even stand up to the men."

She did not. If she stood up to them, then she would have stopped Pak Jung-yang from luring girls in, or ordered Saito to attend to his wife more, or demanded to speak to Japan, to tell him just what she thought of this Occupation of his, and to try to eliminate him.

All she did was lash out until she had made herself as undesirable

as possible, because no one would reach for a fruit covered in spines over one limned with soft fuzz.

"If I were more like you when I was younger…" Saito's wife took in a shuddering breath, hiding her face. "Maybe I wouldn't be married to someone twenty years my senior. Maybe I'd be married to someone I loved."

"Doubtful," South Chungcheong dismissed. "You are a woman of good blood, if any Japanese can be said to be. You never would have been allowed to pick your partner."

"Hah!" Saito's wife laughed bitterly, her voice quiet. "You're probably right. But still, I wish…"

With a heartfelt sigh, Saito Haruko lapsed into silence. After a few seconds, she began to snore softly.

South Chungcheong left the dregs of her tea, marching past the serving girl, who was pressed to the wall as if she had not been listening.

"I can escort you to your room, Chuseinan-san," she said.

"Have you not seen that I have my own escort, or are you blind, girl?"

The servant flinched. "N-No, ma'am, but…" Her lips pressed together anxiously. "Please."

That was a poor sign. One that South Chungcheong wanted nothing to do with.

"Begging gets you nowhere."

She strode off, ignoring the girl as she scampered behind her contingent of guards, slamming the door in her face.

A few seconds later, there was a knock. And another.

"Ma'am?" the girl called. "The Lady of the House has been missing her favourite necklace since the last time you visited her. She was

being too polite to ask you about it, but I told her I would search your room."

Oh, that little *harlot.* If South Chungcheong was accused of stealing-

She yanked open the door, her face cold. "Very well. Search. I assure you your mistress has likely misplaced it in one of her stupors."

The girl slipped im, closing the door on the guards as South Chungcheong went to the window, ignoring her.

"Chuseinan-do-san-"

"Speak Korean, wench."

"South Chungcheong-do," the girl said, her voice a mere whisper. "I have a message for you."

Her fingers tightened on the sill. "I do not wish to hear it."

The girl was undeterred, for once showing some spine. "It's from someone I know from the paper. They want to know…" She lowered her voice even further, a mere brush of sound. "Do you want out?"

"Did I give you permission to rummage through my wardrobe?" South Chungcheong asked loudly, not turning. "I will remove my things, you need not touch my clothes to search them."

"Yes, ma'am," the girl replied before switching back to a whisper. "I'm going to the market tomorrow. I can tell them if you want to be rescued."

'Rescued.' As if she were a damsel in distress instead of someone who had worked herself to the bone to be here in this cage.

"You're in danger, ma'am," the girl whispered, stepping closer. "I hear things. Saito-sama is worried. I don't know why, but he thinks you might betray him, and he doesn't want to take the full blame and be executed if you do.

“He wants to invite Japan here to meet you.”

South Chungcheong’s nails dug into the sill as her insides turned as cold as the dark, snowy mountain outside.

Japan. Whom may as well be the most powerful person in the world. Whom she had done so well in avoiding all these years, until now that the lackwits in charge had decided that since Korea and the other provinces were taking action, she might as well.

She had worked so *hard,* made herself so useful, and still…

*‘You will **never** be one of them.’*

“Ma’am.” The girl was right behind her now, her voice low and fervent, her native tongue clunky after so much disuse.

“Do you want to be free?”

South Chungcheong did not *want* to be one of them. She had never *wanted* to be Japanese, or a man. She was Korean and a woman and she wanted this world that belonged to Japan and men like him *destroyed.* She wanted Korea and his band of idiots to succeed.

But she had nothing to contribute to that. If she were freed, she would be naught but a dead weight. She was a girl. She could not fight, could not hunt or survive in the wilderness. And she did not want to, and should not *have* to. She was a *lady,* like Silla had been.

If she were dragged into the frigid winter landscape beyond her bars, she would be useless. And useless women were fated to die at the hands of men, or worse.

At least here she could wear fine clothes, have a warm meal and good cup of tea before she parted her throat, unsullied.

“No,” she said, not turning around, her voice as cold as the frosted bars. “I do not want to be free.”

There was a silence. Then soft footsteps, and the sound of a door closing. The lock *‘snick’*ed shut.

South Chungcheong inhaled shakily, then went to bed to continue her routine, falling into dreams of a bloody red sun rising above the horizon, burning her to ash.

Arise, embroider, work work work, demand more work, *work,* work hard enough that she could not be discarded, finish, embroider with hands that would not stop shaking however much she cursed them, stare out the window, slumber, try not to remember her dreams, arise and do it again and again as the sand in her hourglass ran out, counting down to the day she would lose the only thing she had ever had.

Until she woke to find the house on fire.

She was crammed in her chair by the window, her knees drawn up to her chest, clutching her jasu hoop to it, holding the embroidered mountain magnolias close, the wooden band that contained them leaving imprints cut into her fingers.

At first, she knew not what had awakened her. Perhaps some shadow that had flickered by outside. Her room was dark, the lamp long since burned out, the only light illuminating the stitches she set in her lap coming from the window, pale scarlet flickering across her numb legs.

Scarlet. And orange. It crept into the room, rusting her gleaming new bars like the ones on her old house. ‘Twas not the silver colour of moonshine.

Just as she stood, kneading feeling into her tingling thigh, men’s voices raised in the hall, alarmed and loud. She spun, pressing her back to the bars, too disoriented to compose herself as the door burst open, one of the guards clearing her room with a gleaming rifle.

“What is transpiring?” South Chungcheong managed to say, trying to recover from her lapse. “Tell me.”

“Fire on the grounds,” he clipped, eyeing her window.

She straightened, trying to still her heart. “Then should we not

evacuate?”

“No.”

“I do not wish to be here if there is a fire outside my window.” She stormed the door. “I demand you tell me what is going on.”

“Go back to sleep.” The man left, and her lock snapped back into place.

There was nothing she could do to open it, and any further demands or shouting would only make her appear childish. She huffed, gripping her jasu hoop as she went back to her window, straining to see the fire.

Namsan Residence was built on the slopes of the titular mountain, her window facing its low peak. Her room was in the southwest corner, farthest from the dark treeline. Her view of the rest of it was blocked by the asymmetrical southeast wing, but it seemed that was where the firelight originated from.

A forest fire? The summer had not been so hot as to kindle one, so it seemed unlikely now that the leaves had turned.

Her pointed nails scraped chips of white paint from the sill.

As if she could sleep when the cries of men echoed from within and out the manor. Fire, regardless of what had started it, meant chaos. And chaos meant the disintegrating of hierarchies and rules.

It meant danger.

She turned her chair to the side, pointedly ignoring the window as she set back to work on her embroidery, dipping her fingers in water to slick the fraying thread as if it were her nerves before starting on the next magnolia petal.

She had never seen the flower with her own eyes before. It grew not in the Governor-General’s gardens, a more wild plant than the hibiscus that she ordered brought to her office at the start of every week. She had only ever seen it in paintings, a sea of white at the foot of mountains she would never catch more than a glimpse of.

Her hands shook on the needle and thread, and her next stitch went astray.

She trembled with the desire to draw her knees to her chest again, trembled with how badly she desired not to. Ladies did not bury their faces in their knees and stain their work with tears. They held it back with anything necessary. Tears were weak, and a weak woman was vulnerable.

Her eyes closed tight as she clutched at her jasu hoop. But it was not hers. It was Saito's wife's, which meant it was Saito's, which meant it was Japan's. Like the room she was sat in, the bed she slept in, the room she inhabited, the manor she was in and those before it. Everything in her life was someone else's, down to the clothes she wore and the food she ate and the thread she used to make these worthless little flowers.

There was no world in which it was not. Even if she had been born to a free Korea, she would still be a woman. Her possessions, her power, her body, would have only ever been hers courtesy of the men above her choosing to let her keep them. She would have been like Saito Haruko, her bedroom full of things that were not hers and a man she did not choose, her only freedom that of drowning herself in drink.

Her things had never been hers, and her power had been repossessed. The only thing South Chungcheong had left was her body, and not even that. It was captive within these walls, as it had been in the City Hall and the Provincial Office.

All she truly had left, the only thing she had had since the start, was her dignity. For however long she was allowed to keep it.

She pressed her face into the mountain magnolias, crushing them to her with her knees as she held them close, desperately fighting the tears attempting to force their way from her, knowing it was a game she would lose, like every other.

She was, in the end, only a girl.

She barely noticed as the door was opened again and she was

dragged from her chair, jasu hoop still dangling from one hand. Any attempt to right herself would quickly be undone by her small body and their long legs. Any attempt to smack the hands off her would only result in laughter from the men, or perhaps a strike in return since the situation was serious enough for the stench of smoke to be crawling through the unlit halls.

She could not bear the indignity. She could no longer bear it.

Saito and his wife were gone, evacuated long before the rest of the household. Or perhaps just before her, as the servants were already gathered on the drive, dressed in their nightclothes, cries of confusion and alarm rising with the smoke coming from the trees behind the house, and now the building itself. It looked as if the southeast wing had been set ablaze, flames rising from below the tile roof.

Not an accident of nature or man, then. Very well. She cared not.

When the shooting started, she did not care, either. She only hoped that one of the bullets would strike her dead before whichever idiots had thought to ‘save’ her this time reached her. Even then, she would not die. She would awaken and have to accept whatever had been done to her body as she had recovered, her only possession stripped away before she stripped her own life away.

She had not been able to fetch her letter opener. As her guards started to hustle her down the road amidst the chaos of fleeing servants, she could only stumble along on useless legs. If they desired to rape or sell her, she would not be able to stop them. She never truly had. But at least she could have given them the dissatisfaction of a cooling body. Now she could not even do that.

She only broke from her stupor when one of the men holding her went reeling back, and something hot sprayed her. Blood.

A serving girl screamed, and one of the house guards roared from towards the manor, “THEY’RE AVOIDING SERVANTS! GET THE PROVINCE IN WITH THEM!”

One of South Chungcheong's guards wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her as effortlessly as a cat, more touch than she had ever been forced to endure, and something in her snapped.

"Don't touch me!" she cried in revulsion, struggling fiercely, her elbow finding ribs.

"Don't shoot!" someone shouted. "You'll hit-!"

"I've got it!" a girl, this time familiar, called back, and the arms restraining South Chungcheong finally slackened as the man grunted in pain, staggering back with a bullet in his side.

South Chungcheong hit the ground, scrabbling back, the night a confusion of screaming, roaring flames and cracking guns.

She ran.

She didn't know where she intended to go, only that she needed to get away, away from the men that owned her, away from those that would if they could, and away from the stupid boy that apparently could not take no for an answer. Here in the burning night, she was nothing and everyone was a danger.

There was nowhere to go. By separating herself, she had put herself in more danger, like those fool girls that lingered in the office alone, without even a sharp tongue to defend them. But staying would have been a danger, too. Enraged men with their blood up, whatever little reason they possessed dispersed by the thrill of combat.

Nowhere was safe. Her blade and shield were nothing in the woods, *she* was nothing, and the person she could hear pounding behind her, calling out, had almost caught her.

There was another call, a snarl of irritation, then she was being sent to the forest floor as someone plowed into her back. She was spared the cut of twigs and stones as her attacker twisted in mid-air so that he- of course it was he- hit the ground instead of she. But the breath was still driven from her lungs by the force of her impact into his chest, with no chance to recover it before she was tossed

aside, rolling away.

She blinked up at the stars glimmering through the canopy, not bothering to brush away the leaf that spiralled down onto her chest, nor to move. She would not give him the satisfaction of fighting back. What was the point when it would only humiliate her further?

No man's face blocked her view of the stars, though. There was only a cough and rustle as her assaulter sat up.

“Ssi-bal, what is *wrong* with you?” Korea wheezed angrily, still less out of breath than she even after being crushed betwixt her and the ground. “Didn’t you hear me calling your name?”

“I… do not have to… come when called.” South Chungcheong managed to sound as haughty as she usually did, though still breathless, unused to exercise.

“Where were you even going?” he demanded.

“None of… your concern.”

She would never be safe, no matter where she had went. The most she could hope for was a steep cliff or a cold river.

South Chungcheong made herself sit, trying to regain some dignity, though her legs trembled too much to stand. The jasu hoop was no longer in her hands.

“Do you make a habit of accosting women in the woods?” she sniffed as Korea brushed leaf litter from his Jap cloak.

He stopped to glower at her. “Only when they take off running in the middle of battle after saying they wanted to be freed.”

The audacity.

She arched a brow. “And just when did I say that? I recall saying that I never desired to see you again.”

“A worker here, Oh Sang-yong, knows an… associate of ours.” Something flickered across the male’s face at the words, vague

discomfort. “She told her you wanted out.”

That must be the true name of the serving girl, though South Chungcheong had only ever heard her referred to as Kazuko, as Saito Haruko had difficulties with Korean names.

‘That little viper.’ Why ask her in the first place if she intended to disregard her answer? She must have truly wanted South Chungcheong away from her.

“Well, you were misinformed,” she said, looking away. “I still possess no desire to-"

“Shut up.”

Jaw feathering, South Chungcheong said coolly, “Excuse me? Do you think just because I am a province, you can order me to-"

“I’m telling you to shut up because you’re being an idiot,” Korea growled, shifting onto his knees. “I *know* that you want out of there. I *know* you want to be free.”

Her teeth creaked. “You know no such thing.”

“The rest of my provinces are risking their lives and their freedom back there to save you.” Korea flung a hand in the direction of the road, where gunshots still echoed.

“And did I ask them to do that?” She raised her chin. “No.”

“No, and I didn’t ask you to get me Gyeonggi and South Gyeongsang’s information,” Korea retorted. “But you did. You risked your life to do it.”

“I risked nothing,” South Chungcheong said stiffly, but he spoke over her.

“Your information allowed me to free them,” Korea insisted. “I have almost all my provinces now, thanks to you. All but one.”

He leaned towards her, though he was not close enough to invade her space.

“And I am not going to lose my final province to Japan because she is too stubborn to admit she wants to be free.” His jaw was set and serious, his eyes pinning her in place, though she wanted to try fleeing again. “I only want you with me if you’re willing, but I can’t leave you here now.”

His gaze gleamed with a raw intensity that made her give in to the urge to cross her arms.

“I’m not going to let you get hurt because you were too scared to escape. I *won’t.”*

“I am scared of nothing,” South Chungcheong replied stiffly.

“You are,” Korea growled. “You’re afraid of fighting for our freedom. You’re afraid of *trying.* You think the torture you know is better than what might happen to you if we lose. You’re an idiot and a coward.”

“Bite your-"

“But we are *not* going to lose.” Korea stood, but came no closer, spearing her to the ground with his glare. “We are going to win. And I am going to have all of my provinces there when we do. I am not going to lose anyone- because they were too scared to leave.”

His hands curled into tight fists before one extended to her.

“So get up. Come with me. Come make our country *ours* again.”

South Chungcheong stared at the palm proffered to her, the moonlight coming through the trees revealing the callused pads and scars that marred the lines on it, like that other province girl had had. Her heart beat in her chest like an animal trying to escape.

Her throat worked dryly, until the words came out. “You said it yourself, did you not? I will be of no use to you.”

Korea’s gaze did not waver. “I would rather have you useless than dead.”

“War is no place for a woman,” she tried.

“Revolution is the place of anyone who wants to free themselves,” Korea refuted firmly. “And women were in chains long before Japan ever Occupied us. You have more reason to fight than most.”

His gaze did flicker then, back towards the gunshots, for the briefest of moments.

South Chungcheong’s fingers curled into the folds of her chima. “You are a man and my Countryhuman, but you would make me fight. You would make me risk everything I am to fight for you, when it should be *you* fighting for *me."*

“And what are you?” Korea asked, his voice as icy as the winter she would be heading into if she went with him. “What exactly are you risking?”

“My dignity.”

“You have no dignity,” he replied scathingly, making her bristle. “You worked for the enemy, helping them Occupy us, and now you sit and rot in a Jap’s household. You have *nothing.”*

She could not make herself reply, nails digging into her skin.

“The only thing you are is Korean,” Korea said. “That is all you have. And no matter what happens to you, you will still have that. Unless you keep working for Japan.”

“I had to,” she rasped, the shame she had spent so long trying to smother flooding her breast, making her traitorous eyes sting. “Do not act as if I did it willingly. I *had* to.”

Korea’s palm remained implacably offered. “And now you don’t. I *am* fighting for you. And I want you to fight *with* me.”

The breath South Chungcheong had previously caught had escaped her, her chest rising and falling rapidly as he stole her air from her again, her fingers clenching over and over in the moist carpet of leaves.

She did. She still had to. What else was there? If she left on this mad crusade of his, then it meant every day would be one in which

her body could be stolen from her, her pride expunged, made to be nothing but a-

Just like here, where she spent every day playing a game that was winding down, one she knew she could never be a victor in.

But if she left with him, then it meant it had all been for nothing. The burnt history, passing on proposals to restrict their culture, serving vile men that would sooner have her bent over their desk than handing them budgets for stupid fucking coasters. Selling herself. The fine line. The game.

"You were not there to protect me." She raised her head to Korea, trying to make it sound more like a judgement than a childish scold.

"No," he said plainly, his face shadowed. "I wasn't."

"Then you will now," she said, making herself look someone fully in the eyes for the first time instead of through them. "If I go with you, you will protect me. It is your duty as a man and Countryhuman."

"I will teach you to protect yourself," Korea responded, unmoved by her demand. "But I'll tell you what I told the rest of my provinces- I will never let you get taken by the enemy. We are at war. You will get hurt, you will starve and get sick and suffer."

He took another step forward, further into the moonlight, staring down at her yet not looking down, though he now stood over her.

"But you will *never* be enslaved again. If you choose to be free, then you will *remain* free. I promise."

His voice was as impassioned as his gaze, filled with more emotion than she had ever seen in a man. One that was not anger or lust, anyways.

It was disgusting. His passion was based on nothing. He had no way to guarantee her safety, and would not even promise to protect her wholly. She should not *have* to learn to protect herself- 'twas *his* job. His job that he had not even attempted to fulfill until ten years into this cursed Occupation.

And yet, when Korea bared his pointed fangs and ordered, “Now get off your damn knees and *be a Korean,”* South Chungcheong stood, holding herself steady.

At least she had not had to take his hand. Small victories.

“Good.” He said nothing more about her giving in, turning his back to her and pulling a firearm from his holster, firing it once into the air. “We need to get to the rendezvous point. Stay close.”

South Chungcheong hesitated, yet unwilling to follow a male deeper into the woods alone, Countryhuman or not.

Korea paused, picking something up from the ground to hand to her. South Chungcheong snatched the jasu hoop, taking care not to brush his fingers. She need not have bothered. He pulled back as swiftly as she.

The province brushed grit from the white flowers, eyeing his back as he walked away.

All males were dangerous, yet after that display of emotion, it seemed likely that he was the sort lacking in the manhood needed to violate a woman. He was too delicate in constitution, though not in the completely unimpressive sort of way that would have kept her on the ground.

Korea realized she was not following and looked back, impatient.

‘Tch.’

South Chungcheong raised her chin, striding by him in her house sandals, not acknowledging when he outpaced her by a step, leading her off into the dark, away from the silence now coming from the road, and the fires that rose over the mountainside.

Even if he did not want to take liberties with her, he had to want something. Men always did. Though he had said he would rather have her useless than dead, he likely expected her to feel some feminine urge to play house for him by stitching and cooking. ‘Twas likely why he had handed the jasu hoop back to her.

Well, he would be sorely disappointed. It did not matter if she had to wander blindly off into the wilderness at his back- if he truly wanted to play the saint by freeing her from women's obligation to be useful, than she would take it. Her days of being a servant were over. Let others scurry and fuss, like that waif surely did. 'Tmight teach him a lesson for thinking he could shut her up and degrade her.

She may have nothing more than being Korean, but she was a Korean *lady*.

So South Chungcheong walked away from the life that had never been hers, clutching her mountain magnolias firmly under one arm, head up.

After all, only a fool kept playing a game she knew she would lose.

She's a misandrist, she's a feminist, she hates women, she's racist, her and North are opposed on almost every issue that matters, except for the one that matters the most, she's exactly like him in all the worst ways, she is South Chungcheong province and my special princess.

I put the hint in there about North's folder being thicker than the others because South is also in it. South Chungcheong came a few pages away from learning where he was being kept. You might wonder why once she learned about South she didn't tell North about the dossiers that could possibly tell them where he was. This is because 1) North said they weren't going to try again, and 2) She did not want to free South. She didn't like that he'd taken a picture with Japan, or the emotion he inspired in North. Even if North had wanted to go get him, she still wouldn't have told him. She doesn't have a secret soft spot, she is a hater to the core. She has a secret *good* spot, but that doesn't make her not a hater. Also Hae didn't have a folder at all. Japan wanted her entirely to himself.

Pak Jung-yang was a real guy, and a hardline collaborator. He opposed the March First Movement so much that he created a group against it. You might think to yourself, 'Author! You can't just make all the men you don't like rapists!' But

apparently he really was charged with sex abuse before the accuser 'suddenly died' and the charges were dropped. So have you considered that maybe all the men I don't like *are* rapists. Saito Haruko is also a real person, but I did invent her being an alcoholic. To my knowledge.

Also Koryo and Goguryeo are both spelled the same in Korean (because they're Koryo and old Koryo)- 고려/고구려. But I like these romaji . And to add- the common sense South Chungcheong receives about Sinsi's (mythological first Korean city/state) formation doesn't confirm that it was real. The common sense gave the Korean provinces and Countryhumans knowledge of its existence, but it's because those stories of Hwanung and Sinsi are enshrined in Korean common sense. They have no more way of telling if it's just historical metaphor or if there really was a place/Countryhuman like that than people in our world.

Once A Fool

1952

South Chungcheong burst into the hall, storming for the exit. She needed to get out, needed to get away before he could add any more steps to her humiliation ritual. She fled blindly down the dim hallway, reaching for the door-

"Ah!" She couldn't hide the cry that left her lips as the Command not to leave the building seized her hand, leashing her intent with ropes of fire.

She could not leave. She was trapped in here, nowhere to go until she was given permission, nowhere to hide from those who had witnessed her humiliation and he who had caused it, and still cursedly *smiling.*

Her mind started to fray as her desire to retain what dignity she had left clashed with that to leave at all costs, and for once the former lost as the door behind her opened.

Blind panic filled her. 'Twas one of the men come to collect on what he believed he was owed, to push her up against the wall and treat her like a common whore while the guards just outside listened in and said she was getting what she deserved, and she would have to take it with a smile on her face.

Her shield had been torn away. If the men who were her jailors realized that, they would break into her prison and make good on their threats to punish her for not being as meek and submissive as her country, the way men always had to punish women. Her blade was useless, half-tied in its sheath, and even if the Commands allowed her self-defense, she could not overpower the burly men without a weapon. She could not even kill herself to escape it. They would violate her the way they had violated the Jeollas and the harlot and she would be driven mad and lose the only thing she never had.

*'You are powerless to stop it. They are above you, and they could do **anything** to you and you wouldn't be able to stop them.'*

She threw herself at the door, rebounding off it again and again as she tried to claw her way out and the Commands clawed what was left of her presence of mind into shreds.

"South Chungcheong!"

She bared her teeth as she regained her senses, though composed her face as she spun around.

"Do not approach a lady from behind," she said sharply.

North Chungcheong looked around the corridor. "We're in a hallway. Not much choice?"

She grit her teeth, trying to still her heaving bosom as she smoothed her skirts. He had only seen her attempting to haul the handle and muscle the door open, he could not know that her frantic actions had been driven by terror. He would assume fury.

That was almost as humiliating. Any kind of hysterics were. And this annoying smile was already humiliating enough.

North Chungcheong appeared unnerved by the pleasant curve of her lips, looking away like it was something he should not gaze upon as he rubbed his eyes and blinked, attempting to moisten them after being forced to go so long without closing.

South Chungcheong did not speak until she was sure her voice would not waver.

"Come to gloat, have you?" she asked imperiously, attempting to look as haughty as possible even with this rictus grin on her face.

His jaw feathered as he lowered his hands. "I didn't. But you know you wanted this, right? This is what you chose in two years ago."

'Wanted.' As men always said women wanted things they did not. She had chosen this, she had agreed to it. That did not mean she wanted it.

"That guy-" He thrust his thumb over his shoulder at the hall door. "Is who you followed. That's who you chose over- over-" He bared his teeth as the name was stolen from his tongue. *"That* is who you chose over our country."

The snap inside her skull was audible as the last few threads on her good sense tore asunder.

"And did our country reward you for *your* choice?" she snapped. "Were you *rewarded* for flouncing away from your capital to join the People's Army? Any of you? Were your praises sung, heaped upon you as h-h- As you were told it was *oh-so-good* to see you?"

The moron fate had decreed was her brother winced, and she knew she was right. He would have been reprimanded.

"Or were you criticized for the same adventurism you were criticized for during the Occupation? Were you told you would have better served staying in Cheongju and guiding your people?"

The words came without thinking, forced out by the weight of over half a decade, tired and furious and hysterical, like any other stupid girl.

"Were you told you should have followed some *imbecilic* boy-child to Busan to keep him safe and feed information back so our country would be able to take the city as swiftly as possible when the army reached it?!"

Her cry echoed in the hall. South Chungcheong stood with her hands balled into fists, panting, and felt her fury drain with her blood as she realized what she had just confessed. North Chungcheong stared back, the violet leeching from his own skin.

"Noona, you-?"

She spun away, trying the door again, trying to force the terror flooding her to make her mindless enough to open it, even though she would just spill out into their jailors and be shoved right back in.

The imbecile must actually possess a brain because in a voice of

horrified realization, he said, "That handler that helped assassinate that guy. He wasn't Gangwon's. He was-"

'CRACK!'

He blinked stupidly as her palm met his cheek. The Commands had let her do it. It was self-defense.

"He was *nothing!"* she hissed, keeping her voice low to avoid being heard from beyond the door. *"I* am nothing. You heard *nothing."*

A laugh echoed from the main room and North Chungcheong flinched, eyes darting around the corridor as if just realizing what that they were in public, that someone could have overheard.

"Why didn't you-?"

His furious whisper cut off as he realized. The same reason none of them had known each other's handlers in the five years before the war, the same reason none of them knew if the others even *had* handlers, the same reason none of the KPA's vital logistics had been able to be retrieved from her idiot cousins after they were captured- so the information could not be Commanded out of them in case of war. War that had came after all.

And now there were two people South Chungcheong's secret could be torn from.

They were both silent as her brother understood what this meant.

"You need to come back inside," he said in a low voice more serious than any she had ever heard from him.

"I need not do any such thing," she stiffly replied, heart hammering against her ribs.

She could not go back before those eyes, so lascivious and objectifying. She could *not.*

"South Chungcheong, you could be-" His shoulders hunched as he looked around again. "You need to be *careful."*

As if she did not know that.

"I am aware," she said scathingly. "I have been being careful with no reprieve for seven years now."

And she had been playing the game for much longer than that.

North Chungcheong ran a hand over his smooth head. "He Commanded me to bring you back. If you don't walk..."

He grabbed his wrist as it twitched for her against his will.

South Chungcheong's jaw creaked. "You will say nothing to anyone about this. Ever."

"The others should-"

"Ev-er," she repeated, as icy as the night she had put a bullet in her handler's skull. "I am not so weak as to care if any of you see me as a traitorous bitch. I care only for not ending up another of Rhee's casualties."

South Chungcheong would not be subjected to the same brutalities the Communist women were. She would not be put in a position where she had to end her own life, even if it would teach Korea a lesson about keeping his promises expediently.

"After the war-"

"Does the word 'ever' mean anything to you, you byeongsin?"

Korea had vowed he would not tell her cousins of her actions once their country was Reunified. 'Twas part of their deal. She had no desire for them to see her as some self-sacrificing wench like the harlot when she had only ever agreed because she would not stand to see her country conquered once more. And she especially did not want South Hamgyong to see her that way.

North Chungcheong stared at her, and she curled her lip at the look on his face.

"I'm... sorry for being a dick," he said quietly.

"Your apologies mean just as little as your slander." South Chungcheong moved past him, head up. "If you *ever* speak of this, I will do what I must to make you regret it."

He touched a hand to his face. "How did you hit me, by the way?"

She did not answer. All her focus was on making sure her hands were steady as she opened the door back into the den of inequity.

The band was playing once more, and South was out on the floor, standing by one of the tables as he spoke with the men at it, his face still glowing with pleasure at being addressed. She was shocked he had even returned to the table to release the others from their Commands to sit and stare.

He looked up as they entered. South Chungcheong wanted to meet his eyes, to show him how much she despised him.

But she did not. She walked past, ignoring the compliments that stuck to her like nettles, to take a seat at the foot of the table with her cousins. Their judging eyes landed on her once more, telling her that she was just getting what she had wanted, when she had only done what *Korea* wanted, and what she had judged worth the risk.

She did not care. She never had and never would.

North Chungcheong quietly took his seat to her left. *His* look she did care about. She wanted to wipe it off his fool face.

South returned to the table, almost skipping into his chair.

"Everyone says we sounded really good," he enthused, eyes alight. "Didn't you hear them trying to praise you?"

'Twas not her singing they were praising. She had sounded amateur, far worse than he or the harlot. 'Twas her beauty, the pleasure she brought their eyes, the pleasure they thought they could receive if only they bribed her with enough sweet words. The pleasure they would take if given the chance.

"That American guy in the uniform really wants to talk to you," he said, nodding.

She did not follow his gaze, knowing it was the disgusting pig that had winked his unnaturally-coloured eye at her.

He would not have dared do it before. None of the men that had jeered at her as she passed would have. South had stolen her thorns from her, and now even if she brandished them again, every man in here and every one of their pig friends they told about this would think they were only a front. They would accept her frigidity as a mask and her smile as genuine because it was what they *wanted* to see. They would convince themselves that she had some buried softness she hid only to be coy, to encourage them try harder. And so they would, rooting at her with their snouts until they found the sweet pulp they were looking for, or what they could convince themselves was it. They would never stop.

"He would live to regret it."

South sighed. "You could try and be a little nicer, you know."

"Release me from this Command," she said coldly, and he wilted, almost as if he had been expecting her smile to be genuine as well, as if she would return and be *grateful* he had just violated her in front of these worthless peons.

"Right, sorry," he said quickly. "I would've, but you ran off. South Chungcheong, **you can stop smiling.**"

Her lips finally fell, leaving her cheeks sore. She gave him one long look from under her lashes, removing his smile just as easily.

And then she said nothing else. And she would say nothing else.

The tension had fallen back over the table, no matter how much South prattled on about how much fun they would have when their country was fully conquered by America, when they could feast and entertain foreigners like this every night against their wills while Koreans starved outside the nightclub lights.

So long as he denied them their freedom, it would never lift.

North Chungcheong kept sneaking looks at her that she refused to return.

There was no kinship in sharing a secret. No camaraderie. There was only danger. Her brother was a fool, and sharing secrets with fools got you killed. Or worse.

It did not matter that South already knew where her allegiances lay. The more that had the knowledge, the greater a chance there was of a leak. If America ever demanded that he Command the provinces to make sure they were still 'loyal,' the Chungcheongs could have it forced out of them. Her imbecile brother might still tell one of their cousins against her wishes before the night was over, thinking he was doing her a favour. One of those who was in the know was a drunkard who would spill anything you asked, if you only gave him a taste of the connection he so desperately craved.

And South was a man. A weak-willed, ignorant man. He had spared her once. Now that it was clear that had not earned her affinity, he had no reason to do it again. If she was too abrasive, too powerful, he might feel the need to put her in her place, the way all men had to do to women who threatened them. And if Rhee's regime, or worse, America, had the opportunity to punish her, they would take it. They would do everything she had feared in her time working under Japan, in Korea's guerrilla army, during her five years of information-gathering, and ever since this war had began. And worse.

South Chungcheong would lose.

She should not have trusted a man to keep his promise. Not when she knew Korea was an idealistic fool whose heart had more control over his mouth than his head.

But she had not trusted him, had she? She had not trusted him when he said the southern one would not use the Commands before Taejon was Liberated, nor had she trusted him when he said he and the Korean People's Army would be in Busan in under half a year if a war were to break out. She had not trusted the words that made their way to her in the port city after the army retreated, telling her he would be back soon.

And still she had gone. Just as she had passed on his instructions

to Pak Seo-nam when it had not even been an order. He had not let her be taken by the enemy. He had sent her, and she had left. Because he was not a man- he was her country. And he had kept his promise to free her from Japan, he had kept his promise to destroy the old system in the north, and he had kept his promise to win, at least once. Even if he had broken the most important one.

*'You will **never** be enslaved again. If you choose to be free, then you will **remain** free. I promise.'*

She was not some petty, simple-minded waif who would whimper and whinge over it. That promise held nowhere near the import of the other he had made the last time they had seen each other before the war, as he took her aside after she had refused to be placed into American custody and sent south, and that he had silently repeated in that burning holding camp the year before last.

*'I **will** Liberate our country, South Chungcheong. I promise.'*

She had done what she could for that. She had taken his risks and done what he requested, against her better judgement. Now she could only wait, and try not to lose.

She should not have to worry about losing or winning or about this stupid game. They were supposed to have destroyed it by now.

But she did. The game still existed, and she was trapped in it, like every other woman and true Korean. Surrounded by wolves, by weak-willed boys and degenerate nation-traitors and a foreign nation that would like nothing more than to take Korea's women and her for himself. To take *Korea* for himself.

There was no way to win a fool's game. You could only survive it. So she had to play by its rules, its unfair, unconscionable rules that had been designed against people like her. She had no choice. No matter how a Korean province should not have to keep her footsteps hushed in her own country, no matter how badly she desired to skin the wolves and nail their gore-streaked hides to the doors of National Assembly Hall, she could not. The Commands had taken root in her spirit, in her mind and body, wrapping invisible strings around her joints. Even if Korea called again, even if she was

so foolish as to stick her own neck out again, she could not.

She had to **behave.**

She lifted her eyes to the head of the table, where sat the South of Korea, laughing as he spoke with the miguk-nom that desired her, and who was plying him with a fresh bottle of expensive liquor.

They had already lost, if only when it came to him. If she had not been able to sway him, then South Gyeongsang would not either. Ladies did not change men's minds. Perhaps back when he had been throwing up in her sink, back when he had still been sorry. But not now. The Yankee would not have dared leave if he was any less than certain that his puppet's grooming into a man was set.

South may be a fool, but this was not his game. He did not control it. He only played his role as a pawn within, a pawn with more influence and power than anyone like her, but a pawn nonetheless. But he had resigned himself to this with no true disdain.

Korea would argue it, but she knew it was true. They had lost the South of their country to America.

That South smiled at her tentatively, teeth stained red with wine, and she lowered her gaze, the way a woman should around a man with more power than she.

South Chungcheong province would survive. She would not lose, no matter how despair filled her chest with its oily black slick. She was *not* a stupid little useless girl. She was a Korean province, and she was almost as big a fool as her Countryhuman.

When Korea kept his promise, when he came for her, she would raze the Republic of Korea to the ground.

And until then, even if this was a game she was destined to lose, South Chungcheong would play it.

—

The news came eight days after the bombing of Pyongyang,

delivered in an unobtrusive press conference about steelworkers' wages that wouldn't have ever made its way back to Korea if North hadn't been monitoring every single statement the American Countryhuman gave his media.

When asked if he was planning to return to the front once the strike was resolved, America had waxed poetic about never giving up his 'holy' duty to defend Korea from the Communists, but that he couldn't just sit back while his own people needed him. He had assured the press that he would still be head of the United Nations Command, and maintain close contact with both Mark Clark and 'South Korea,' but that he should be in the United States for the changing of the president later this year, the first since World War II. He had said South was capable of handling things on his own.

It had been a lot of words to say 'no.'

And so almost exactly two years after he had first arrived in Korea, boldly announcing to the world that he would destroy Communism and free the south in time to be home by Christmas, America slunk away with a quiet, unofficial statement, something that didn't even make the front pages of his own news.

It was a victory. But North couldn't feel anything over it. He couldn't feel much of anything beyond the bone-deep throbbing pain that pervaded every inch of his body.

They had denied America his easy victory, forced him to head home to manage his own country. But his army was still here. His 'negotiators' had just spent another week still refusing to sign the armistice, then taken another recess. They were still denying North and China their people. The germ bombs and regular bombs still fell. Rhee still lorded over the south, imprisoning and vanishing anyone who spoke too loudly about the legitimacy of the upcoming elections.

And America could always come back. Even if he was on the other side of the world, Korea was still just a plane ride away. North's brother and provinces were.

And there was that lurking unease. They had forced America, the

most arrogant country and Imperialist in the world, to give up. Even if it was just a personal relinquishment, it *was* still a relinquishment. The other countries with troops in Korea would see that. Even more, they might question why their soldiers were still dying in a foreign nation while the Countryhuman in charge could go home. They wouldn't care about their men, but they would care about their pride. And America knew it. It was why his exit had been so subdued.

If he decided it made him look *too* weak...

North's fists clenched, waves of pain rolling through his arms as that feeling from when that first fake atom bomb was dropped over Pyongyang last year filled him, the same one that flooded his chest as they stood by the rail line and he waited to see if the incoming plane was for reconnaissance or destruction.

It had taken over a thousand sorties to inflict the damage the US Air Force had on the 11th. It had taken hundreds of thousands to turn his capital into the mess of rubble and cratered roads around him since the war began.

It would only take one day, one atom bomb, to wipe Pyongyang off the map entirely.

North's skin crawled, tightening around his bones at the idea of how it would feel to be washed in nuclear fire, but he blocked it out. The damage to his body wouldn't matter. He would live. Tens of thousands of his people, a hundred thousand when you added the pollution, the radiation, the factories and fields they would lose, and the strike at the front that would surely come with the detonation, wouldn't. Any pain he felt would be deserved for being unable to stop it.

He *couldn't* stop it. He tried to use the fact to push the thoughts away and focus on the present, but it just made them close in.

He couldn't stop it. If America wanted to prove his strength against his country, he couldn't do anything to stop him. The planes, the starvation, the destruction of their power grid, the executions in the south, he couldn't stop *any* of it. The B-29 Superfortress could be in

his sights, directly above him, ready to drop its load on his city and turn it to the same ashen shadow that Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been reduced to, and he wouldn't be able to do anything but watch it plummet towards them, knowing it would murder and sicken his people, burn his resources, and engulf him with the greatest agony his body had ever felt, worse than anything Japan ever had or could have done to him, all because *he hadn't won when he was supposed to.*

And he couldn't stop it. He wasn't able to stop any of it. He never had been.

North suddenly rocked forward, slamming his skull off the wall, trying to replace the raw pulsing pain in his burns with the sharp impact of his head against smooth cement, to smash his thoughts back into place and stop the spiralling feeling inside him.

It worked. Blinding pain flashed through him, a flare of white light in the dark room, distracting his body from the burns.

But the momentary relief quickly faded, the chest-tightening agony creeping back in, now matched by the pounding in his head. The shadows swirled around him, and he staggered back, slumping down onto one of the pews in the lecture hall to hold his temples in his hands.

'Idiot.'

But at least he was thinking clearly again. As clearly as he could when-

No. He *was* thinking clear. Everything his body felt was back to being nothing. He just... needed the dark behind his eye to stop spinning.

The stone clicked against his teeth as he made sure he hadn't swallowed it. He didn't think South's trick was working anymore, but it was better than nothing.

South.

He was fine. As fine as he could be. Still in Korea, not imprisoned or vanished. Two days ago he had even gone to a nightclub with all

the southern provinces, letting one of North's agents make proper visual contact with them for the first time in months, confirming that they were all well, at least physically.

A nightclub, when they were at war.

He shouldn't begrudge that. It was a good thing. It looked like with America gone, South might be releasing the provinces from the solitary confinement the foreigner had kept them in. Even if he couldn't, and was just using Rhee's false republic's 'Constitution Day' as an excuse for the day since he couldn't visit them in private without suspicion, North knew his provinces wouldn't miss an opportunity to try and educate him.

'Or talk sense into him.'

Maybe they had succeeded. Maybe if he went now-

No. He had made his decision. It couldn't be risked. Not just for their country. If his provinces were getting more freedom, maybe even a reprieve from the Commands now that America wasn't around to make sure South used them-

'I told you America wasn't on the radio with him. It was only South.'

-North couldn't risk jeopardizing that. He didn't need to see his brother or have him here. He just needed him to be ready for when the armistice was signed. He would have to be there. With North at his side, he would have the confidence to stand up to America and tell the reporters that would be there, tell the *world,* that both halves of Korea wanted a real end to the war and to finally be Reunified. Even with the Yankee watching, he would know his brother would keep him safe.

Hopefully his provinces would have more chances to prime South for that. Though he also hoped South Chungcheong wouldn't stick her mouth out. Not while she was still in enemy hands.

She wouldn't. She was clever. And had too much self-preservation. It was why she had been the one he had chosen to accompany South once he had grudgingly accepted that war was

likely inevitable. And from his book of names being hidden in the hills to the successful assassination of Rim Gun-hon, he knew he had chosen correctly.

'I promise I will come for you.'

He would. Even if it wasn't in the way they had planned, and it was too late to avoid her wrath. He would accept being smacked across the face for once if it meant he had all his provinces back with him.

And he would keep that other promise, too. The most important one.

North exhaled, his skin crackling in the quiet room as his ribs sank in. Then he rose, a wave of pain and exhaustion and h-

It crashed up against the barrier he erected against it, dulling. He was fine. He had work to do.

Pulling the stone from his mouth, he wrapped it in a small scrap of fabric and tucked it in his pocket. The last thing he wanted was for Choe Yong-gon or Deng Hua- the acting commander of the PVA now that Chen Geng had returned to his country to establish the Military Engineering Academy- to realize he was sucking on a rock while they talked strategy. China would be even worse.

Maybe South's trick was still working. Somehow his insides felt even hollower without the stone to occupy his mouth.

But he was fine. His stomach hadn't protested its emptiness in months. And no one could feel the ache. No one but him.

North pushed down the throbbing pain, overcoming it. He had been needing to take more of these breaks lately, slipping out of meetings to compose himself. He needed to stop being weak. It was nothing and he couldn't let it interfere with his duties.

He placed his general's cap on his head, adjusting the brim so it covered the dark bruise he knew had to be rising on his blue skin, and strode out into the hallway.

The bulbs attached to the walls of the military complex were dark, but dim light spilled out from around the cracks in some of the doors he passed.

The power was back on. They had managed to get the Supung Dam back in working order in two weeks after it was bombed. It still wasn't entirely repaired, but the Amnok River was flowing again, its current powering their hydroelectric plant.

It wasn't enough. America was still striking their other plants- Pungsan, Puryong, Changjin, their transformer stations everywhere- over and over again, fresh- *deepening* burns eating away at North and his provinces every day. He could feel them now, burning down into the tender skin below his right armpit, digging for his ribs.

They didn't even have ten percent of their power back. What they did have was powered mostly by their few thermoelectric plants, like the one in Wonsan. Energy rationing was more severe than ever, all of it directed only to vital locations, like factories and hospitals.

The light that brushed North's boots as he passed the doors only made the pressure inside him build. It came from lamps and candles, not bulbs.

But at least he had North Pyongan and North Hamgyong back, and the Liaos. Now that morale was on the rise again and repairs were moving smoothly, he had recalled them from working on the dam to return to their provincial duties. The Supung had been safer than anywhere else so long as America wasn't targeting it, but the constant tension in his shoulders from watching enemy planes soar in that direction, waiting all day to hear if they had struck the dam, had worsened the permanent ache in his spine.

He would still feel that way, jaw clenched as he waited for the day the hydroelectric plant was hit again, and he could do nothing but hear about it happening. But at least he could stop fearing that he and China's provinces had been broken with it.

He stopped outside the door to the war room, taking a deep breath.

Before he could go in, someone said, "Excuse me, Comrade Korea. Can I have a moment?"

North twitched slightly, hoping it hadn't been too obvious he was bracing himself, and turned to see one of his generals coming down the hall.

"What is it, comrade?" he said, coming off too flat, but needing to hide the strain in his voice.

"Sorry if you're busy, Comrade General." The man gave a quick bow. "But I promised my daughter I'd ask you if you're making a Liberation Day speech in person this year."

North's molars grit together. "I am. I'll be at Moranbong Theatre on the 15th. Jin-yong is welcome to come."

His comrade kept his military mask, but the broad shoulders under his epaulets visibly relaxed. "She'll be glad to hear it. It means a lot you make them open to the public."

He meant 'It means a lot you're actually making one this year.'

North bid the man farewell, watching him walk away lighter than he had came.

He had deprived his people of that relief last year. He could never do that again. He would have to have it announced in the papers that he was making a speech for Liberation Day so no one would be dreading that he wouldn't.

Even if it was his fault their country wasn't free yet, he couldn't let that cripple his people's morale. He couldn't let them blame themselves for *his* weakness.

With his composure restored, he marched into the room, taking up his spot next to Choe Yong-gon to discuss the limited probing actions they would take to assess the Americans' troop build up like he had never left, though too conscious of China's eyes on him, mask off in the safety of the war room.

Deng Hua had recovered from the shock of finding out his

Countryhuman was still in Korea by now, though his eyes still flicked to him every once and awhile, wondering the same thing North had been for almost two years now.

Another of China's National Days was coming up. And though North tried to deny it, something told him they wouldn't have an armistice by then.

'Go home,' he thought across the table while Deng Hua and Choe Yong-gon talked germ warfare safety measures.

China smiled back at him like he could hear what he was saying, but was choosing to ignore it, as usual.

North broke eye contact.

Whatever. He had accepted a long time ago that he wasn't responsible for China's decisions.

Even if he was responsible for him being here at all.

He shook his head, trying to dismiss the thought. *America* was responsible. America and no one else. He couldn't start wearing those wheel ruts into his mind again. Not on top of everything else.

He managed to hold them back for the rest of the talk, though when they were done, they rolled back in alongside the pain that had never truly left.

"Want to come dine with my soldiers tonight?" China asked as they padded through the narrow cement tunnels.

North hesitated, then shook his head. "I'm busy."

He... would. But if he did, he would have to eat.

"Giving your rations away again, I assume."

"I've never done that," North denied flatly, then changed the subject. "But you can invite some of your comrades to my Liberation Day speech."

China brightened. "Am I invited?"

"No."

"I'll make sure to get there early." The other country tapped his finger on the flashlight in his sleeve. "By the way, I hear you're having an important trial tomorrow."

North grimaced. ***'North Pyongan.'***

"It's just a normal trial," he said.

It was. Out of all the reactionaries they had tried, Pak Chae-eun wasn't anywhere near the worst offender. He hadn't done any raping or murdering himself. He hadn't sabotaged food stores or cut power lines. He had only led someone into a trap. It was only an exceptional trial because that someone had been a Provincehuman.

And because North had personal interest in it. Even if he had been trying to hide that, asking for another delay after North Pyongan's truck had been set back by a bombing run on the drive back here had shown his hand slightly.

"If you ask me, you should save the effort," China said breezily. "Pull the trigger on a priest and there's a high chance you'll be doing the world a favour. And we *know* you would with that one."

North had decided by now that one of the things China actually didn't have a say in in his country was how they handled religion. If he did, he was sure Chinese Christian priests would have been a dying breed.

"I have no issue with priests," North said as they exited the underground system, not leaving the small shack that had been rebuilt over the entrance until they were sure the drone of jet engines was far away. "Only the ones that get my provinces abducted."

"I suppose I don't have to ask what you want the verdict to be then," China hummed. "Though I wonder what you're expecting your province to do when it comes to testifying."

"None of your business."

"Even after my poor, sweet Xi'er got shot foiling that wicked priest's plan?" the other man sniffled.

"My trials are internal affairs."

China made a disappointed noise, his lip losing its fake wobble. "Not even a little hint?"

Before North could answer, new pain flared through his side, making his feet falter. He planted them in the blackened dirt before he could stumble, clenching his fists and jaw until his 'ears' rang as he was faced with the assault of the edges of the burn gash tearing open, hot liquid soaking his side.

China turned, and he bared his teeth, prepared for him to ask if he was alright. But as usual, the other man just waited patiently.

It never left. He only grew used to it. Enough that he could move his feet again, pushing past his comrade.

"The coasts, I assume," China said idly.

North unlocked his jaw enough to grit out, "I don't know."

"Mm. You know, I don't think you ever properly thanked me for my little sister's help in retrieving your province back then," his comrade remarked as they headed for the city proper. "Or for anything, ever."

North never knew if he should feel glad or irritated by how his comrade didn't acknowledge his flare-ups any deeper. He knew if China looked at him with anything like pity, he would snap. But he also didn't like that it felt like the man was allowing him to pretend he didn't feel them at all, the way you would tell a child with a skinned knee that you knew they were brave when they denied their pain as their lip wobbled and tears welled in their eyes.

It wasn't like that. North didn't cry, no matter how bad his pain ever got.

W rithing on the floor, fire in his insides, blood burning his skin as that gleaming blade cut him over and over and-

And this pain was nothing anyway. He just didn't like that China *thought* it was bad, and was laughing at him for pretending it wasn't.

Either way, a glare was the proper response. "I thanked Comrade Liaoxi like I said I would. *You* still did nothing."

"I seem to recall me playing a fairly important part in the operation."

"I don't," the Korean said bluntly.

"Hmmm. Maybe war damage can cause short-term memory loss."

"Maybe you just didn't do anything that important."

He would be less averse to thanking China now if the man wasn't so intent on it. As it stood, he would rather dig his hands into either side of the gash in his torso and pull.

China smiled at him from under his old scarf, and North looked away.

The air over Pyongyang was still thick with the smell of char and burning chemicals, even over a week later. Major repairs had been finished swiftly, only hampered slightly by the lack of electricity, but there was still too much to do. And they had lost too many supplies. North tried not to think about that string of zeroes stretching into infinity until he was behind the chair in his office, occupying his mind with other things in between responding to China's banter until then. Anything but the heat pulsing in his left side, the blood soaking through his bandages and hopefully not another uniform, and the empty pit inside him.

Pak Chae-eun. North wanted him dead. And even though he had helped design the system that gave him no direct control over who would be involved in the people's court, he was sure he would end up that way, so long as his niece didn't back out, which she hadn't yet.

As for what he wanted North Pyongan to do... He wanted him to have some self-respect for once, some outrage over what had been done to him. But that couldn't be what he wanted from him when it came to the trial, just like he couldn't want him to make his decision just to prove Korea's provinces were no longer tethered to any god but their people. What North wanted North Pyongan to choose...

He wanted him to make his decision how North had made his to withhold military information from his provinces, how he had chosen to send South Chungcheong off with the enemy. How he had chosen to leave his brother behind, twice. How Korea and his provinces should make every one of their decisions.

He wanted him to choose what was best for their country.

It should have been obvious by now, but there's the confession- South Chungcheong has been a spy for North since day one! The world's worst woman (affectionate) has been playing the long game and is prepared to play an even longer one.

South Chungcheong hates domineering, 'manly' men because they have all the power in a system that was built for them, but she hates weak, less stereotypically masculine men more, because the system was built for them, but they allow themselves to be ran by it. All they have to do is change their attitudes and they can achieve all the power, control, and respect that they want, unlike women (her). It's like you have this access to a power she used to only be able to dream of, and that's still out of her grasp, but you don't use it. Yes she also despises men that *do* use it, but at least they're playing their role the way they're meant to, were *designed* to. She is very much a biological essentialist when it comes to sex. Except North gets to transcend his because he is also her country. 'You are like a concept to me.' (or because she doesn't entirely hate him and she refuses to not entirely hate a man)

Theirs Alone

North Pyongan stood in the hall, his heart lodged in his throat like a pearl in a clam.

The Central Court had been moved from the Kumsusan residential district, forced further towards the outskirts by the bombings. A scant few dim bulbs lit it, flickering halos only glowing when court was in session, or about to be. He wished he could see the sunlight, though he knew no amount of illumination would make his choice any clearer.

"Well?" Korea's face was unreadable as he prompted his province.

No matter how North Pyongan had mused over his decision during the weeks of working on the Supung Power Station, he still wasn't any closer to knowing what he should do. What his people would want, need.

He breathed in, preparing to dive into deep water.

"Can I speak with him first?"

Korea tipped his head slightly, single eye piercing into him like a spotlight. Then he nodded curtly.

A handful of minutes later, North Pyongan was standing outside the remand room, an unadorned wooden door flanked by armed Public Security.

"He's pretty frail," one told him as he unlocked the door. "You shouldn't have any problems. But if you do, just call."

North Pyongan swallowed nervously, and the door opened, giving him his first glimpse in over a year of the man that had betrayed him, and their country.

Pak Chae-eun sat behind a small table on a rickety chair, looking just as much so. 'Frail' was not the word for it. He had been frail last

year, when they met in Seoul. Now he was decrepit.

The lines on his face had deepened so much they could have been carved with a knife, and his cheeks and eyes sank in between them. Only a few patches of wispy white hair still managed to cling to his spotted skull. He trembled, even sitting still, not from fear, or from cold in this stifling room, but weakness.

The door shut behind North Pyongan with a soft thump, and Pak Chae-eun looked up. For a few moments they only stared at each other in silence.

"F..." North Pyongan tried again. "Pak Chae-eun."

The old man blinked wearily. "That's me. Forgive me if I don't stand. I'm not what I used to be."

No. He wasn't.

"It's alright," North Pyongan murmured instinctively, then didn't know what else to say.

Pak Chae-eun did. "So. Did they send you to finish the job?"

"You aren't... Your verdict hasn't been reached yet," the province told him. "I'm just here to..."

He didn't truly know. Was he looking for closure? Some excuse not to go through with this? Or something that would make him feel better about sentencing the man to death?

"Talk to you," he finished lamely. "Before your trial."

The old man smiled bitterly. "Which I'm sure will be fair and impartial."

"We try to make sure all our trials are."

But people could never be impartial. The accuser, the jury, the judge, the defendant. They all held biases and views and emotions that could twist their decisions. They were all human, all had their own idea of what was a crime and what was justice.

"We aren't what you think," North Pyongan told the man sadly when he only shook his head disbelievingly. "Do you really think I would walk with Korea or join the Worker's Party if they allowed things like that?"

"I don't know," the old man said tiredly. "I don't really know you."

His heart squeezed in grief, engulfed by a sudden sense of loss. He had spent years, decades, thinking of this man fondly as the one who had set him on his path, as the one who shaped his faith in God, as a beacon of goodness in a dark world. As a saviour.

But he guessed, in the end, neither of them had actually truly known each other.

North Pyongan opened his mouth, then found his words. "Why? Why did you do it?"

"I thought I'd told you," Pak Chae-eun said. "Our country cannot fall to sin."

North Pyongan didn't cry out this time. There was no ice beneath his feet to crack. Only the tepid waters of sorrow.

"And you were willing to betray a friend for that." He shook his head before the man could respond. "I *never* would have been grateful to you."

There were no cobwebs over his eyes to fall. Only scales over this man's.

"You don't think," Pak Chae-eun replied. "And maybe you're right. But I've always tried to live my life by what I think God would want. And that's what I did."

"You truly think God would have wanted me to be torn away from my family and put into the hands of those that killed yours?"

"America and the Southern Korea weren't the ones that started this war," the man said. "It was *your* side that did that."

"America bombed your family." North Pyongan knew he wouldn't

see past the propaganda, so tried to make him see this instead. "His pilots *targeted* them, even though you were civilians."

"He is fighting a holy war," the old man said tiredly. "If that was the price we have to pay to keep our faith, then it's one I can accept paying. God knows better than me."

"Korea isn't taking anyone's faith."

"Isn't he?" Pak Chae-eun lifted his eyes to him. "How's yours?"

North Pyongan hesitated, glancing away, and he gave an unamused chuckle.

"You see?"

North Pyongan knew Korea would rather he renounced God entirely. He would rather he had never found Him.

But he had also never tried to dissuade him from his beliefs. Even his disparaging comments about God being cruel or useless, or religion being an opium, had only ever been brought on by North Pyongan bringing up the topic in the first place. He had never told him that he needed to stop believing, or even outright that he *should* stop believing, even in those early days when he was a bundle of brimstone and fury.

The only time he had ever tried to strip North Pyongan of his beliefs had been a test that he had failed by allowing him to.

"No," he said firmly, looking back to Pak Chae-eun. "I don't see. Korea has never tried to take my faith in God from me. The only thing that has ever shaken it has been those that proclaim they follow His will while plunging knives into the backs of their countrymen."

It was Pak Chae-eun's turn to look away.

"Korea does not want to take our faith," North Pyongan said softly. "He only wants to give us faith in ourselves."

"And if we have faith in ourselves, then what use is there in

believing in Him?" the man asked lowly. "No matter how you look at it, even if you folks up here aren't murdering men of the cloth and banning Bibles, what your Worker's Party is trying to do will turn people from the Lord. Faith in mankind degrades faith in the divine."

"Even if we turned away, so long as we do good on Earth, God would forgive us."

"Ha." Pak Chae-sun gave short laugh. "You've become something worse than a Godless Communist- you've become a Catholic."

"No," North Pyongan said, wincing as he thought of Sang. "Belief in God is what saves. But I think a belief in His goodness counts, even if someone doesn't mean it to."

Catholics believed they could commit acts with sin in their hearts, then simply confess them to be absolved, only to commit them again. And they believed as long as they did good works, they would see Heaven.

But what about those who did good works solely to achieve Heaven, out of fear of Hell and greed for His kingdom? Surely they would be turned away at the gates. They might believe in God, but they didn't believe in His good.

"Good actions don't always mean someone will be saved," he said to Pak Chae-eun. "And cruel ones don't always mean someone will be doomed."

"Aren't you just saying that to reassure yourself?" the man challenged. "How many Commandments have you broken with your Communist Korea? How many lives have you taken?"

"I have never taken a life I didn't think I had to," North Pyongan said, thinking of that boy in Anju. "But still..."

He looked down at his hands, spreading the bandaged fingers, the skin under them as soaked in red as if the blood of all the Japanese, traitors, Americans, and southern soldiers, forced to fight for Rhee or not, stained them.

"I might not see Heaven," he admitted, remembering the nothingness he had experienced after drowning, the same one shared by Hae. "Whether Provincehumans cannot, or I have just made too many mistakes."

He curled his fingers in, hiding the scarlet flower on his palm, looking back into Pak Chae-eun's eyes.

"But I want to help Korea create a world where we don't have to sin to keep ourselves alive, or others. A world where no one has to steal or lie or kill to survive. Where everyone receives what they need and gives what they can, and isn't swayed towards evil."

He knew there would always be evil in the world, those who wanted more than they deserved, or wanted others to have less. Those driven towards cruelty by forces beyond society's control. But he also knew there could be less of them. The Pyongans never would have stolen if they had the clothes, food, and medicine they needed. His sister never would have killed Guk Gun if their country hadn't been colonized, their people turned against each other, made desperate for money they needed to survive. He never would have killed at all.

And that boy in Anju, Ahn Chun-hui, Oh Tae-min, Hyun Han-jin, Kim Kang-sim, millions more of their countrymen, dead or maimed or displaced, would still be alive and well in their homes, never given the opportunity to enact evil or have it be visited upon them if America had never Divided their country in the first place, turning neighbour against neighbour.

"And if I can never see Heaven because I've spent my life fighting for that, if none of my good intentions or belief are enough for God to forgive me, then that's fine. So long as I can help create paradise on Earth, so that one day our people can all rejoice in His Paradise." A smile graced the corners of North Pyongan's lips. "Then that's a price *I'm* willing to pay."

"You said you read the Bible," Pak Chae-eun said slowly. "But I don't think you understood it. 'You shall have no other gods before Me. I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those

who hate me.' Do you think a God like that would tolerate you setting yourselves up as idols? Joseon and the old guard were stricken down for that very same sin."

"The words of man can be twisted. And Joseon was stricken down by Japan, because he held no love for our people," North Pyongan corrected. "We aren't trying to make ourselves idols as they did. That goes against everything we want. We don't want to be worshiped, we want to serve our people."

"The people you say would have twisted God's word in the Holy Bible."

North Pyongan could have pointed out that it was not Koreans that had written the Testaments, but instead he said, "Yes."

'Do you think people are good?'

He had to. There was no other choice.

"And you believe God would want you to serve them over him?" Pak Chae-eun man asked skeptically.

"I believe if God made me, then He made me to protect our people and guide them towards a better world."

Why else would the Lord have made Countryhumans and their provinces? If He despised idols, then why would He have given them their swift healing and conditional immortality, things that could be and had been so easily taken as signs of divine power, and the ones that held them to be gods to be worshiped, unless it was so they could better serve their people as His hands?

"And I have faith that the world Korea wants for us *is* that better world." His fist closed over his heart. "I believe it is what God would want for us. And if it isn't then...

"He would not be a God worth following."

Pak Chae-eun gave him a long, unfathomably sad look, then shook his head. "I don't think we can understand each other."

"No," North Pyongan admitted sorrowfully, remembering what he had said about being an old man stuck in his ways. "But perhaps if you had tried, we wouldn't be here now."

"Or perhaps you wouldn't be."

"I will always be by Korea's side."

Even if he went down that road he was so afraid of. If he started walking too far ahead of their people, if he didn't notice they had fallen to their knees, North Pyongan would grab his hand and reel him back to them.

A silence fell over the small grey room, as fathomless as the sea. There wasn't much more to say, but North Pyongan found himself reluctant to leave, knowing that when he did, he would have to give his verdict. And then he might have to sit in the courtroom outside and look Pak Chae-eun in the eyes as he sentenced him to death.

"Why did you take the money?" he asked quietly.

Pak Chae-eun hadn't been put in manacles. His thin, shaking hands clasped on the table.

"Because I wanted to get enough to get Eun-yu out of Korea before I passed."

"She's testifying against you today."

His swollen, arthritic knuckles tightened, bulging like knots in driftwood. "Yes."

"I'll make sure she's taken care of." North Pyongan put his hand over his breast. "I swear on the Lord."

"Then I'll trust that you at least think you still believe in Him," the old man said wearily. "I suppose that's all I can do."

North Pyongan hesitated, then asked, "Do you regret it at all?"

The man was silent for a long moment, his jaw working, before he

answered, "No. I did what I felt He would want. And I would do it again, even if I still ended up here."

Perhaps North Pyongan should hate him for that. Perhaps he wanted to. Maybe he had come in here searching for a villain, hoping Pak Chae-eun would rub his leathery hands together and tell him he had wanted the money to buy better tea and suits that didn't have patches on the elbows.

But he didn't find that. Staring into those rheumy brown eyes, the same ones that had looked at him so kindly on the night he saved he and his sister's lives, only older and sadder, he only found an old man who had thought he was doing what his faith would want, but had lived his life too dogmatically to see that it was not.

"Thank you," North Pyongan said, finally finding what he had come here to say. "For saving my sister and I back then."

Pak Chae-eun's clouded irises hid from sight. "I would do that again, too."

The province turned to go, looking back over his shoulder as he did.

"Goodbye, Pak Chae-eun. I hope our God isn't as cruel as you believe."

"And I hope you never have to face His judgement at all."

North Pyongan stepped over the threshold.

The guards didn't close the door behind him. They went in, taking Pak Chae-eun between them and marching him off for the courtroom.

North Pyongan let out a shaky breath. No relief welled inside him. If it was closure he had wanted, he hadn't received it. Only a deep sense of sorrow and regret.

"And?" Korea asked as he slowly made his way down the short hall towards him.

North Pyongan didn't look up from his boots. "Those guerrillas on Yebong Mountain. Pak Jeong-ri. Pak Yun-sung. Choe Ki-bin." The names fell like stones from his mouth, those he didn't know weighing even more heavily. "They died because of me."

Korea had been the one to say those words to him. Yet a touch of heat lurked under his response. "They died *for* you."

He supposed he could accept that. The men had given their lives not because he had held too much blind faith in a man that shared his, but because they had wanted to save him, so he could keep guiding the rest of their people forward. And because someone he should have been able to trust had been even blinder than him.

North Pyongan inhaled deeply, then gave his verdict.

"I won't testify against Pak Chae-eun."

Korea didn't react. His gaze bored into him, waiting for him to continue.

"I think he should face justice," he quietly told him. "His actions led to the deaths of our people. He betrayed our country and he would do it again. But I don't think I should play any part in delivering it to him."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think we should make Provincehumans testifying a precedent. If I went out there and told them how he betrayed me, some would think I was doing it because I wanted revenge."

He didn't. In the end, how could he want revenge against the man who had saved his sister's life? He only wanted justice for his shattered trust, and what Pak Chae-eun had tried to do to their country. And for the lives lost for him that shouldn't have had to be.

"They would think I was doing it because of my personal feelings," he continued. "And that any of us could. People could fear sharing their honest thoughts if they think they could upset us, and end up on a defendant's stand with a province on the other side."

Like how Korea didn't want them involved in executions. But instead of executioners, they would become witnesses, someone who could seal your fate with a few words. It didn't matter if a person had no intentions of ever committing a crime- it could still make them uneasy.

"Justice is difficult enough," he told Korea. "It's hard for a judge and court to be impartial. If any of us got up on the stand, they wouldn't be. The verdict would be decided in our favour every time, even if it shouldn't be."

It was hard for them to be impartial, too. And for Korea. Even if they were provinces, they were still people, prone to being blinded by emotion and beliefs. North Pyongan knew that well.

Maybe one day they could have a world where their masses would hold them accountable if they were seeking vengeance instead of justice. But not yet. Not when the memories of jade-green veils and nine-ornamented crowns still lived on in many.

They couldn't depend on divine, omniscient justice down here on Earth. They could only depend on their flawed human version of it. And they couldn't muddy those waters any more than they already were.

"Are you sure you aren't just doing what you always do?" Korea asked coldly. "Shoving the decision off on someone else so that *you* don't have to be the one to bear it?"

North Pyongan didn't flinch at the accusation, but he did look down as he admitted, "Maybe part of me still wants to. Pak Chae-eun isn't an evil man. Only misguided. And perhaps part of me doesn't want to be responsible for the death of someone that helped me once. But..."

He lifted his eyes. "That isn't why I'm making this decision. I think judgement should be our people's right alone, unswayed by us. They're guiding us as much as we are guiding them. We should trust them to guide us on this."

He smiled at Korea, giving him the reassurance he needed. "And I

trust that they will get me my justice today."

His Countryhuman stared at him, considering.

North Pyongan straightened under the pressure of his gaze, feeling calm as he said, "I truly believe this is what is best for our people, and the future we want for our country. I understand if you don't agree, but this is my decision. I won't testify."

Korea's eye pierced him for another long second, like he was trying to see to the bottom of the ocean floor. Then he nodded.

"Very well." He spun on his heel and marched away. "You can stay in the area until the trial is over," he called, not looking back. "Then head back into the city to help with repairs at the Rubber Factory. Bring me the verdict at the muster point tonight."

And with that, he was gone.

North Pyongan wished Korea would give him some indication of whether or not he thought he was doing the right thing, or if he agreed with his decision, as he wished he had been more open about his issues with him from the start.

But he supposed it didn't matter. He hadn't made the choice for him.

The trial was short, only four hours. They couldn't afford the bureaucracy that could stretch a case out for weeks right now, not for such a straightforward case that had been waiting for over a year to be decided. They had one witness- Pak Eun-yu, who never retracted her statement- and one defendant. Two sides to the story. And North Pyongan felt both would tell the truth.

Eventually the doors to the low hall of the Central Court opened, and a lone figure walked out, collapsing onto the steps, burying her face in her hands.

North Pyongan hesitated, knowing it was best if he kept his distance. But her shoulders started to shake, and he went over.

"Here."

Pak Eun-yu looked up at the handkerchief he held out with glistening eyes. "Are you sure?"

He nodded, and she took it with a trembling hand, dabbing at her eyes, fresh droplets replacing those she wiped away.

"I gave my testimony," she whispered in her quiet voice. "Lord forgive me, I did."

"He will," North Pyongan softly assured. "It wasn't false."

Pak Eun-yu nodded, crumpling the handkerchief in her trembling hands as she looked down at her feet.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I should have told you sooner what he was planning, or tried to talk him out of it, or- I should've..."

She buried her face in the fabric again.

"It isn't your fault." North Pyongan rested his hand closer to her on the sun-warmed stone. "It was his decision."

"I didn't want him to get in trouble," she sobbed. "But now- I know what he did was wrong, but he's my only family left. I couldn't keep my husband safe, I couldn't protect our boys. And now-"

She raised her head, bleak eyes staring out at the ruined city.

"I'm killing my own uncle."

Perhaps part of North Pyongan had wanted to escape the responsibility of sentencing Pak Chae-eun to the executioner's bullet. But part of him also wished he had taken it on, if only to be able to help his niece shoulder the burden.

"You aren't," he said gently. "Your uncle made his choices. Those are what are killing him. Even if you hadn't testified, he would still be found guilty. You only saved us time."

It could be a lie. It could have also been the truth. What mattered was lightening her soul of at least a piece of the guilt.

"I just..." The mousy woman let out a shaky sigh. "I wish I had stopped him."

"You didn't know until the day it happened." North Pyongan had read the statement she had given while in custody.

"But I knew he was doing *something.* Going places alone, talking to people he shouldn't. Talking about Korea the way he did." She dashed at her eyes. "I just..."

"No one wants to believe those they love are capable of betrayal."

She nodded mutely.

And she had just lost the rest of her family. No one could blame her for not wanting to see the truth, especially not North Pyongan.

"Thank you," he said, because he hadn't had the chance to. "For testifying, and for telling me about the trap."

"Some good it did." She sniffled. "I should've told you sooner. If you'd been gone..."

"Regret poisons the soul, comrade," he told her. "We can't change the past. You aren't at fault for being scared, and I'm not at fault for going. Pak Chae-eun was, for putting us both in danger."

Even though the money had been for his niece, he had put her in danger by having her in the house when he brought the reactionaries. He had let the lip service Syngman Rhee and America paid to their religion convince him that they were just, despite what he had seen.

Or maybe he just hadn't expected North Pyongan to put up any resistance. Maybe he had thought that he would turn the other cheek.

"It's hard to tell my soul that," Pak Eun-yu murmured.

"I know." So very well.

The sun's rays whined in place of the insects they had eradicated,

the glimmering golden ghosts of cicadas.

"Can I ask why you warned me?"

Pak Eun-yu stretched the handkerchief out in her hands, staring down at the unembroidered ivory fabric.

After a moment, she recited, "'He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'"

The verse he had quoted to her as they sat in the rickety little shack, trying to fill the silence.

"I don't know anything about politics," the woman said, raising her watery brown eyes to his. "But you were kind to us. What he wanted to do wasn't justice. And it certainly wasn't kindness."

North Pyongan's throat felt thick. Wordlessly, she handed the handkerchief back to him.

"Will you...?" She swallowed. "Will you pray with me? If it's allowed."

North Pyongan took her hand in his, and they closed their eyes.

It felt right for this to be the last time he prayed with another. The first time had been on a pew in that little church as a blizzard wailed outside, a Bible in his lap and his hand in Pak Chae-eun's. The last would be on the steps of a courthouse on a stifling July day, comforting his niece as the former Father was brought to justice behind them. Not a full circle, but a distorted reflection, like ripples on sun-filled waters.

He didn't pray for God to lighten Pak Eun-yu's burden. That was his job. He instead prayed for that same nebulous thing he always did, beseeching of whoever was out there, whoever could hear him,

'Please, keep us safe.'

Even if that was his duty, too.

As the sun crested in the sky, beating down on the cracked and blistered city, and North Pyongan's battered body, the doors behind them opened once more, and the two Public Security men escorted Pak Chae-eun out. The old man hung between them, listless with the weight of despair.

The verdict had been made.

The former priest saw the province and his niece holding hands in prayer on the steps. He turned his head to them as they passed.

Pak Eun-yu kept hers down. But North Pyongan met those old, tired eyes, unflinching, until they disappeared into the maze of the homes destroyed by those who had destroyed both of theirs, and whom the man that had once been kind to him still believed were on the right side of a holy war.

The hand in his squeezed, and North Pyongan squeezed back. And bowing his head, he murmured one last prayer for the soul of the man that had once shaped his life.

I love North Pyongan. I really like writing his perspective because I'm not religious at all (I'm more on North's side of 'God is either useless or cruel, either way why would I serve that?), so it's a very fun exercise. I know I'm the one writing him, and his eventual future is one where he doesn't believe in god anymore, but it genuinely makes me a bit softer on the idea of faith. His views on religion are filled with a great love, and that's comforting to me. If only religious people like that really existed. uu

For the 'nine-ornamented crowns' part, for most of Joseon, the king of Korea wore nine emblems (because twelve was reserved for China). So Joseon and the provinces also wore these. After the Korean Empire was declared, the Emperor started to use the twelve emblems, so Joseon would have, too, to show that he wasn't a tributary state anymore, but an Empire. Though I do think Gojong had a very loose definition of what an empire is. So he would have had the twelve-stringed (on each side) crown. But the provinces stayed at nine (inequality growing). Though I do like to think there was an

argument about moving to ten strings/ten beads on the strings, and Hwanghae was like 'Ten?? Since when is ten an important number? You want more strings and less meaning!' And the others were like 'You never wear anything but that stupid horsehair hat anyway!' And then Hwanghae said 'My apologies for not wearing *half the treasury* on my head every time I wish to walk the gardens.' And then Joseon remembered why he did n't just have all the provinces live in Seoul and said 'Nine strings or I demand more taxes' and won the argument.

Straining

North watched Pak Chae-eun's execution from afar, unseen by those carrying it out. Part of him had wanted to follow through on his threat to the man by having it done in public, but he'd decided against it. He didn't want anyone prying into his crime, and then into North Pyongan's history with him.

As the old man's corpse slumped to the ground with a bullet in his skull, he left, pretending he didn't see the splash of sky blue through the trees as someone else slunk away, too.

The former priest's body would be returned to his niece to be buried, before she was relocated across the country, far from the front. He had a patch of land ready for her to farm, seized from another traitor to their nation. He couldn't bring her family back, but he could give her the chance to start a new life.

The year in prison had broken the old man down entirely, leaving him incapable of harm. But it still felt good to know he was dead. It was the only true assurance that he would never again try to sabotage their country.

And he deserved it for betraying his province.

North Pyongan had done well. He had just done what he should, so as usual, he wouldn't be receiving any praise for it. But he was making good progress. And since Pak Chae-eun had been found guilty, North had nothing to criticize.

His province wasn't walking as close to him as he should yet on their path. But his Countryhuman now knew he would catch up.

He wondered if he should have it enshrined in the Constitution that he and the provinces couldn't testify in court, but quickly discarded the idea. There could be times when one of them was the only witness to a crime, especially if it was a financial one in the upper echelons of their government. He would just keep them away

from the courtrooms unless it was necessary. And if it ever did become necessary, he would make sure they only graced it for officials who had betrayed their people.

And now he could make space and stop thinking about this. Pak Chae-eun was dealt with. He could walk away with the same lesson that North Pyongan had, one he had already learned and he wished his province hadn't had to.

Anyone could betray you. No matter what they had done for you or how good of a person you thought they were. Betrayal didn't come from outside- it came from within.

And he would walk away with the names of those Yebong Mountain guerrillas who had sacrificed themselves for his province as well. And the vow he had made to those who lived.

'I'll return here when Korea is free to thank you all in person.'

Or to find their graves.

The dull pulsing heat in North's side threatened to overwhelm him, but he forced it down with gritted teeth. He wouldn't keep his promise by giving in to pain.

Liberation Day was coming up. As he got up on that stage in front of his people, he couldn't be anything but unshakeable, invincible. An unyielding promise that they would be free, that he *could* free them.

North went to go keep trying to do that.

The four weeks passed just as successfully as all the months before. America's negotiators kept coming back to the table, only to retreat again for another week. When they *were* at Panmunjom, the only thing they brought were more spanners to throw into the works.

They had run another useless calculation, and now said that eighty-three thousand soldiers wanted to return home, one of the smallest numbers they could manage with the seventy-eight thousand on Geoje they had admitted were demanding it. But

looking closer at the list showed that they had included over six thousand Chinese soldiers from the Jeju camps in the number. They had cut the seventy-eight thousand to seventy-six thousand three hundred, and tried to make it up by adding them. They had removed one thousand four hundred of those who had said they wanted to go home before, along with seven thousand 'reclassified civilians' from the seventy thousand moved from Geoje, and the over five thousand prisoners that had rioted in the mainland hospital camp back in May. And they hadn't said anything about the two thousand left out of the earlier Geoje count.

The number of those who wanted to go home kept decreasing, and North knew what the reason had to be. The same tortures his escaped soldiers had reported experiencing. The steam cages and rapes and beatings. Either that or America's insidious lies finally breaking them down.

And America was lying about the numbers in the first place. The Yankees had only publicly published one of their screening results, done after the massacre on June 10th. By their own numbers, only two percent had said they would forcibly resist repatriation.

Ninety-eight percent of North's soldiers wanted to go home. And America was refusing to offer more than eighty, and even less of the Chinese. His negotiators insisted they would only return thirty-two percent of China's soldiers, all while picking at the wording of the draft armistice and leaving the table whenever they pleased, always without joint agreement.

North knew why.

Across the sea, the steelworkers' strike had ended, the workers satiated with a pay raise, smaller than they had demanded, but enough to send them back to work with no qualms about producing the steel used to kill North's people now that they were a few cents richer. The kink in America's supply chain had only been felt in the flagging probes at the front, but now even that sagging chain was pulled tight as the weapons began to flow again. It would take a few months for his stockpiles to return to the overwhelming force the Imperialist was used to having, but when he did…

North knew if they didn't have a ceasefire by then, the talks would be doomed. Even if they did…

He couldn't think about that. He could only focus on doing everything he could to get an armistice. Even if it was difficult when your negotiating 'partner' refused to even sit at the table with you.

The weeks passed slow and hot and painful. North didn't know a day where his uniform wasn't plastered to his skin by blood, sweat, pus, and the other fluids that leaked out of the holes being eaten into his body. He couldn't escape the suffocating constriction of his bandages or the thick smell of rotten meat thrown onto a fire that clung to him and everything he touched, or the gaping hole inside him.

And he couldn't escape watching his provinces deteriorate around him.

They weren't like him. They hadn't known pain worse than this before. And the way their skin split whenever they moved and the constant throbbing agony were starting to wear on them. They tried to hide it from him, but he could see it in the white eyes that stared wearily from the masks of red and black that obscured their flags, just like he could see their accusations.

'You said this would be over by now.'
'You said we would be in Busan by Liberation Day.'
'You promised we would win.'
'We shouldn't have to burn anymore.'
*'We should be **free.**'*

"Where are you going?" the words came out sharper than he'd meant.

Hae turned to look at him with big eyes from the edge of the clearing. "The latrines."

She was lying. He could see it in the way she wiggled her shoulders and puffed her cheeks. She was lying to him, he *knew* it.

North opened his mouth, then caught himself, forcing his hackles flat and giving Hae a curt nod. She skipped away.

He was being paranoid. He knew his provinces had to be judging him for the war still waging, but it wasn't like it would turn any of them towards the enemy. Especially not Hae. She had never lied to him directly before, and there wasn't any loophole in her answer for her to wriggle through.

He ignored SH's furrowed brows from the log across from him as he finished stitching the tear his field uniform had received while hauling rubble away from Moranbong Theatre. When it was satisfactorily closed, he stood.

"Douse the fire when you're done," he ordered, even though they always did.

"Are you sleeping here tonight, Korea?" North Pyongan asked. Kangwon dozed on his shoulder, recalled from the hospitals to get some rest for tomorrow, so he spoke softly.

He had been quiet ever since Pak Chae-eun's death. Part of North's mind tried to whisper that he resented him for the execution, but he shut it out. He had tried to protest it even back before he'd been broken of his blind obedience. And unless it came to his sister or someone's feelings, North Pyongan didn't lie, either. If his province said he wanted to see the man who had betrayed him face justice, he meant it.

"No," North said to him when he realized he had been silent for too long.

He was just at the bunker to fetch his dress uniform and wash this one, as he had to do every day now. He would need to bandage himself even more thickly than he had last year. He couldn't afford to have blood seep through the white fabric while he was before his people.

"You could get some rest, too," SH tried, but he was already walking away.

His shoulders prickled as he left, filled with the certainty that they had started talking about him the moment he was out of earshot.

The air under the dark canopy was cloyingly hot. Sweat trickled down the side of his face, down into the bandages and the open wounds under them. North stifled a hiss.

Though he was alone, he kept his spine straight and his breath locked behind his teeth, only opening them to slip the stone between his lips.

At the washbasin, he made himself methodically fill the hearth with the stockpiled wood, steadily holding his matches to the kindling until it caught. While he waited for the water in the large tub to boil, he set to washing his uniform in the smaller one they had for laundry now. Thankfully he didn't have to wait for that. Cold water for bloodstains. Or lukewarm, the heat having been leeched out of the air and into even the river water.

North took off all his clothes, his skin immediately crawling at being exposed. He preferred even the choking fabric to being vulnerable like this.

But even in the thin moonlight coming down through the leaves, he could see everything from his boxer shorts to his undershirt was soaked with dark patches. Though thankfully his field uniform was safe tonight. He washed it first, hanging it on a bush to dry before starting on the stained clothes.

Scrubbing his knuckles across the rough fabric made him grit his teeth. He had taken the bandages off his palms to stop them from getting soaked, and couldn't help but feel like every pass of his skin only scraped off more flesh, staining the clothes worse. The water had grown even darker with the blood, leaving him unable to tell if that was true. The flames trapped in the fire cage flickered and roiled, casting confusing shadows, and he couldn't turn on his flashlight because if he had to look at the charred and cratered wasteland of dead flesh his body had become he was going to smash the bathing tub.

He just wanted his clothes to be clean. It was bad enough he had

to spend every day soaked in the fluids leaking out of his body, choking and burning alive, feeling filthy and grimy and unable to be truly *clean.* He couldn't take his clothes being dirty, too. He couldn't fix the burns, but he could fix them. He *should be able to.*

He scrubbed and scrubbed, faster and harder, dirty water sloshing as he ground his formerly white undershirt into the bottom of the stupid fucking washbasin until he used too much force and his knuckles slipped off the fabric, scraping across rough wood and sending a lance of pain up his arm.

Fury surged in North and he seized his shirt in his hands, prepared to tear it apart.

He caught himself in time, dropping it and pulling his hands from the water.

He couldn't waste another shirt. They were just underclothes. It didn't matter if they were stained. No one else would see them. It didn't matter if he would be able to feel the stains underneath his general's tunic like another layer of dirt he couldn't get rid of. No one else would know they were there.

But he would try again. After he had bathed. He would get fresh water and keep scrubbing, even if it took all night. He didn't need to go back to Jonsung complex tonight. He just didn't want to sleep here.

North pulled the sodden underwear from the tub, arranging it over a different bush, and getting a surge of satisfaction as he got to kick the basin over, bloody water pouring across the dark ground, flooding the undergrowth. He might have kicked it harder than he needed to.

The water in the large tub was boiling now, bubbling with a sound like someone murmuring behind his back. North let it boil a bit longer while he unwound the bandages from around himself, making sure it was sterile. Then he realized he should have left the washwater to douse the fire, did it with his canteen and a lot of stomping, and climbed in.

He let out a shaky exhale as the heat singed his dead nerve endings and burst through the living ones like long-delayed detonations, a rush of heat so intense it felt cold. The sound made his teeth grind.

He should be used to this. Everything had been worse last year, and the one before it. When he held the burns from all his provinces, when more targets were being hit instead of the same ones over and over again, when they had been crammed up against the Amnok with no food. Even his sympathetic fever had been worse when he had the real one.

The pain shouldn't be getting worse, he should be getting *used* to it, even if the idea of his provinces doing the same made him dig his nails into the sides of the tub.

North lowered himself further into the water, forcing himself to bear the way the heat made his chest tighten even more, holding himself there until the screaming in his body faded to a pained hiss.

He wasted no time, starting to wash his body, sloughing away bits of skin and fibres from the dressings. His eye roamed the dark shadows beyond the trees as he did, heart pounding.

He had always hated bathing. He hated being exposed in a river or tub at the Secret Camp, his weapon on the shore and his clothes off, having to leave his provinces alone because he couldn’t bathe with the other males. Even after Liberation, when they had a bathhouse and no one hunting for them, it took up too much time. North couldn’t stand not being clean, but if he could, he would snap his fingers and be that way.

Even his first bath hadn’t been a relief. It should have been, as he scrubbed away nine years’ worth of filth and was finally clean for the first time since the day he had been formed. Even with Kangwon sitting on the shore behind him, back to him, North had felt relief as he dragged his nails down his arms and rediscovered that his flag was white, not grey.

But then that same feeling from his first meal surged back up, and any sense of relief had died. He knew South wouldn’t be clean. He

would still be caked in all the misery they'd gone through, starving and alone while North frolicked in a river with a full stomach, his flag sparkling like snow his brother would never touch, while his was still the same dull grey of the cobwebs he always cleaned from the corners of their prison.

If he was even alive.

It hadn't felt right to be clean. It felt… All the dried blood, bile, piss, and dirt that had built up on his skin for almost a decade had been disgusting, even after Kangwon had wiped him down in his sleep. But it had been filth he'd shared with his brother. Digging under his nails, scraping at his limbs, straining to reach his back after turning down Kangwon's offer to do it, washing it all away felt like… he was washing *him* away.

North's knees half-rose to his chest, but he forced them down, staying cross-legged as he rubbed his hands along his thigh. With the both of them together, they could almost fit around it. He switched to using one.

South wasn't being imprisoned now. He had been left free to roam, even if he had guards. The agent had said they all stayed outside the nightclub. Surely there would have been secret observers inside, but for America to trust South to even *think* he was alone with the provinces…

The southern elections were over now. Rhee had won, suddenly far more popular than in any election or poll before it, especially with the military brought in to supervise the voting. Not a single leftist had been on the ballot.

And still South walked free.

Another reason North hated baths. It was harder to stop thoughts he didn't want to think from crawling in.

He ran his hand along the old raised scar on his chest. The sensation of pressure against the dead tissue and the burns that still had nerves in them made his skin shudder, like unreal fingers were dragging across it. But it was still better than washing that gash. He

would save it for last, as always.

His brother *wasn't* free, he knew that. He was watched by guards and America's agents. And even if North would have seized the opportunity to gather his provinces and free them from the Commands so they could fight, the elite unit doubtlessly able to break free from Busan and disappear into the wild, South wasn't that sort of person.

'Can we please not do that again?'

He never had been. From the start he'd always been-

Something moved out in the woods, and North froze, skimming the trees. He didn't move until he heard the beat of wings and panicked dying chirp as a bird was taken by some small night predator.

His provinces' bodyguards were in their dug-out barracks by the road, and patrolling the area. If there was an enemy, they would spot them long before they breached the trees. And he knew he didn't have to worry about his provinces spying on him, even though he sunk down lower in the tub anyway.

And China wasn't out there tonight, waiting to offer to wash his back for him again (which North had taken to calling him a freak for). He had left for the border this morning with the Liaos, off to do something which he had said was 'None of your business' since it involved his politics. Which was *not* the same as when North said it because this was *his* country. Everything the other country did here was his business.

He tried to ignore the little voice that said China had finally grown tired of his… still admittedly poor demeanour, and left. It would be good if he had. He *wanted* him to. And it would get Liaoxi away from North Pyongan.

The idea of the man walking out of Korea without even waiting for North to dismiss him pissed him off, that was all.

He sank down even more into the water, until it lapped at his

chin. He wrapped a hand around his throat, scrubbing at the lines of his neck, trying not to feel how the skin dipped between the cords, and how much his clavicles stuck out. Tracing the line of rough skin that hurt to touch showed that the burns were still staying off his face. They stopped just shy of touching his chin, lining his jaw all the way back to the bone, then swooping down slightly around the nape of his neck, before rising on the other side, lopsided.

Those sitting at the front of the theatre hall would be able to look up and see the burns that marred the underside of his chin, and any dressings he put on them. He would have to dress them, or he would get blood on his collar. Medical tape, maybe, and lighting that would cast more light on his flag than his body. That would be good. But he didn't know how to ask the stagehands for it without making it clear why he was.

China liked the theatre. Maybe…

No. He didn't need a foreigner to help him set up lights. He would figure it out on his own. He didn't even know if the man was coming back yet. He probably wasn't.

North struggled to reach his back, the pull of his arm as he twisted it tearing open the scabs around his underarms, dirtying places he'd already cleaned. Still he persisted, rubbing at his-

'Too sharp.'

-shoulder blades as best as he could.

He knew he should probably ask Kangwon to come clean it for him. But he couldn't. His province had been working even harder ever since the ISC had came to investigate, and was finally getting a chance to sleep and escape the pain he had to deal with constantly. North couldn't disturb him.

He watched the treeline in the direction of the camp, almost expecting him to emerge without being called, here to force care that he didn't want on him.

But the undergrowth around the trail they'd worn through it stayed silent, and North twisted back around, redoubling his efforts to claw at his own back.

'Stupid.' He knew he would just have to scare him off anyway.

He couldn't let him see him like this.

He had never gotten to bathe with South before. Even during the few blissful weeks after Liberation. His brother was too nervous about washing outside, so North had made it his duty to watch the perimeter, close enough to talk, but not in the water.

But even that had been nice. So had South singing (and splashing water at him) while North washed up. It was a shameful little desire he would never admit to anyone but his brother, but… he had always wanted to take a bath with him before they were Reunified. To wash each other's backs like they should have been able to when they were young.

North brushed his fingertips over the edge of the burn gash, feeling the sting from the sores.

His body didn't bear the burns of Seoul anymore. But still, now the idea of his brother running his hands over burns that *could* have been from it, skin that had once reflected the damage from their capital, damage *he* had caused was…

Agony lanced through North as he suddenly plunged his fingers into the gash, scrubbing violently at the soggy scabs and raw flesh inside, refusing to stop as the pain pushed against his temples.

Good. The pressure drove away any thoughts he didn't have time for. He needed to hurry. For once in his life he needed to think about what to say at the speech tomorrow, and then to prepare for that guest who would be here for the first time since 1949.

He didn't have time to think about unimportant things like pain or hunger he couldn't feel, or how he couldn't reach all of his back properly, or whether or not China would return. And as for South…

He would deal with that when the war was over.

Very fun weekend. I am bloated with sun. I tried to update last night but I came home, squinted at my phone for a few minutes, felt like I was being Trotsky'd and decided it could wait.

Hmmm. Halfway through editing. I was looking ahead at an initial chapter in this part. Did you know the outline originally said ninety chapters? We are at one hundred and six.

I'm going to be honest if a man pissed in my water bottle because he had a crush on me I would commit an act of violence. I mean this without exaggerating. I would hurt him and I would hurt him badly. It would be a visceral primal reaction and I would leave him unable to piss ever again. Luckily all my coworkers are women because boss says men don't know how to work hard (boss is a man, boss is possibly class conscious and aware he is stealing our labour).

Sealed With Solidarity

[image] [image]

North slunk into his room at the bunker in the early hours, when only South Pyongan was awake on watch.

It was still empty.

He didn't look at China's cold bedroll. Just started dressing himself for the day in his now-dry field uniform. He would change into the dress one after dealing with his guest.

Once he was done with his bandages and clothes, he put the roll of fabric back in his bag. His fingers brushed something smooth as he did.

He grit his teeth. After a second, he pulled the wooden tiger out, gazing at it in the light of his flashlight, seeing Gangwon's white eyes staring back, anxious to be told he'd done a good job carving it.

The last time he'd seen him was on February 20th, when he had gone off on Kangwon for hiding Hae's… coma from him. After that, North's condition had deteriorated, and he'd avoided the Quarantine Hospital. And then Kangwon had convinced him to rest.

And then he had woken up, and his province was gone.

He couldn't even remember his last glimpse of him properly. His mind had already been growing fuzzy. He'd been standing in the corner as North ordered Kangwon to fill him in on the anti-germ warfare measures, watching him nervously, probably already suspecting he was sick.

North should have… He didn't know. It wasn't like he could have known he would be gone when he woke up.

But he should have.

Exhaling, he placed the tiger back in his bag, hiding it with his other painful mementos. The heart-shaped stone, the sketch of Seoul, the bloodstained pottery, the dried pink jindallae, the photograph of the 63rd Army platoon. The-

His fingers reached, then curled in.

He couldn't look at that picture of him and South, no matter how badly he wanted to see his brother's face. Like after the occupation of Pyongyang, he knew it wouldn't be wise. He'd glanced at it after returning from the south to make sure it wasn't damaged, but it hadn't seen the light of day since then. Neither had that scrap of paper.

'잘못했어.'

Closing his eye, North went to go start the anniversary of the day they should have been free.

Alone.

"Shoulders back, stand up straight," North snapped, moving down the line of his provinces standing for inspection outside the air raid shelter. "I said *straight."*

He didn't wait for North Hamgyong to comply, putting a hand on the small of his back and using the other to shove his chest, ignoring his wince and the *'crack'* as his bent spine straightened.

"He's not even *here* yet," his Provincehuman grumbled.

"No talking. Stand up taller," North barked at Hae.

"This is as tall as ah get," she complained from her place between Chagang and North Hamgyong.

"I don't care."

Hae puffed out her cheeks, straining as she tried to make herself look taller without standing on her tiptoes.

North snatched the flatcaps South Pyongan was juggling, slapping one on her head and the other on North Pyongan's, then took a few steps back to appraise his unit.

South Hamgyong and Chagang were best at hiding pain, so they were in the middle, the first ones an eye would land on. Flanking them were South Pyongan and South Hwanghae, also at least appearing less affected. At the ends were North Pyongan and North Hwanghae, shifting slightly in discomfort, but still doing far better than the two he had tried to hide in the middle, Kangwon, still with heavy shadows under his eyes even after a full night's rest, and North Hamgyong, miserable even when he wasn't grimacing in pain and rubbing his back. Hopefully his guest's gaze would skim over them.

"Korea, it's hot," Hae whined, tugging on her collar. "How long do we got'a stand out here?"

They were covered head to toe, from the tips of their gleaming black calf-length boots to the white undershirts peeking out of their uniform sleeves to the red-embroidered collars done snugly up to their chins. Their generals' flatcaps perched on their round heads, covering some of the burns there. North would have made them cover their hands, too, but gloves in the middle of sweltering August heat would have only drawn attention to what he was trying to hide.

"Until he's here."

North stepped in to fix Hae's collar, straighten North Hamgyong again, and brush an invisible speck of dust off of Kangwon for good measure. He took another cursory look at Hwang, but SH had already fixed his belt orientation for him, and since North had snatched his short course drafts, he hadn't been distracted enough to mess it up again.

His eye skimmed across his provinces, searching for any signs of weakness. They all had perfect military posture, backs straight, chins up, hands braced behind their backs. Even North Hamgyong had finally stopped his slouching. The stars on their golden epaulets and the buttons on their uniforms were polished to a sheen, as were

the crimsom star pins on their hats. Not a thread was out of place.

But there was nothing he could do to conceal the bandages crawling out from their cuffs to wrap around their hands, or just visible under their collars. And not even those bandages could hide the raw red skin and blackened edges around their eyes and mouths, places they couldn't cover. South Hamgyong and Kangwon had done their best, but unless they cocooned their entire heads in fabric, their guest would see them.

North could see them. And he could see the glare in the eyes he couldn't hide either.

He turned away.

"Be on your best behaviour," he clipped, bracing his own arms behind his back. "No unnecessary speaking, no breaking position."

"It isn't like we didn't have to do this once a month for three years," North Hamgyong grumbled.

"Though I would say our reception was allowed to slacken somewhat after that," Hwang ventured.

"We are greeting an allied nation during wartime," North responded, not looking back at him. "This is proper form."

He couldn't have his provinces feeling relaxed enough to let their guards down. They needed to be a unified, unflinching force.

"Aiya," a voice said as someone stepped out from behind a tree off to North's right. "Fairly excited about our special guest, aren't you?"

North stiffened. Ssi-bal, how long had he been standing there? Someone had been facing the forest ever since he lined them up.

China padded out, his mask and scarf off. As North reflexively scanned him for injuries, he noticed he was wearing a different uniform than he usually did. Instead of the lighter olive of the PVA summer infantry uniform, he was in the well-fitted black lapelled coat of the dress uniform his commanders would wear if they were

at a formal event.

Epaulets graced his shoulders, the boards almost matching North's- a red star on each with his national emblem above them. Golden thread, more extravagant than the lining he had on his other uniform, decorated his cuffs and the tips of his lapels with half-laurels and stars. A golden braid bordered the red band around his black peaked cap, and a gold star cradled by a gleaming wreath perched in the middle.

For once China actually looked like someone that could be in charge. North was both glad he didn't wear it normally, and irritated that he hadn't worn his own dress uniform, not wanting to get it dusty before tonight.

Though there was one non-regulation difference between the uniform and a regular commander's- China's, of course, had long, pinned-up sleeves.

His comrade had startled him, but somehow that wasn't first thing he felt at his voice.

North crushed that feeling, and instead of saying what he wanted to say, took a step back, glaring. "I am not excited."

He wasn't. He didn't want this visit to happen. He would have rejected it, if he couldn't use it. And if he had been given the chance.

"Mm." China smiled, scanning his provinces, then called, "Little Sisters! You can come out now!"

A few minutes later, Liaoxi and Liaotung emerged from the road their vehicles had worn between the trees, hauling a large chest.

"Could we not… just… take the Jeep?" Liaotung asked between gritted teeth.

"It would have ruined gege's stealthy entrance somewhat," China replied.

"I am going to ruin your- We could have… brought it in… after

you got here," she forced out.

Her Countryhuman paused. "Ah. You're right. Well, lesson learned for next time."

"There won't… *be* a next time."

The two provinces slammed the chest down on the dirt. Liaoxi immediately slumped over it, panting. North gave North Pyongan a look, stopping him from going to her.

"A little to the left, maybe?" China asked, then at Liaotung's glower said, "Mm, no you're right. It looks good there. Thank you, Little Sisters. You're dismissed."

Liaotung flattened her lips at him, then helped her sister up, hauling her away along Jangsan.

"Happy Liberation Day, gege and comrades," she called.

Liaoxi was still panting too much to talk properly, but she gave North Pyongan and the others a small wave as she gasped out, "Happy... Liberation Day I say."

North was focused on the chest. It was large, made of dark lacquered wood and decorated with the curling geometric shapes China's people loved, and that had seeped over into his country. The corners were bound with brass, and a large keyhole was placed in the center. Somehow it looked like what he had always defaulted to picturing when his brother would tell a story about bandits finding treasure from one of their common sense folk tales.

"What is that?" he asked suspiciously.

China perched on the lid, crossing his ankles. "A chest."

North glared. "What is *in* the chest?"

"Treasure," he said idly, fanning his face with a red hand. "I'm sure we'll find out what kind soon enough."

"Comrade Korea!" a voice called before North could press further,

and he stiffened as someone jogged out of the trees. Song Ki-gon, one of SH's bodyguards.

"Is he on his way?" North demanded, pulse spiking.

The man nodded. "Truck coming up the Pyongyang highway with the escort, make we were told to expect."

The news didn't excite North. He just nodded and ordered, "Point him to the road when he gets here."

The man saluted, taking off again.

North gave his provinces one last scan.

Kangwon's eyes kept closing tight. The Hwanghaes were squirming slightly, Hae even more than usual when she had to stand still. And North Hamgyong's face was lined with permanent strain.

Wonsan, the Sariwon airfield and the front, and the rail lines.

It put North on edge, especially that last one. But if the vehicle had made it, he was clearly fine. North hadn't been informed of his departure time or ETA to prevent communications leaks, but he assumed he would have crossed the border in the middle of the night.

As satisfied with his provinces' state as he could be when they looked and smelled like something their guest would normally cook (or more like Hae would), North turned to face the road, straightening one of his epaulets and taking a step away from China and his pristine black uniform as he came to stand next to him.

North eyed him, trying to think of how to ask his question.

"Does he do that…" he began, not looking at him, trying to be quiet enough that his provinces couldn't hear him clearly. *"Greeting* with you?"

"Greeting?" China asked, innocently enough that North knew full well he knew what he meant.

He grimaced. “The Socialist fraternal kiss of brotherhood.”

He was going to die of shame just saying the name.

“Has he done it to you?” his comrade questioned back.

“No.” North suppressed a shudder at the thought.

Once a Soviet man had tried, overexcited by their victory over Japan. CCCP had intercepted him the way you would intercept a child heading for the edge of a pier, plucking him up by the back of his uniform and redirecting him before North could have an excuse to reject the trusteeship after all. The Soviet Countryhuman had never tried it himself.

But that did *not* mean North was not on constant guard for it.

“Does he do it to you?” he repeated.

China met his side-eye, smiling. “I suppose you’ll just have to find out.”

North was going to permanently exile them both from his country.

“By the way,” his comrade said idly. “Make sure not to mention how extended my stay here has been.”

The Korean looked warily at him. “Why?”

China smiled, eyes on the road. “Because CCCP doesn’t know I’ve been fighting in Korea.”

Before he could interrogate him, North heard the rumble of an engine and quickly straightened up, thrusting his shoulders back and tilting his chin, arms locking firmly into a brace, crushing all hints of pain.

Down the forest path crept a military-green, heavily-armoured vehicle on six thick black wheels.

“BTR-152,” North Hamgyong muttered in admiration.

“Shh,” North hissed.

But it was an impressive vehicle. They had only recently gone into production, and were mostly being exported to the Warsaw Pact countries right now. North wanted one.

For the army. Not himself.

The BTR couldn’t pull all the way into the clearing, blocked by the chest China had brought. It stopped, the engine cutting, and the person barely visible behind one of the small windows climbed out of the driver’s seat, unfolding his impressive stature from inside the cramped space in a way that always brought North a small amount of pleasure because of how ridiculous he looked doing it.

Then CCCP stood at his full height before them, reaching back into the truck to grab his furry brown ushanka and set it on his head, despite it being high summer, the same way he wore his long brown coat over a sweater that was only slightly thinner in response to the heat, red this time.

Good. He hadn’t worn his uniform. He never had for the trusteeship visits, but North had been worried the war might change that. The man’s size was enough, he didn’t need to see him in the peaked cap and formal uniform Kangwon had described.

CCCP’s single eye went right to him, the stern lines of his face briefly softening, then to China. Despite the man saying he didn’t know he was staying here, he didn’t look surprised to see him.

“Sons,” he greeted, his deep voice like summer thunder.

North heard North Hamgyong *‘tch,’* and tapped his finger against his wrist, signalling him to shut up, though he didn’t like the moniker either.

“Comrade.” China gave North a mischievous glance before stepping forward, swishing for CCCP.

He opened his arms willingly as the Soviet held his out, and they met in that irritating hug the Chinese man had forced on North when they first met, pressing their bodies against each other’s sides,

left, right.

North tensed. China stood on his tiptoes, tilting his head up-

Then he met CCCP in the middle for the third and final hug, his cheek against his broad chest due to their height differences. He gave North an amused look over his shoulder, and the Korean hid a grimace.

CCCP broke the more formal hug by patting China on the back with one of his large hands, something the Chinese man didn't seem bothered by.

Hadn't China said they had only met in person once? Yet he didn't seem to have any problem giving or receiving the embrace.

Then again, he had hugged North the first time they met. Meeting twice was probably grounds for swearing a blood oath for him.

He wondered if he had hugged South when they met.

China stepped away after a long moment. Even though they hadn't touched lips, North debated exiling them both from his country anyway.

"Comrade CCCP," he greeted, fixing his face as the Soviet looked back at him.

He made no effort to approach, forcing the large man to come to him.

"Son," the Soviet greeted, as warm as the sun beating down from the sky, though his face was still severe.

He experimentally moved his arms slightly away from his body, and North tensed, letting him know that a greeting hug was still not appreciated.

By the end of the meeting, he wouldn't have a choice, and would be pulled into an embrace before he could fight it. But the Soviet's sense of propriety hadn't been worn down yet, so he stopped a safe distance (but still too close) away from him.

Ssi-bal, he hated the way he *towered.*

"It is good to see you," CCCP said, his eye flicking over North in a familiar way that put his hackles up. "I am glad to see you are well."

He could at least still act it.

"Your message was too last minute," North said coldly. "We agreed I would always be informed of any intention to visit a week in advance."

He could turn down the visits now, as he had been able to since 1948. But he couldn't if he didn't have time. Just because he hadn't rejected any yet didn't mean he wanted to accept every one.

"I am sorry," CCCP apologized. "I did not want there to be any chance of my visit being leaked. If America knew I was here, he would surely target your city and any roads I could take in an effort to draw me into war with him. I did not want to risk your people's safety any further."

Ssi-bal. It was a good response. Now North couldn't complain without seeming unreasonable. But he still wasn't going to thank him for it.

"This is the last time it happens," he ordered, conscious of his provinces behind him.

He hadn't wanted them here, but he needed to show the Soviet that they were all still alive and… functioning. And presenting a united front.

The man dipped his head. "Hopefully so. With luck, this war will be over next year, and I may visit freely."

Luck wouldn't stop America from bombing them.

"Not freely," North said scathingly. "That is the *point* of writing ahead. So I can decline it."

And he *was* going to decline the next one now.

“Aiya, he’s such a pedant, isn’t he?” China asked, walking over to stand next to them, ignoring North’s glare as his shoulder brushed CCCP’s burly arm.

“You two have been becoming acquainted?” the Soviet asked.

North held his tongue for a second, seeing what China would say. This was his lie.

“You could say that,” his comrade said. “We’ve been exchanging letters, you know. Though I’ve always been of the opinion that you need to meet someone in person to truly get to know them.”

“We have been becoming acquainted,” North said flatly.

He tapped his finger rapidly against his wrist, telling his provinces not to ask questions.

He had thought the Soviet had known what China was doing. He knew people like Yakov Malik, charged with voting for his innocence at the UN trial wouldn’t have, but he thought CCCP would.

Then again, when would China have told him? Their one time meeting had been before the war, and he wouldn’t have risked writing a letter or sending any sort of communication, just like North and his leadership had never mentioned China’s presence here in theirs.

“That is good.” CCCP sounded pleased. “It is good for all the democratic nations in the world to be family.”

North twitched at the word, and China said, “Aside from Yugoslavia, yes?”

A stormcloud passed over the Soviet’s face. “That is not my decision. He would be family if he would set aside his useless antagonism and stop cozying up to the American.”

“How is Comrade Stalin?” North cut in.

The Socialist infighting annoyed him. Korea and Yugoslavia should

have nothing but warm relations, but the Countryhuman refused to be entirely against the war being waged against North's people solely because CCCP was. He didn't want to be dragged into someone else's problems any more than he already had been.

CCCP had sobered at his question in a way that made him tense. "He works himself too hard, no matter if I tell him he is supposed to be taking a break for his health."

Another thing they couldn't talk about over mail, and public information was understandably kept quiet, but the Soviet had mentioned before the war that his comrade had been having health issues.

"It is declining," he said heavily.

North could hear the sorrow under his usually stony voice. Joseph Stalin was seventy-three. Even if his health recovered after this, he wouldn't be around much longer.

He knew the Soviet had been forced to watch Lenin waste away after his strokes. He could… He could admit it grieved him that his comrade would have to watch it happen again.

And it tightened his own chest with panic. The idea of a once fiery man fading away as his body turned against him…

It was their goal to create a world where people died of old age, withering in bed surrounded by their loved ones, he tried to remind himself, as he had with Song Dong-nyo. Countless revolutionaries had died young, and even if they had gone out in glory, they all would have preferred to *live* with glory, to survive the war and live to an old age, and die in a free country. Joseph Stalin had been a great man that accomplished much, and would get to die at the side of the country he had spent his life fighting for. Every Communist should be so lucky.

It didn't make North feel any better. He wanted to see his General.

"I'm sorry," he made himself say. "Tell him Comrade Korea sends his regards."

“Ayuh!” Hae burst out. “Tell him we hope he gets better soon!”

North glared at her as she clapped a hand over her mouth, and CCCP nodded.

“He will not appreciate me sharing it with you,” he admitted. “But I will. Do not tell this information to anyone.”

“Are you sure you should be telling *us?”* China asked, tipping his head.

CCCP patted the top of his hat. “I trust you will not share it with our enemies.”

No. But North *would* share it with his Premier. They had to start preparing for any shifts in policy a change in Soviet leadership could bring. Along with China, they were their biggest trading partner, and the number one source of materiel support in this war. If any of that could change, they would need to be prepared.

“My lips are sealed,” China agreed with him, and North could tell that he planned to tell his leadership as well.

“Good.” CCCP’s voice froze over again. “Let us not talk of unchangeable matters. It is Korea’s Liberation Day. And I have brought gifts.”

The Korean’s teeth ground. “We do not need your charity.”

He could feel the provinces staring at him.

“It is a gift, son.”

“I’ve heard he’s unfamiliar with those,” China chimed in, earning another glare from North.

“I *know* what a *gift* is,” he ground out. “I just don’t want any.”

He could… tolerate them on his Foundation Day, so long as his people stuck to letters and art, like the boy last year, whose artwork was another aching memento. If it was for his people’s benefit, he could accept them. And he could also tolerate the knife from China,

considering he'd given it to him selfishly. Even if it wasn't his birthday, so long as others saw it as that, a gift was just a gift. He supposed. But on his Liberation Day, a day for his people and country, not him, it was hard to not see something from another Countryhuman as a bribe. Or worse- pity.

"You will take them," CCCP said amicably, striding for the truck.

North bristled at the order, intent on never taking anything from him again, but before he could snap, he heard SH click her tongue. He snapped his head back.

She looked at him with round eyes, along with some of the others. Hae's were the roundest.

'Please?'

'No,' he glared.

SH's eyes flickered to Hae for the slightest second, becoming less light-hearted. *'Please.'*

North grit his teeth, turning back to see CCCP pulling what he had expected from the passenger seat- a canning box packed with jars of pickles and dark jam separated by thin dividers. North knew the one under it would be filled with cans of sprats, the shiny pink tubes the Soviets called kolbasa, dried fruit blocks, and maybe even the weird sweet blood bars that Hae liked too much. Army fare designed to give as many calories as it could and last as long as possible. The same as he had brought on his first visit after the Division, before the food issues had been resolved.

CCCP was already heading for the cooking area with purpose, so North said grudgingly, "Fine. I'll take them."

He needed to keep his provinces fed.

The Soviet set the boxes on some of the log seats they had, making sure they were in the shade.

"You will," he confirmed, making North's teeth grit again. "You are working hard. You must eat well. Keep these cool and they will

last for some time."

The dug-outs would be good for storing food. If he gave some of the canned goods away, it could give a few of his people a week or so of relief. At least those his provinces fed on the weekends. The leftovers, along with Hae's garden and the rations, should be enough for their unit.

Well, no. They wouldn't. But it would have to do.

CCCP returned. "I can assume the sausages I sent previously did not go to who I intended."

"We received them," North said vaguely, and thankfully Chagang didn't elaborate.

"I would like you to eat at least one thing from what I have brought personally."

"I will."

"I haven't known him very long," China leaned up to stage-whisper into CCCP's 'ear.' "But I think our comrade is lying."

"I am not," North lied.

He peeked over his shoulder, seeing Hae's eyes fixed on the tops of the pickle jars, practically drooling. SH gave him a grateful look.

North averted his eye.

It was necessary to keep at least some of the goods. His provinces had never truly complained all those long years of starvation during the Occupation, when the food situation was much worse. But the years after the war had let them forget what hunger was, proven by Hae's idiotic stunt with the clams. Even though they hadn't said anything about it in months, he knew they had to be hungry. He didn't want their empty stomachs to make their wills start wavering.

Food would keep them loyal.

“Thank you,” he said grudgingly to CCCP.

Behind the Soviet, China’s thin brows shot up. North ignored him.

“You are welcome.” CCCP placed a hand on his shoulder. “Anything I can do for my son’s war effort. I am sorry I cannot do more.”

North tried not to twitch at the word again. “The assistance you have offered so far is enough. Korea can handle this on our own.”

“Not so alone,” China hummed. He smiled at CCCP in a conspiratorial way that made North bristle. “Should we give him our other present now?”

North tensed, hand moving subconsciously for his pistol.

China caught the movement. “Aiya, about to point a gun at an ally during our first meeting? Our correspondences didn’t give me that impression of you.”

He was enjoying this too much.

“What present?” North asked, not entirely abandoning his stance.

“You didn’t think I came all this way just to congratulate you on your Liberation Day, did you?” China asked, moving for that big chest. “You’re at war, you know. And while it’s okay for a Countryhuman to pay a day visit, so long as they don’t spend the night, that would still be far too much of a risk, considering the accusations America has been levering against me. And why would I risk my nation by coming here for no good reason?”

Enjoying this *far* too much.

“I came to help our comrade give you a joint gift. Something to lift your spirits a little in these trying times.”

China went behind the chest, bending to unlatch the lid, straightening as he lifted it, exposing the contents.

“Qiangqiang,” he chimed, a self-satisfied smile on his face.

North edged closer. Inside the large chest was what looked like… paper.

Tentatively, he reached out to pick one up, finding it was a thin, folded sheet. Inside were Chinese characters, written with the sort of careful, mechanical hand North knew belonged to someone that was just learning how to write.

'Comrade Korea, real glad you're giving those paper tigers what for. I'd come fight for you myself if the Japs hadn't taken my leg. As it stands (and I don't) wish you good luck and keep kicking Yankee ass! -Wu Jianwei, peasant from Taotian Village, Fujian'

North blinked dumbly at the paper, turning it over like he would find an explanation on the other side. "A letter?"

"En." China smiled as CCCP plunked a heavy cardboard box from the back of the BTR on the ground next to them.

"I had been gathering letters from around my country to send to you for this anniversary," the Soviet said. "I was surprised when China wrote to me last month to ask that I do what I was already doing."

"Luckily I had the idea myself," the Chinese man sniffed. "Otherwise you would've shown me up."

North didn't pay attention to them, blinking at the papers burgeoning from the chest, and those neatly packed into the box CCCP had opened.

"These are all letters?"

"For you," China told him. "From all across China and the Soviet Union. And a handful of other nations, if our Soviet comrade managed to accomplish what I asked."

"I did," CCCP confirmed. "As I am sure you remember, on my Comrade Stalin's seventieth birthday, the international proletariat came together to send him gifts and correspondences. I went through those same channels this year to receive some for you."

“You’re looking at well-wishes from around the world,” China said, sweeping his hand at the hundreds of letters that had to be there. “Congratulations, apologies, thanks, cheers.”

He looked North in the eye. “All for Korea.”

North felt his throat close as he reached into CCCP’s box, coming out with a letter from a man at the Gorky Automobile Plant in the Russian SFSR, hoping North’s army was getting good use out of the BTR-40s they had sold them. Another was from a woman in China’s Hunan Province, fretting over if he was eating enough. Another was in a language he couldn’t read, but had a sketch of his flag crossed against that of Peru at the bottom, coloured with some sort of red pigment so he could tell that was what it was.

“I did not have time to have all of them translated,” CCCP said regretfully. “But I wanted to include them regardless.”

North stared at the Peruvian flag. Peru was currently under a right-wing regime that had already massacred and imprisoned thousands of Communists. Even if that wasn’t what the person who had drawn that flag was, even sending this letter to CCCP for him would have been dangerous.

He pulled more out, eye flicking over the ones he could understand and the ones he couldn’t, one after another. From Poland, from the Turkmeni SSR, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. From people who had been through their own struggles for liberation and were going through them. Congratulating him for holding out for so long against America, urging him to keep fighting, telling him he and his people were beacons of hope for revolutionaries across the world.

“Korea?” SH said from far away. “Can we see?”

“…Yes,” he managed after a moment, and his provinces swarmed the letters, picking some out for themselves.

South Hamgyong found one in Mandarin, her eyes shining as she worked through it. Chagang picked up a small scrap with characters crammed onto it, but looked more at his cousins than at the words.

Hwang chose a Russian letter, reading part out loud to North Hamgyong, who *'tch'*ed and looked away.

Hae rummaged around, coming up with one written in Choson'gul, beaming as she read it.

"Look, Korea!" She shoved the cheap paper in his face. "This guy says he's from the K-Ka-ja-khu Soviet Socialist Republic! He learned Korean just to write and tell us we're doin' a good job!"

North opened his mouth, then closed it, not reaching for another letter, just looking at the three he was holding. A Chinese peasant, a Russian worker, and someone who could have been anyone, but was risking their life to write to Korea. To…

"We even received a few from the United States," CCCP said, reaching into his coat. "And one that came with a specific recipient. Kangwon."

North jerked over to see his province blink, lowering the Mandarin letter he'd been reading.

"Me?" He looked confused, relaxing his Countryhuman. When he looked at him, asking permission, he nodded.

Kangwon took the letter he was offered, one in a proper envelope with a stamp from 'Mississippi.' His name was on the front in English letters. He opened it and his eyes widened, scanning the foreign words.

"It's from Jepp," he said, sounding stunned. "The American I helped in Taejon."

"The one you had me search the camps for?" Hwang asked, leaning over his shoulder and adjusting his glasses.

"Yeah. He…" Kangwon read more, lips moving as he sounded the English words out. "I think he says he was in the Pyongyang hospital camp when the American army took it over. He got medically discharged and sent home. He's alive."

The words were filled with equal disbelief and relief. He pulled

something out of the letter, showing it to them.

It was a sepia-toned photograph of a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned man in a suit, standing in front of a rose bush with his arm around a plump woman in a white flower-patterned dress, tightly curled hair pulled back into a bun, her warm smile a white crescent on her face. In her arms was a baby.

"Guess they tried hard enough," Kangwon murmured, smiling crookedly as he kept reading through the letter.

Part of North wanted to snatch it from him before whatever the foreign man had written him could undo his progress.

But he didn't. He really… He really didn't want his province to feel the same way about foreigners as he did. He didn't want him to mistrust all of them, just like he didn't want North Pyongan constantly on the lookout for another Pak Chae-eun. He just needed them to. He needed them to be safe.

He let him keep the letter.

"If you root around in there enough, you'll find the letters from my provinces," China told South Pyongan, hunting through the chest. "They should all be bound together. Hebei, Shaanxi, Yunnan, Xinjiang, Tibet- I'm officially allowed to correspond with him now, so don't worry about the paper trail- and the other assorted sundry."

"I brought some from my own provinces and republics," CCCP said, pulling a large sheet from his coat and holding it out to North.

He didn't take it, but SH did, snatching it, her eyes lighting up.

"This is so nice," she said, slightly choked. "Korea, look."

North was forced to.

The paper had been covered in words arranged to look like his flag, blue inked borders at the bottom and top, red ink making up the band and the star with negative space in between to make the white. The handwriting ranged from childish and scribbly to

flowing and refined, belonging to CCCP's younger republics and older oblasts, krais, and other subdivisions, and was in more languages than North had ever seen. The Cyrillic of Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Uzbek, and many more, the flowing script he recognized as Georgian, several that had to be Baltic, Yakut, even Korean, likely written by Primorsky Krai. And dozens more he couldn't identify.

It looked like there were translations on the back, but North didn't want to read them. It looked like they were all just variations of the ones he could.

'Do your best!'

'Roshka says hi! And beat the American pig up!'

'Stay strong, comrade!'

'I hope you win.'

"My children each wanted to write their own letter," CCCP said with the proud twinge he always had when talking about them. "But I had them make this to save space."

North stared at the center of the star, where *'Good luck, Korea!'* was written. He felt the inane urge to tell CCCP that writing someone's name in red ink meant that they were going to die.

"But Belarus insisted I let her make her own as well." He took another paper from his coat.

North didn't take this one either. SH did.

"Your daughter made this?" She sounded touched.

"Yes," CCCP said fondly. "She is my little People's Artist. I have told her that one of Korea's provinces is an artist as well. She would enjoy meeting you one day."

SH's lips trembled as she gazed down at the drawing, the shine in her eyes turning to a glisten as she held her hand over her mouth.

North tried not to look. It was on the same side as his eyepatch, so it should be easy. But he could still see what was drawn.

Him, dressed in a rudimentary uniform, holding hands with CCCP on one side and a little girl in the white shirt and red ascot of the Soviet Young Pioneers on the other, under a cloudless blue sky and yellow sun. Her green, red, and white flag said she was the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, and their figures were helpfully labelled, *'Карэя, Тата, Я.'*

They were all smiling. Even 'Карэя,' though North didn't think he could make the expression if he tried.

'Мір, зямля і хлеб!' read the words under their feet. Peace, land, and bread.

"Korea." SH's voice was thick. "Can I keep this?"

He wanted to snap at her not to cry in front of the other countries. Instead he stiffly nodded, and she smiled, holding the drawing close to her chest as tears trembled on her lashes.

His provinces were all similarly affected. Hwang's glasses misted over as he read a letter from a Filipino revolutionary writing in crude Mandarin, hoping they could read it so that they could know she wished both their countries could be free from America; South Pyongan was grinning as North Pyongan read her one from a Tibetan serf, learning how to read now that the peaceful liberation of Tibet was underway, but still needing a PLA soldier to scribe for him, hoping the PVA could help do the same for Korea; Hae was bouncing as she excitedly showed a message from a Korean child in Liaoxi's province promising he would come home to fight one day to Chagang; Kangwon shook slightly as he read another letter from an English speaker, struggling through it, the letter from the man whose life he'd saved clutched tightly in his other hand; and even North Hamgyong held a Korean letter, penned by one of their countrymen that the unjust Sam Francisco Treaty had made stateless last year, taken away to Japan during the Occupation and still unable to come home, his jaw feathering as he read through it.

CCCP looked pleased, his eye glowing as he watched them.

He should. For these letters to have gotten here only a month after China suggested this, a lot of these people would have had to write them right away. They had truly wanted Korea to receive them. It was a unique show of solidarity, one that was only possible between those fighting for a better world, those in the democratic nations and those trapped in countries like America and Peru alike.

One of the letters Kangwon had set down lay open on top of the cardboard box. North could just decipher a scrap of the English.

'-sorry my country is doing this to you. But I want you to know Korea is showing workers all around the world that we have a chance. Your country is an inspiration to all of us.'

North averted his eye, finding China watching him, smile muted. The man tipped his head at him, asking a silent question.

He looked away.

"Hey, is this…?" Kangwon's eyebrows went up as he tried to read the Russian under an Arabic letter, written on better parchment than most. "Is this from Palestine?"

North jerked over, snatching the paper from his hands and going over the Cyrillic characters, not even attempting the Arabic ones.

It was a long letter, but his eye settled on the last few lines.

'Those who walk with evil will never win. Allah will see both Palestine and Korea free, by our own hands. Until then, do not let our oppressors bow your head, and may every year find you well-being, friend.'

It was signed 'Palestine' twice, by the one under Egyptian control and the one annexed by Jordan, both of them once ruled over by the British, and now having their homeland stolen from them by Israeli settlers, their people being driven from land they had tended for years, or being massacred and buried under it. Just like North's people, but with no State to stand for them, the way it had been under Japan.

"Other Countryhumans sent letters?" he said after a moment, passing Palestine's back to Kangwon so Hwang could read it for

him.

It wasn't abnormal to receive well-wishes on this day. But they came through official channels, not personal ones. The only personal letter North had ever received was from CCCP during the Occupation.

“Several.” CCCP nodded to his box. “The true Vietnam and our bloc. And there are a few that I find suspect.”

China plucked the one the Soviet chose from his hand. It was unsigned.

“Hm.” He made a considering noise. “Tagalog. Though I’m afraid I can’t read it.”

“I will attempt to get more of them translated into Korean and Russia, or Mandarin if possible,” CCCP said to North. “Or English, since Hwang can read it so well.”

The Korean looked at the overflowing letters. Part of him told him that there wasn’t any way all of these were well-wishes for him. That CCCP was lying, translating them as he saw fit, knowing North wouldn’t be able to read him, snickering to himself that he could ever believe this many people would give a damn about his country.

But even if only the ones he could read directly were sincere… It was a lot. Hundreds, not counting the messages signed by several people in order to save paper and money. One was even signed from an entire Chinese village, one of those just across the border from the Supung Dam, congratulating their shared work teams for fixing it. And him.

“And there are more letters coming,” CCCP said. “Even as I departed for your country, more were being placed on my desk.”

“I had to leave three chests behind,” China said competitively. “I’m sure by the time I return home, I’ll have five more from my people alone.”

CCCP gave the man a fond look, then pulled a last letter from his

coat. “I have one more whose sender insisted I give it to you personally.”

North didn’t want to take it. His arm was stiff as he did, opening the crisp envelope with the Berlin postage stamp- a dove perched on a hammer surrounded by laurels.

It had been carefully written in Russian, with pencil, many smudges showing where mistakes had been erased.

‘Greetings from the German Democratic Republic! I know we’ve written before to establish relations, and on our holidays, but I wanted to send something more personal this time. Congratulations on your Liberation Day, and for holding out against America for so long. I know how annoying him and people that you have to deal with that are being influenced by him can be. My people tell me living through his bombing is even worse. I’ve seen the aftermath at least, and how hard it is to rebuild. I want you to know that when it comes time for Korea to, East Germany stands ready to help.
I don’t have anything too important to say. I just wanted to tell you that your delegation at the Youth Festival for Peace and Friendship last year was impressive, and that-‘

There were more smudges than the other lines here, the ghost of words written and erased over and over again.

‘I know what it’s like to be split. And I hope one day Korea and Germany can meet when we’re both Reunified.

-East (for now)

Also Father- stop reading over Comrade Korea’s shoulder, you helped edit this, you are aware of what it says.’

CCCP and China both leaned back as North lowered the letter.

‘I know what it’s like to be split.’

But North *wasn’t* split. He had been Divided. East Germany had been formed one nation partitioned into two. North had been formed the second Countryhuman of one unified country. His brother wasn’t someone who had been torn away from him soon

after they existed, only met at tense meetings, only known by his public face, his expression set by America before they had ever gotten to know each other. South was the person he had been with every day for nine years, who he had known for decades, who sang to him when he was hurt and helped him drink when he couldn't and pressed his back to his at night. Who he knew never would have burned Seoul or taken his eye before America had gotten his talons into him.

He could never know, never *understand* what it was like. East Germany was missing half of his country. North was missing his brother.

He shouldn't feel this way. He shouldn't feel this way about any of it. It was wrong. Hundreds of people, maybe a thousand, from all across the world had written to his country, struggling to learn languages they didn't know and scrounging money to pay for postage to the Soviet Union and Beijing, risking their lives and reputations just so Korea would know that the eyes of the world were on them, that they weren't on their own. He should feel the way his provinces did, the way he had felt back when CCCP had sent that first letter, solely appreciative, hopeful, like his people weren't alone in this fight.

But he could still hear the droning of the planes.

"East is looking forward to meeting you," CCCP said, using the directional name for Germany, unlike how he did for North.

"Tell Comrade Germany that I'm looking forward to meeting him, too."

His voice sounded normal. China still looked at him. And maybe SH and Kangwon did, too.

"Thank you for these," North said, trying to sound more forceful, directing the words solely at CCCP. "Tell those you can that Korea is grateful as well."

He would try and write back to East Germany and the Palestines, and the other countries that had written. The ones it would be safe

to. He would think of something to say that sounded like something he should.

“And does China get any thanks in there?” China asked, slinking to CCCP’s side.

“Tell your people Korea is very appreciative.”

China clicked his tongue.

“But we should put them away.” North kept his eye off the slew of solidarity. “I need to attend the city meeting with my Premier, and listen to his broadcast with my people. And Comrade CCCP and I need to take this opportunity to discuss our relations. I can read through them later.”

He would let his provinces do it. They could keep them in their rooms, to read to raise their morale, since it seemed to work for them.

He carefully folded the three he'd read, placing them back in the chest.

“I can carry these inside for you, son,” CCCP volunteered.

North went to tell him he could do it himself, before remembering all the times he had picked up rubble while rebuilding and his sides had ruptured like stuffed pork stomach. He had spent too long making sure his bandages were perfect this morning to get more blood on them now.

He let the Soviet handle the box he’d brought, directing North Hamgyong and Chagang to carry the chest (which China looked pleased by). North picked up the boxes of food, fending off SH to carry them into the air raid shelter.

He tried not to look down at the vibrant emerald and deep purple of the pickles and jam. His stone sat heavy in his pocket.

China had followed, unobtrusively placing himself between the door to their bedroom and CCCP, forcing the Soviet and the provinces to set their cargo on the hallway floor, crowding it. North

almost snapped at him before realizing they couldn't let the other man see the second bedroll in there, or China's collection of tech that he was still fiddling with even now that his handheld radios were finished. CCCP knew North didn't have any hobbies like that. Or at all.

"I'll organize everything later," he said, though it itched at him not to do it now. "Let's head into the city. Go mingle with our people and meet up at Moranbong Theatre later," he ordered his provinces.

The others headed for the GAZ, but SH and Kangwon lingered.

"Korea…"

"Go," he commanded, and they did.

Commands. South hadn't released the southern provinces from them. In the month between the false Constitution Day and now, they hadn't left their prisons.

Rhee's 'presidential' inauguration would be today. North wondered if his provinces would be trapped inside, imprisoned on the day of their Liberation, or if they would be forced to attend, to stand in a stiff row with fake smiles on their faces, swearing in a puppet as American planes flew overhead, in the same place they had once received the news that Japan had surrendered, that they were now free. He didn't know which was worse. Both of them. All of this.

'Everything.'

CCCP patted his shoulder as he passed, lightly. Too lightly. He had felt the pad of bandages that swathed it the last time. He knew that the only reason North was filling out his uniform was because he was suffocating under layers of them.

The Soviet climbed into his BTR, waiting for China to get in. But the Chinese country stopped North, subtly turning them so that neither vehicle could see their faces.

He opened his mouth, about to say something, and North braced

himself. Then his eyes flicked in CCCP's direction.

"I'm looking forward to your speech," he said, and North got the sense it hadn't been what he had been going to say. "I was disappointed I had to miss last year's."

Then he flitted off, joining CCCP in his truck. The Soviet started the engine, rolling down the path so the GAZ could get out.

North, conscious of his provinces' eyes on him, didn't linger. He climbed into the driver's seat, pain pulsing in his haunches as he sat on the seat, bent his legs, wrapped his fingers around the wheel.

"Liberation Day time!" Hae sang from next to him as they passed under the trees. He'd been too focused on the knives shooting up his spine to realize she had taken the passenger seat.

"Day off!" South Pyongan cheered, drumming the side of the truck. "Kinda sorta. Not really."

"I hope we're not just leaving Comrades Liaoxi and Liaotung," North Pyongan fretted.

"Nah, they've got the Jeep."

"Make sure not to divulge their presence here to Comrade CCCP," Hwang advised. "It might give away Comrade China's ruse."

"'Ruse?' Who are you- South Chungcheong?"

"I don't believe I insulted SH even once."

"Make sure you don't get your uniforms too dirty today," SH told them. "We'll be in the light tonight if there's no raids."

"They wouldn't be able to see my uniform if I was wearing my anti-germ suit," South Pyongan muttered.

"Korea said not today," SH scolded. "We need to look good."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," her cousin preened. "We *are* 'inspirations to the world' or whatever."

Despite her flippancy and discomfort at not wearing her protective gear, she sounded undeniably proud.

North throttled the steering wheel as the pale light on the other side of the woods came through his windshield. His provinces' bodyguards were waiting, and so was CCCP's truck, letting him take the lead into the city.

"I can't believe everyone would do that for us," SH murmured, her words almost lost to the morning. "It's… nice."

"Ayuh!" Hae chirped, twisting in her seat to look back at them. "Everyone's cheerin' us on! That's why we're goin' to win the war an' send the Yankees packin', just like we sent 'Merica packin'! Everythin's goin' to be over by next Liberation Day, right Korea?"

"We are prepared to fight a protracted war or end this tomorrow," North parroted the words he and his General had been saying for a year now by rote. "It is up to the enemy."

"And we're goin' to make 'em pick the second one!"

"That's the spirit, Hae," South Pyongan said, kicking her legs up on North Pyongan. "Keep saying it every year, and one year you'll be right."

"Ah'm right *this* year," Hae declared confidently. "Korea said so."

He hadn't.

North swung his head to look out the passenger window, locking eyes with North Hamgyong as he did the same thing in the back.

His province's gaze pierced into him. North could see where the blisters escaped his bandages, starting to grow across his eyelid.

He stared back, then broke away, pressing harder on the gas, trying to outrun the stifling unease inside him.

He had a speech to give.

If you're wondering why Hae pronounces Kazakh(stan) so

weird it's because 1) she's never seen the Korean word before. And 2) Kazakhstan is 까자흐(스딴) in Korean. Which is something like Kkajaheu(seuddan) in romaji.

I think it's funny when people say 'My family fled Communism in North Korea before the Korean war because they were landlords who got targeted!!' And it's like, you weren't fleeing Socialism, let alone Communism. There isn't anything inherently Socialist about land reform. That was just the start of the democratic revolution. Your family was fleeing democracy. They got a taste and said 'Not for us, thanks.' 'Democratic? Yeah right, they stole over a 1000 acres from us.' Riiiiiight. Because your family was capable of working a thousand acres by hand. They took land whose harvests *your* family stole and gave it to the people that actually worked and owned it wwwww. Those families never lose their sense of entitlement, they just pass it down to their children. And those children resent that they never received the stolen wealth they 'should have,' even though their living conditions are still ten times better than those of the peasants whose lives they owned. This applies to a lot of places. You weren't fleeing Socialism- you were fleeing the loss of the privileges you enjoyed at the expense of others, and hoping you could keep exploiting them in the places you fled to. Die mad.

SH's burns are way more severe than this, but I can't draw burns. ㅠㅠ

Seven Years Separated

Seven was an enormously large number.

There were times it could be small. The number of divisions remaining in an army, the number of soldiers left of a twenty-two man platoon. The amount of buildings left standing or rice sacks in a granary.

But too often, it was terribly large. Seven years was one thousand one hundred and thirteen days spent caged in a prison shack like an animal. It was six hundred and twenty-two tallies, each one smaller and harder to make than the last, and three extra strokes, still with over a hundred to go. It was sneaking into Seoul alone with a tension that tightened every year, as he grew closer and closer to having spent longer without South than with.

Seven years was the time that had passed since they were Liberated, and he had been supposed to get his brother back.

North stood inside the doors of Moranbong Theatre, the voices outside seeping through, making him want to retreat back into the depths of the underground. It had been a mistake to think he could do this in the light.

Seven years ago he had stood in Busan, bathed in the light of the golden sun, and told his people that after thirty-six long years, longer, they were free.

And now he had to look them in the eyes and remind them that he had been wrong. He had to, because for seven years, he had left them to suffer alone.

North breathed in, his hollow stomach pushing his ribs into his burnt skin. He felt that aching cord inside him. Then he pushed open the doors.

Sunset light flooded the crowd. Oranges and golds and ambers

poured down from the western sky, illuminating the hundreds of people gathered near Moran Hill, before the crumbled theatre. Railway workers, the Rehabilitation Corps, Rubber Factory workers, and more, peasants and refugees and non-essential workers come down from the hills, allowed into the city to see their Countryhuman speak.

It was dangerous to gather so many in the open like this, especially on a holiday, when the bombs always fell harder. But North could feel them falling elsewhere, on the power plants and rail lines and frontline positions. And Pyongyang had already been destroyed. The buildings beyond his people, the debris some were sitting or standing on to see better, the factories and supply depots, hadn't been restored enough for America to bomb again so soon, not when his steel production wouldn't be back in full form yet.

It was a risk, but North had decided he needed to meet his people in the light while he still could, despite the marring on his chin. It saved electricity, and he didn't know how long it would be before the burns finally invaded his face, turning it into a death mask like his provinces'.

They were lined up on the bottom of the steps, looking up at him standing between the shattered pillars, their flag hanging over his head, swaying listlessly in the summer heat.

Were they judging him? Was that resentment he saw in the eyes looking out from the bandages and burns, knowing that whatever words he was about to say wouldn't make up for the fact that they still weren't free?

North tore his eye away.

"Comrades."

He had a microphone today, a row of them bristling from the podium he stood behind, casting his address out. It echoed off the columns and rubble, before being eaten by the still air.

All eyes had already been on him, voices hushed from the moment he stepped out into the shadow of what was left of the theatre.

They'd been waiting for him to arrive, and he could see the tension that left smooth faces and worn alike as he did.

In the future, no matter what happened, North would never let another Liberation Day pass without his people hearing from him in person.

"Today marks seven years since we cast off the chains of Japanese imperialism." North projected his voice, refusing to let his words be swallowed by the summer heat. "After thirty-six long years, our people shattered the talons clutched around our Peninsula and drove the Japanese back across the sea."

He could have said 'with the Red Army's help.' He knew CCCP was somewhere nearby, his large frame hidden behind debris, able to hear him. But his Premier had been grateful enough, both in the meeting and his broadcast. They hadn't *needed* the Soviets- they had only been there.

And North already had to modify his speech.

"Seven years ago, for the first time, Korea knew what it was to be free."

His chest squeezed, remembering the broadcast, Japan's bleak voice, the cries that filled the streets, not pain and terror for once, but joy, wandering through a city whose colours suddenly seemed brighter than any had ever looked, his people's eyes glowing as they looked up at him, an invisible weight lifting as he told them what they had been waiting decades, their entire lives, to hear.

And his brother, emerging from the crowd, his face filled with the same emotion North's was, like a ghost come to haunt him, but somehow real.

'I missed you.'

"We should have been free," he told his people, making an effort to fill the words with certainty instead of the frustration bubbling in his throat. "And we would have been, if it wasn't for America."

A murmur of discontentment rippled across the crowd. He caught

eyes lifting to the sky, and dragged them back down by raising his voice.

"Preaching that Korea needed 'guardianship,' he invited himself into our country, cut it in half, and refused to accept the Soviet proposals or the will of our people to Reunify."

'The Division would only be a few months.' He had been so stupid, so blind, even with two eyes. He had known what sort of country America was. He shouldn't have accepted the trusteeship, shouldn't have left South in Seoul, shouldn't have walked away again.

"He told us that we needed his guidance," North spat. "That without him, Korea would never recover from what had been done to us. But we *did.* Here in the north, we nationalized our factories, our banks and transportation. We freed women and peasants from slavery, put the land into the hands it belonged to, and destroyed the remnants of colonial lopsidedness left on us by Japan. The Soviets assisted us with trade and cooperation, but it was *our* hands that did the work, our workers that rushed to learn the skills denied to them for so long, to rebuild what the Japanese had razed, our peasants that tilled the lands and fed Korea's people, that carried out the Agrarian Reform, the first of its kind in Asia, and our intellectuals that unlearned what they had been taught by foreign powers and channelled their efforts into drafting laws and uprooting bureaucracy in the offices and schools, educating our youth the way they always deserved.

"It was *our* people, led by our Worker's Party, that created a truly people-first system for the first time in Korean history."

The words tasted bittersweet. The other half of Korea should have been by their side for that. *South* should have been by *his* side. He should have been there on March 5th, 1946, as the Law on Agrarian Reform was passed and the peasants took to the streets to celebrate finally owning the land they worked, and July 30th, when Korea's women had been freed from their bindings, and North had been pulled into their mass celebrations and drowned in colourful choson-ot and banners, he should have been there when they formed the Communist Party and passed the Labour Law and opened their university and held their first elections, standing

proudly at North's side, knowing each achievement meant they were another step closer to being one.

"But in the south, our countrymen were still in chains." How many times had he reminded his people here of that without it changing? "The peasants were still chained to the landlords, and *are* still chained to poverty. The 'reform' the Syngamn Rhee clique has launched is for the landlords, not them, *compensating* them for the years they spent exploiting our masses, turning them to capitalists and sending them into the cities to exploit workers, while our peasants still slave away, their harvests stolen from them for unjust taxes and paying off the land the puppet republic's 'government' bought.

"The women were still kept in concubinage, made to produce commodities for the capitalists while being denied their rights, and now forced to mobilize in the factories for Rhee's army, while being treated like cattle by American and reactionary soldiers."

From the bottom edge of his eye, he could see South Hamgyong's burnt face darken.

"The intellectuals whose minds should have been turned to moving our society forward were instead shackled to the old ways, wearing suits and horsehair hats alike as they left the old colonial laws untouched, using them to keep our people in chains, imprisoning hundreds of thousands whose only crime was desiring to see our country Reunified and *free."*

The hills of Taejon, covered in corpses, flashed across his mind's eye.

"And our workers were kept in chains, not using their labour for themselves or their country, but still breaking their backs for comprador capitalists and foreign masters, only no longer Japanese, but American, forced to work their mines on the land they 'inherited' from Japan, the land that should have been *ours."* North let the snarl into his voice, then restrained it.

"And it showed. The south could not develop as fast as we did, because our people's spirits were not in it. They yearned for the

same liberties we had here in the north. For all of the technicians and money America pumped into the south, all of his loans and companies, he *failed."*

And there was still victory in that, the same pulse of excitement as in 1948, when Rhee had declared his false republic. As furious as North had been, there had been a smug relief under it as he compared the two halves of their country, one that had started without even the single university Seoul had, with less land, less farmland, less people, and less foreign aid, and could see objectively that despite all odds, they had done better. His system had done better. Even budding Socialism had improved his people's lives more than feudalism or capitalism ever had. He had been right.

"America failed," he repeated, and despite everything, still savoured the words, something he could see reflected in South Pyongan's grin and more than a few blazing eyes in the audience. "We progressed far faster in the north, for *all* our people, not just a select few. We proved that Koreans didn't need foreigners to chart our course or build our country for us- the only thing we needed was a People's Korea. We proved him *wrong."*

He sobered, his voice going grim. "And he couldn't accept that. He had to destroy what we worked so hard to build."

He cast his hand out, circling the city behind the crowd, directing their eyes to scan the blackened rubble and flat skyline where sloped tile roofs and smokestacks had once stood, before drawing them back to him, not wanting to let them linger on the destruction for too long.

"Two years ago, he launched his attack with the Syngman Rhee puppet army, blaming their actions on us and using it as an excuse to bomb the base of our people's power before even officially joining the war."

'Korea, ah thought you said he wouldn't stick his mouth out.'

He had said it. He hadn't believed it.

"He has tried to destroy us," North bluntly announced. "He has

bombed every factory in the north into the ground." Almost the entire Light Metals complex at the end of July, almost hitting a POW camp with it. "He has targeted our peasants in the fields and drenched them in napalm. He has cut our rail lines, over and over, trying to stop the flow of lifeblood in our country, so that even when our people overcome all hardships to send materiel to the front and food to the cities, our trains cannot carry it.

"America has brought to bear every single weapon he can to make Korea crumble," North declared, knuckles tightening around the edge of the podium as his blood rose. "From napalm to white phosphorous to chemical weapons he swears to the world he isn't using, but that leave our soldiers blinded and maimed in ways no regular bomb can. Germ bombs dropped on us and our Chinese comrades to sicken our soldiers and peasants, to kill our livestock and rot our crops, to weaken us enough for him to make one last push. Blockading our coasts, starving our fishermen and preventing millions of tons of produce from reaching our markets, bribing saboteurs with food *he* has deprived them of to turn against their neighbours and sabotage our People's Army, holding our prisoners of war hostage, trying to force them to break, and to force us to accept them trampling international law and our human rights in order to sign peace.

"And he has failed this, too."

North knew it was dangerous to say. He knew America would be monitoring what he said the same way he monitored what he said. That his words could infuriate him, push him over the edge to bring even more force against his country.

There was one weapon, after all, that he hadn't yet used against Korea.

But he wasn't going to bite his tongue on praising his people just because a foreigner could see it as a taunt.

"When his napalm burns our villages to ash, our people move underground. When his plague insects come, we annihilate them. When his saboteurs act, we halt them. When he bombs our power plants and plunges our country into darkness, we fix them. And

when he tries to make our soldiers break, when he threatens them with death and sends them into the north as spies, they come willingly to set down their arms and return to the embrace of their country, knowing that the lies the enemy spews are false."

He nodded to Yun Jin-tae, standing in the sea of people with his little sister and father. The man raised his hand, saluting grimly back.

"And like us, the comrades they have left behind in the death camps in the south refused to break."

North took a subtle breath. This was too dark to make his people think about on Liberation Day, but he needed them to understand why they couldn't just let America get away with his 'voluntary repatriation.'

"Even now, as you stand in Pyongyang, free to celebrate the Liberation of our country from Japan, our countrymen are facing abuses in the American camps. Last year-"

After he had been driven back.

"-as our prisoners on Geoje Island marked our nation's Liberation, even in captivity, they were murdered for it. One hundred and twenty-five men and women cut down for celebrating their freedom from a country America tries to claim *he* defeated. The women's compounds invaded, our female comrades forced to bear indignities beyond imagining."

But the people before him could imagine it. Most of the crowd were women. They had faced it during the Japanese Occupation and the briefer American one. His civilians wrung their hands, and the militia and Chinese soldiers he'd invited gnashed their teeth. SH's eyes were closed, flickering behind her lids.

And North didn't have to imagine. He had read the reports. Even from the International Committee of the Red Cross, surely watering the atrocities down, they had made his blood boil.

"On the day we Liberated ourselves from Japan, the day Korea

should have-“

*‘Should have should have **should have’***

“-been free, over one hundred thousand of our soldiers and our Chinese comrades are imprisoned in the south of our country, made to slave away for the enemy, enduring abuses and tortures they never should have had to again.”

Abuses he had promised would end before this day two years ago.

“And Syngman Rhee, the traitor-puppet responsible for the death of hundreds and thousands of our countrymen on Jeju, in Taejon, in Suncheon and Yeosu, in Pyongyang, in- Seoul-“

‘잘못했어.’

“-is sworn into power again. Our people *know* he is a traitor to the nation, they know he is corrupt, another puppet to a foreign nation like the rest of his government that danced on Japan’s strings, but they were still forced to vote for him at gunpoint. The world knows what kind of man he is, what sort of government he runs. They know his crimes.”

They knew it all. Every Red Cross bulletin about his women being kept as pets by Yankee officers, his men tricked out of the camps and told they were going home only to be gunned down and tossed into the sea, every Women’s International Democratic Federation and International Association of Democratic Lawyers report about what the American soldiers and their puppets had done to the land and people they occupied.

And they didn’t care. And even the ones that said they did…

“Yet they call the south a democratic nation and label us as the aggressors, denying our calls for peace, denying our demands that they follow the laws they created. They watch a *murderer* force his way into power again because they know he will keep Korea a colony.”

North bit down, stopping his tongue from running away. That wasn’t what today was about.

“But our southern kin are still fighting.” His people’s were anyway. “Thousands refused to vote, or have been targeted by Rhee’s police for protesting the trickery and violence he used to win. And our brave southern guerrillas are still holding on in the rear, sabotaging the enemy where they can.”

He wasn't supposed to talk too much about what their people in the south were facing. Those here needed to wholeheartedly support an armistice. They needed the war to end, not to be unable to bear leaving the rest of their nation to suffer for even a moment longer, or making peace with those who were doing it.

But still he said, “They are waiting for us-“ ***‘Me.’*** “-to Liberate our country once and for all, so that *all* of Korea can share in the future we are creating.”

He could feel his Premier's eyes on him from the edge of the crowd. He didn’t look.

“They haven’t broken,” North said firmly. “Our guerrillas and peasants and workers and women and soldiers haven’t broken. *Korea* has not broken.”

He almost raised his chin, but stopped himself, remembering the burns.

“And we *never* will,” he fiercely decreed, nails scratching at the podium. “We will not break. America can burn every inch of our country, but no matter how much he destroys, he will never destroy *us.* Because the base of our people’s power isn’t our factories or our fields, it isn’t our assembly halls or rail lines- it is our people.”

North made himself let go of the podium, pain surging through his arms as he raised them to envelope the hundreds of people spread both before him, and the millions across all their country.

“You are Korea’s power,” he told them. “And no matter how hard he tries, no matter how hard *any* of our enemies try, they will never destroy the Korean people!”

A woman in the front surged up on her toes, a cry she couldn’t

hold back leaving her throat, instinctively echoed by everyone around her, a roar that moved out form her epicentre like the wave of force from a bomb. His provinces cheered, too, all except North Hamgyong. He bared his teeth, bowing his head.

North lowered his arms, letting them cheer, reluctant for this next part.

When his people had quieted, he said, “And our power also comes from our ties with the other democratic nations of the world. From all their unerring assistance and solidarity.”

He tried to keep his voice firm, to not let it show how much he begrudged the words.

He hadn’t been planning on saying anything about this, beyond thanking China’s soldiers, and tossing out some brief praise for CCCP, once he had heard he was coming. He didn’t want to. His Premier had said more than enough earlier.

‘The sympathy, support, and concern of all progressive people are focused on the Korean people. Now, all honest people in the world assist the Korean people with all sincerity in the battle for the freedom, honour, and independence of their country.’

Sincerity didn’t help when their country was in ashes around them.

He knew that was unfair. The other Socialist nations *had* been helping, sending things far more useful than letters. CCCP had sent him fifty thousand tons of flour before sowing this spring, helping alleviate the starvation brought by winter until their harvests could begin. Mongolia had sent a hundred thousand horses, cows, pigs, and other livestock, along with thousands of tons of provisions. China had brought over even more, food and cleaning chemicals and daily necessities, and the other nations had sent the medicine and clothes his people needed by the wagon, all things his Premier had reminded him about in the meeting earlier. And even if North could say that China only helped because he was part of this war and CCCP only helped because he wanted to bribe him to join his Union, and they had all only helped because they wanted to tack

even more zeroes onto the amount he owed them, to use them as links in the chain to leash Korea…

They had been donations. For all he would owe China and CCCP, he didn't owe any of them for that. And even if the other nations had only done it to make him *feel* like he owed them, the Chinese country and Soviet should both know by now that he wouldn't.

He wasn't ungrateful. He wasn't. He had approved of all the praise his Premier had put in his speeches, and he was telling his people that they should be grateful now, even if he could only half-listen to the words leaving his lips or else his voice might tighten.

But he just… He didn't know. He didn't want their pity, he shouldn't need their donations. He would have rejected them if it wasn't for his people's sake.

And the letters…

Something else his Premier had said flitted through his mind, as he lauded all their allies had done for them.

'The Korean people, arms in hand, are defending the freedom and independence of their country- they are not only Liberating their nation from the American barbarians, but also fighting for the peace of Asia and the rest of the world.'

Somehow those letters made all the aid seem less like a donation and more like… payment. North didn't know which was worse.

"We are not alone," he said, even though he felt small and isolated up between the broken pillars, with no sign of the countries whose peace he was fighting for to be seen. "We live in an unprecedented time. One where nations don't help each other solely for their own benefit or because they wish to profit off someone else's war."

Even if he didn't believe the words entirely, his people should.

"But because we share one goal- that of freedom, *true* freedom, for all the working people of the world. From the People's Republic of China to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the German Democratic Republic, to all those in nations still ravaged by

colonialism and unjust regimes- Palestine, the Philippines, Malaya, Iraq, Peru- Korea is a beacon of hope."

'Your country is an inspiration to all of us.'

Tension twisted in North's chest.

"We are proof that imperialism can't win, that even an outnumbered, overpowered force can grind a giant like the US Empire to a halt, send its Countryhuman fleeing back to his own country, and withstand the cannibals seeking to feed the entire world into the jaws of their bloodthirsty system."

Even if they shouldn't *have* to withstand. Even if he should have won. *Would* have if America hadn't decided Korea was a pawn in his self-decreed war against CCCP.

"That the people are powerful and that we can *win.*" North slammed his fist on the podium, letting it hurt. "That no matter what is done to us, *we will not break."*

Kim Il-sung watched his country from the side of his bodyguard, dressed in all white so he wouldn't stand out, dark eyes brimming with emotion. A thousand ri away, the newly reinaugurated Syngman Rhee dined at a banquet table with the men of his cabinet that hadn't been imprisoned, on a meal he couldn't afford on his salary alone. On the eastern front, two Korean soldiers were locked in a desperate embrace, writhing in the summer heat as blood and gunpowder drenched the air, each one trying to be the one that lived for at least a few more minutes, each one trying to pretend he didn't recognize the terrified eyes peering back at him from the other blood-smeared face.

"We will not bow."

The northern provinces stood rail-straight at the foot of the stairs, muscles quivering and white eyes shining with a light their Countryhuman wouldn't see even if he could bring himself to look at them. The heaviness and awful throbbing pain wouldn't be felt until the moment he stopped speaking. The southern provinces sat around a table burgeoning with meat and desserts and too much

liquor, not raising their heads as the foreign band played, and South Chungcheong snapped at a man that if he did not remove his hand, he would lose it, cursing herself and the country she followed for their foolishness over and over.

"We will not submit."

North's chest heaved with all the emotion he was trying to suppress, the pain and rage and grief, and the mixed resentment the letters the world had sent Korea had watered in him. South's shook with laughter as he joked with an army officer, letting him pour him another glass, trying to wash away that ache, and the knowledge that when the party was over, he would go home and cry on the floor.

"I know my people, and what you are capable of. *You* freed us from Japan, *you* founded our People's Korea. In five short years, you accomplished more than some countries achieve in decades." North's chest swelled with desperate love. "I know we can defeat America, too. Whether it is peace or war the enemy wants, we will give it to them, a thousand times over. We will force them to sign an armistice, just as we forced them back to Busan twice, just as we forced their Countryhuman to run away with his tail between his legs, the same way we drove Japan out of our country."

And even though North had tried to plan out his speech for once so he wouldn't say something like this, even though he knew in his heart that there would be no militarily Liberating their country, that when America's next offensive came they wouldn't be able to surge forward and drive them back to Busan, to Liberate South, only repulse them, dig their heels in to make sure the north stayed free, even though he knew that the nations arrayed against them had far more weapons, supplies, and people, stolen from across the world, and didn't care how many of their soldiers died in this war, only how much money it cost them, even if they did make America sign the armistice, it didn't mean the war would be over, even if that ultimate weapon was still hanging over their heads, the words still left his mouth.

"By this time next year, Korea will have peace."

He knew his provinces were glaring up at him, telling him he had said the same thing two years ago, and dozens of times since. He could feel South Chungcheong cursing him somewhere.

'We want everyone to be able to celebrate real Liberation Day as soon as possible,' Kangwon had said on that anniversary by the Raktong. And he had let them down, just like he had let their people down for nine years of his existence, like he was letting all the oppressed people's of the world down.

Just like he had let his brother down.

It couldn't stop him from adding, "I promise."

He didn't know if his people still believed him. He was afraid to look too closely at the sea of shining dark eyes and tremulous smiles, to find out if the tears were of hope or fear. Or pity.

North exhaled softly, then lifted his voice again.

"Long live the seventh anniversary of our victory over Japanese imperialism!"

Across the East Sea, a man watched with tired feline eyes from afar as his former subjects bowed before Yasukuni Shrine, honouring the fallen kami enshrined in it, and one who no longer was. Farther across it, America lounged in his king-sized bed, reading operations reports with one hand and winding the red hair of the woman sleeping next to him around the finger of the other, thinking she'd look a helluva lot better as a blonde.

"Long live our Korean People's Army! Long live our soldiers bravely resisting torture until the end!"

West of Panmunjom and south of Busan, soldiers raised their voices in song, defying the air strikes falling around them and the bayonets aimed at their prisons. In the crowd, Yun Jin-tae pulled Yun Jin-suk closer.

"Long live the brave soldiers of the Chinese People's Volunteers and the Red Army!"

Li Meihua made her way back from the fields, face flushed and sweat-soaked from rallying the peasants, a crimson pennant draped over her shoulder. Yao Song met her at the door, pressing kisses to her damp cheek as she laughed, trying to fend him off. Somewhere, a Chinese soldier lit the cigarette of a Korean peasant with his own, and the boy pulled from the frigid river visited the grave of the PVA man that had drowned to save him.

"Long live all the peace-loving nations and people of the world!"

A Japanese woman sheltered with a Russian war correspondent, watching the bombs that had driven them off the road fall over Korea, heart aching as she remembered watching them fall on her own country with her husband. Blood ran from a Puerto Rican man's nose as a fresh cocktail of narcotics was shot into his veins, head spinning as a man with a friendly face and no light in his eyes told him again what he was supposed to believe. Birds sang in the early hours as a black American woman prepared breakfast for her husband, and he prepared for his one-man war protest, conscious of the car that had been parked outside ever since he came home. At the same time and five thousand kilometres further south, a Peruvian woman jolted up as the door to her house was broken down, and uniformed men stormed into her bedroom.

In the shadows of a ruined house, China pulled his gaze away from Korea to look up at CCCP, observing his sober but proud expression, piercing deeper, before he was drawn back to the one across the audience, the unease he'd likely been one of the few capable of seeing now burned away by wildfire, replaced by a feral light.

His own eyes glowed.

"Long live the Worker's Party of Korea guiding us toward our shining future, and all those who have fought for it! Long live our People's Government!"

Kim Il-sung smiled to himself, thinking that as much as his country had changed, the look in his eye was the same he remembered from that fateful day in Pyongyang thirty-three years ago, the one that had stirred his heart more than any church hymn ever could. His country would have said the same of his.

The sun had slid down in the sky, rays curling around the edge of the ruined theatre, the golden light catching North's white uniform and turning him into a torch, brighter than the village homes burning north of Kosong that American reports would call a defense base.

North drew in a deep breath, and it felt good to *scream,* to finally howl loud enough to drown out the pressure and the voices whispering in his memory, at least for a moment, ***"LONG LIVE THE KOREAN PEOPLE!"***

"LONG LIVE KOREA!" his people and provinces roared back at him, each and every one of them trying to drown out something of their own, and even if he didn't deserve it, North let their 'MANSE's roll over him, anchoring him.

He was Korea. None of North's aches and pains bothered him. They were small in comparison to those of the people here, and those all across his country that would hear his broadcast. Even if they didn't believe him, even if he had let them down too much for them to, he would keep fighting to win them their peace. Because that was what he was good at. It was what he was *for.* It was what he owed them.

He had been forced to break so many promises. He would keep this one.

He had to.

All across the Peninsula, Korea's people marked their Liberation with food and song and blood, torn between what they were fighting for, but each united by one desperate desire.

'One last year.'

I love my characters so much. I still remember writing down the province names and what I knew about them to create the Northern Provincehumans. I did it in a few hours before writing the first chapter where they showed up in Safeway Pyongyang. And now we are here. They are like my children to

me and I have loved watching them grow.

Also have I ever said why the Provincehumans have mountain magnolias on their faces? Have I ever clarified that the provinces of the DPRK don't have flags and that I just made them up? Because I did. Just so you're all aware. I just chose the national flower for them. If I ever do a one-shot of the first Foundation Day when they grew up and received them, I'll explain what the in-universe reasoning is (also I might have said this before, but PLEASE look up the flag for Jongno District in Seoul. Why does it look like that??)

Family Ties

North returned to the bunker earlier than he would have liked, only so CCCP wouldn't be caught driving across his country the next morning. The last thing he needed was the Soviet getting hit by an enemy bomb in his borders.

Still, he'd let his people embrace him for even longer than usual, making up for the year before. He would need to visit the front as well, and tour the provinces. They all needed to see him, to know his words weren't empty. Korea wasn't broken. And he could still Liberate them. They still needed to believe that, at least.

Despite how his skin was still tingling from being touched, all the hands that had held his and caressed his face and stroked his arms, and the full-body hug Pak Jin-yong had given him, he didn't feel as light as he usually did. Maybe it was the embarrassment of knowing China and CCCP had seen him being so vulnerable with his people, or maybe it was the fact that under the tingling, his skin felt like it had been peeled off.

Or maybe it was those boxes of letters, squatting in the hallway like guests he hadn't invited.

North parked the GAZ in its usual spot, hating that it had a usual spot, that the tire tracks worn into the dusty soil were so deep, that they had a washbasin and laundry tub and cooking station and that they were still *here,* that their city was still being bombed, that-

"Korea?"

North snapped his head over, realizing that his provinces had all already gotten out of the back. SH stood next to his door, her brows furrowed.

"Are you alright?" she asked quietly.

'Weak,' her eyes said.

"I'm fine," North snapped, shoving open the door and making her step back.

"Thank you for giving a speech this year," she said as he slammed it. "It really means a lot to us."

North didn't need to be facing her to know her face said, *'It would mean more if you had won.'*

He grit his teeth, turning without looking at her, then jerked around as he realized CCCP's BTR hadn't pulled in after them. He and China were nowhere to be seen.

They had been right behind him, on his heels. Had something happened? Were they-?

No, they'd been too close. North would have heard enemy sabotage, no matter what form it came in. You didn't take out an armoured car silently.

His heart stopped pounding and his hackles rose as he realized what that meant. They had stopped purposefully to talk where he wouldn't hear them.

North lurched towards the road, but SH caught his arm.

"Korea," she chided, knowing what he was thinking. "You don't need to go eavesdrop. I'm sure they'll be here soon."

"Yeah," Kangwon said from where he was helping North Pyongan prep the stove. "Comrade CCCP probably just stopped for a smoke."

"Eavesdrop, eavesdrop," South Pyongan chanted, Hwang nodding vigorously in agreement.

North quivered under SH's touch, staring at her. After a moment, she let him go.

"Fine," she sighed. "But if Comrade China catches you, you'll just be embarrassed."

"I don't get embarrassed," North muttered, already beelining for

the dark road.

He walked carefully but quickly along it, not wanting to give the other nations the time to say too much without him hearing.

He *knew* they would be talking about him, about his speech, saying he was making promises he couldn't keep, mocking him for his failure to win by that first Liberation Day, for thinking he ever could have won, that he'd only been able to hold out for so long because of them, that Korea was weak and *he* was weak and that they were only helping because they had to for their own sake's and it was pathetic that he could ever think that they actually-

North darted off the road the second he rounded the bend enough to see the silhouette of the BTR, parked halfway down the path.

He knew he should just keep walking, insert himself into their conversation and stop them from gossiping about him. But he also knew that wasn't the reason he'd been trying to walk so quietly. He needed to hear their slander so they couldn't say he was overreacting when he severed personal ties with them.

He slunk through the shadowy undergrowth. The bushes that crowded the road weren't too thick, so he stayed low, and stopped the moment he could hear their words clearly.

"-do you think?" the rumble of CCCP's deep voice asked.

"About what?" China had that innocent lilt again.

"About Korea."

North stiffened. He had a partial view of the Soviet, standing next to the truck's front bumper, his pipe in hand. He really had stopped to smoke, even if that wasn't all he was doing. He knew the Korean couldn't stand the smell of tobacco smoke.

And he knew he would kill him for talking about him behind his back.

"Lovely little country," China idly replied.

He was almost hidden from North's sight thanks to the glossy green leaves of the arrowwood shrub he was sheltering behind. He could only see him because he was perched on the hood of the BTR, long legs hung over the grill. He was sitting in a beam of moonlight that pierced the canopy in a way that had to be deliberate.

"Though I suspect it would look more appealing if it wasn't being bombed," the Chinese man continued. "There wasn't much to see but brown on my way here."

North suppressed a bristle. China had praised his country on the way south. He was just saying that because he was pretending he'd never been here before.

Unless he'd only given that praise because he was talking to North, and he was being honest with CCCP.

"I meant 'What do you think of Comrade Korea?'" the Soviet clarified.

"Ahhh," China said with exaggerated understanding. "He's interesting, I suppose."

North made a face. That word again.

"Very passionate," the man added.

The Korean waited for him to follow it with an insult, for 'foolish' or 'reckless' or 'ungrateful.' Or trigger-happy.

China just leaned back on his palms, absent-mindedly kicking his heels off the Soviet's bumper.

"Да," CCCP agreed after taking a drag of his pipe. "He is. I am glad you have been getting along well, even now that you have met in person. I know he can be difficult."

North grit his teeth.

It wasn't like he didn't know he was. He'd been thinking last night that China had probably left because of how unpleasant he was to be around. He could be polite over letter with East Germany or

Poland, or in the fake ones he sent to China, but when it came to the two friendly nations he'd met in person, he couldn't help but be combative, stubborn, rude. Even the times he didn't want to be.

He had wanted to thank CCCP for keeping his promises after he'd released him from the trusteeship. Well, he hadn't *wanted* to. But he had been going to. But as he faced him for the first time with his new flag and body, his people still celebrating in the background, he hadn't been able to stop himself from telling the bigger country that if he ever wanted Korea under his control again, he was going to have to try harder than the last time.

North knew he was difficult. It didn't bother him. It was better to be difficult than compliant.

It was the tone CCCP said it in that prickled. Not disgusted or derisive, but familiar, in the same way his eye scanning North when he arrived had been, and the same way North often told South Pyongan she irritated him was.

He hunched, freezing as the ferns around him rustled slightly. But neither of the other men looked over.

"I'm a Communist," China said flippantly. "I like difficult."

"Good." CCCP exhaled more smoke, the acrid smell strong enough to reach North.

He scrunched his face, but China didn't seem bothered, even though he had told him he'd never been a smoker. He leaned across the hood, closer to the large man, his legs stretched out to the side.

"So," he said in a conspiratorial tone, but not volume. "What do *you* think of our Comrade Korea?"

"He is a principled man," CCCP said. "And a good son."

'Mrgh.'

China arched a brow. "And would he use that word for himself, I wonder?"

“It does not matter,” the Soviet dismissed. “He is my son. As are you.”

“Mm.” China’s hum didn’t give North any idea of how he felt about that. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” CCCP tapped his pipe against the side of his vehicle, half-turning to face China. “He is very strong. You both are.”

North’s face warmed, and he quickly looked down, fingers digging into the loose soil.

CCCP had to know he was listening. He had seen him hide in the bushes, or heard those ferns. He was mocking him.

“Aiya, that’s a compliment coming from the bipedal tank.” China’s hand slid up the Soviet’s arm, squeezing his large bicep through his coat.

“You are aware of what I mean.”

“En. But I have to make jokes or I’ll blush.”

China bashfully covered his cheeks with his hands. North was certain they were red enough that even if his comrade did blush, it would never be seen.

Unlike him. He should have told his Premier to design their flag with more red.

CCCP shook his head. “You are very strange, son.”

The Chinese man smiled. “I’m aware, comrade.”

The Soviet faced him directly, more serious as his voice lowered. “I need to ask for the truth. Have you been in Korea before today?”

North’s eye darted towards China. His small smile remained unchanged.

“Aiya, believing enemy propaganda?” He *'tsk'*ed. “I’d thought better of you than that, comrade. Should I ask *you* where the

factory you use to churn out all your evil Bolshevik infiltrators is? Or maybe where you keep the big spoon you used to personally devour all those poor, honest kulaks' grain?"

"I do not believe America's claims about anything," CCCP dismissed. "But what you asked me to do at your trial-"

"A precaution," China interrupted. "You and I both know the evidence against me didn't have to be true for it to be believed."

North narrowed his eye. What had the Soviet done for him?

China still appeared relaxed, brushing at one of his epaulets.

Maybe CCCP had had something to do with how India or some of the other nations' representatives had voted, or rather refused to. Or in their Countryhumans not showing up. It irked North that they hadn't told him about that, but it didn't really matter.

CCCP nodded at the other man's words. "This is true. But if you were fighting in Korea, I would not chide you. I would be grateful you were able to help your brother where I cannot."

A full-body shudder ran through North. He would need to make it clear to the larger country that even if he was going to insist on calling him 'son,' that did *not* mean he had any sort of connection to his other children, or 'children.'

China let out a small laugh. "I'm afraid I'm not that selfless. I care about the outcome of this war for the people of Korea's sake, but not enough to risk my own."

He sounded so genuine that, for a moment, North felt a growl rumble in his throat, before he remembered he was lying.

And the words shouldn't make him feel that way anyway. That was just how a Countryhuman should operate. China *shouldn't* care about North's country enough to risk his own.

'But he is.'

"You are already risking them," CCCP pointed out.

“There’s a difference between sending soldiers to war and having war brought to my civilians, and everything else I’ve worked for,” China said. “I’m sure you’ve ran your own simulations of how an American attack against me would go.”

“Poorly. For the both of you.”

“But mostly for me.” China shook his head. “I have my own nation to run. Comrade Korea is, regrettably, on his own.”

CCCP stared at him for a moment, then dipped his head. “Do not feel regret, son. Only anger that our hands have been tied this way. And Korea is not alone. All the people of the world are with him.”

North looked down, watching the grass roots tear in his grip.

“En. Though I think he might still be having a little trouble believing that.” China slid off the hood, landing lightly on the soil, stretching. “Anyway, I think it’s time we head in, before our Korean comrade gets paranoid and comes looking for us.”

All the blood in North’s body rushed to his face. As he’d said the words, China had looked directly at his hiding place, lifting his eyebrows.

CCCP didn’t seem to notice, opening the driver’s door. “Да. He can get nervous.”

North did *not* get nervous, he just didn’t appreciate foreigners conspiring against him in his own country. And he was right to be suspicious because he was almost certain he knew where the information about adapting to one eye that ‘Kang Kil-dong’ had written for him came from. And they had been talking about him now, even if they… hadn’t been saying what he’d thought.

China knew he was listening. He must have signalled CCCP in some way. They seemed close enough to have signals North wouldn’t catch. They’d known he was eavesdropping, so they… spoke well of him so that they could snicker together over him almost believing they actually thought that.

And China had let him know he knew he was there because… He

was China. North couldn't begin to understand why the other country did anything he did.

"Mm, I got that impression," the enigma said, opening his door. "We should drive quickly then."

Ssi-bal.

China's eyes squinched mischievously at the bushes, then he hopped into the vehicle.

North waited until the BTR was past him. The moment it was, he took off running, sprinting off through the trees, dodging roots and grasping branches as he did a wide arc away from the road so the men in the truck couldn't spot him. The second he was far enough away, he plunged back towards the clearing, bursting out of the trees and startling Hwang as he flew past him.

He could hear the engine coming. Not wanting to just be standing there, he darted over to North Pyongan, screeching to a halt right behind him as he washed the rice rations.

His province looked over, raising his brows.

"Shut up." North kept his eye on the rice.

Off to the side, the BTR stopped at the end of the road, doors opening and closing.

"Ah, looks like our worries were for nothing," China noted, nodding at North. "He's here after all."

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asked stonily, looking the other man in the eye, ignoring the way North Pyongan shook his head.

He should have learned his lesson about eavesdropping at Chorweon.

"We thought you might have been worried for us and come looking," China said lightly, sauntering over to perch on the edge of one of the logs. "I know how diligent Comrade Korea is. I told Comrade CCCP on the way about how you always ask after my

health in your letters."

That was only because North had no idea what else he was supposed to write. If it wasn't for forging a paper trail, he wouldn't send even a quarter as many correspondences as he sent 'China.' His formula was- ask after China and his leadership's health, inform him of non-classified information about the war effort, tell him he appreciated the PVA's actions, then sign off.

Of course, he couldn't say that with CCCP there.

He glared at China, before realizing that the Soviet was staring at him with a reprimand in his eye.

Ssi-bal. Since they were lying to him, it really just seemed like North had it out for someone he'd never met before, and also happened to be the country whose people were dying for him.

Not that that gave the foreigner the right to disapprove of him for it. Korea and China's relations were between Korea and China, no one else.

"He thought you were being a tad unfriendly," China said airily. "I made sure he knows you're just shy."

Hwang cleared his throat, and North shot him a deathglare.

He had been wrong. He *did* know why the Chinese man did some things- to annoy him.

"I am not shy," the Korean denied, then narrowed his eye. "I just didn't receive the correct impression of you from your letters. You're more…"

North gave him a dismissive once-over from the tips of his polished black boots to the shiny gold thread woven into his uniform and hat.

"Flamboyant than I imagined. I'm adjusting to it."

China gave him a vaguely affronted look. North tilted his head up, a fang poking into his inner lip.

His comrade wasn't the only one that could play that game.

CCCP couldn't tell that it was suspicious when SH only gave a sigh instead of stepping in to subtly remind North to be polite. He just said, "You are not meeting under the best circumstances, as well. None of us did."

It was strange to think that if it wasn't for America's meddling, North would have met CCCP over a table instead of in the center of Pyongyang, solely pleased to be forging alliances with another Socialist country instead of ready to go to war against him for cutting his country in half. Or that China would only be familiar to him from real letters sent on holidays, and as few meetings as North could arrange. They would be comrades, but strangers, even if the Soviet still called him 'son.'

Another thing to curse the Yankee for.

"War has a way of bringing people together," China said, smiling at North. "Blood binds."

'Comrade!'

"You should leave," North said, looking at CCCP but speaking to both of them. "The drive back to the northern border is long."

"Yes," the Soviet said. "But I would speak with you first. Privately," he added when China tried to follow them.

The other man pouted. "But it will be awhile before we're all able to get together like this again. Shouldn't we cherish the time we have?"

CCCP stared at him blankly, and he sighed. "Fine, fine. I know when I'm not wanted."

"Don't slink along after us," North ordered, immediately regretting his words.

"Aiya, such slander." China lay an offended hand on his chest. "I can't imagine how unscrupulous someone would have to be to eavesdrop on a private conversation."

North grimaced, giving Chagang and SH a nod, silently telling them to keep China in the clearing before following the Soviet.

CCCP took them twenty paces into the woods, and North led him another twenty deeper. Not just because he didn't want the Soviet dictating where they stopped, but so certain people wouldn't overhear them.

"What?" he demanded when they stopped, just out of range of the bathing tub.

"I wanted to ask if you are truly doing well," the Soviet said, brushing aside a low-hanging larch branch. "I did not think you would appreciate China overhearing."

China had seen North in far more vulnerable positions than CCCP had in the short time- *'Too long.'* -that they'd known each other. But the man was still right. North didn't appreciate him asking in the first place.

"I meant every word of my speech," he told him, an edge to the words. "Korea will not break."

CCCP slow-blinked down at him. "I am aware your country will endure. I am asking about you."

North tensed his shoulders. "I am fine," he said, reinforcing his voice with as much steel as possible.

"You have adapted to the eye?"

He stifled the urge to touch the eyepatch. "Yes."

"I knew you would."

North almost said something, then thought better. He hadn't asked Hwang to do what he'd done. It irked him that he'd gone behind his back with the foreigner at all. He wouldn't thank either of them for it, even if it had been… useful.

"Is that all?" he said instead.

"No. I wanted to ask what you think of Comrade China."

North didn't want to gossip. And he couldn't tell the Soviet what he *really* thought of him.

"He's…"

'Annoying, aggravating, thoughtful, generous, good with kids, an idiot, punchable. Kind.' There were a lot of words North could use to describe his comrade, none of which he wanted to admit to CCCP.

That night on Bukhan Mountain flashed in his mind, China's eyes glowing like the stars above as he fantasized about the future.

'I want to rival America and outshine CCCP, and be a beacon for those fighting for their own countries everywhere. I want to be a red star in the East.'

"Ambitious," North decided on, then, before he could stop himself, added, "You should watch out for him."

CCCP made a rumble that was one of his half-laughs. "Are we not all ambitious? To be a Communist nation, we must have great ambition and greater love."

Unlike when China had called them greedy, North couldn't deny that. Though he could argue that you needed greater ambition than love. Not more, but greater. Anyone could love. Not everyone could act for it. And love without ambition could *keep* you from acting. If a revolutionary loved his people but lacked the ambition to risk them for freedom and the greater benefit of all, he would never take up arms.

Or if he loved his brother too much to let him get hurt.

And he didn't want to deny it. He *was* ambitious, and it was good that China was, too. If he wasn't, his soldiers likely wouldn't be here. He wouldn't have survived becoming the People's Republic of China, no matter which China he'd been before.

North didn't know why he'd said that. It sat uncomfortably in his chest, like he had just betrayed his comrade in some way. Even

though he didn't owe him loyalty in the first place.

"China is a good boy," CCCP told him. "You will see."

He… didn't need to.

"He has been… a staunch comrade," North said awkwardly.

He couldn't elaborate and didn't want to.

"You should go now."

"Wait, son."

CCCP's voice called him back. Reluctantly, he turned. The Soviet's shadow stared back at him from under the trees.

"I am sorry for all this," he said heavily. "I did not think America would intervene in your war."

"We both knew he would," North bitterly replied.

"Not to this extent."

They had expected the arms sales, a naval blockade and trade embargo. And North had expected the planes and maybe even a few thousand mercenaries. All things he could have easily withstood. If it wasn't for the sheer amount of foreign soldiers and the Incheon landing, Korea would have been his two years ago.

They hadn't been prepared for seventeen armies and more bombs than had been brought to bear against even Japan or Germany. America hadn't just stuck his fingers in the borsch- he'd plunged his entire damn hand in up to the shoulder.

"You were wrong," North said coldly. "The United Nations is worse than useless. He is nothing but a pawn."

CCCP let out a sigh like bellows deflating. "You cannot blame me for hoping otherwise. But I am still sorry. If I had known that this is what agreeing to divide you would lead to, I would have fought it."

North bared his teeth, but his surge of anger quickly faded. “It… isn’t your fault.”

It was his. *He* should have fought it, should have told CCCP to screw off and waited for the American ships with his rifle ready, even if a war with him would have ravaged Korea even more than it already had been, even if he knew without their People’s Army and everything they had now, they would have just ended up with the entire Peninsula being colonized by America, sentencing them to another thirty years of guerrilla warfare, or more.

At least he would have his brother with him.

“It was America’s decision,” he told the Soviet. “He was the one that ruined the Reunification talks, and he was the one that forced through Rhee’s ‘republic.’ And he is the one violating international law to lay waste to my country. Korea doesn’t blame the Soviet Union for this war.”

For all his… gripes with CCCP, justified and not, this wasn’t one of them.

It hadn’t been on *him* to win, after all.

“I am grateful you see it that way,” the Soviet said. “And I will keep doing what I can for you with my pilots and in the United Nations. Even if it is fruitless.”

And it would be. Just like the germ warfare protests and trying to get North and China’s representatives in and stopping China from being labelled an aggressor and all the armistice attempts and protecting the Supung Dam and trying to stop the war in the first place. The United Nations was America’s playground. He would do what he wanted there, and all the other nations would follow his lead. Just like he would in Korea.

“But I will say- the greatest assurance I could give you is to take you into the Soviet Union.” The man said it with his usual blunt forwardness. “America’s politicians do not dare move against me directly, let alone the rest of the capitalist world. If Korea had been seen by them as my official child, this war would not be happening

this way."

North's jaw creaked. He kept his voice stiff and formal. "Any intention of Korea joining the Soviet Union would have only ensured that America fought even harder against our Reunification. And half of a country cannot make decisions for the whole."

"I know you still do not intend to make the decision at all," CCCP said. "And we cannot change the past. It is just something to think about for the future."

He returned the Soviet's blunt tone. "The only thing in Korea's future is Reunification."

"I do not intend to pressure you," CCCP tried to soothe him. "It is still enough for me that you are my son. I only want to be able to use all my power to keep you and your people safe."

Korea's people didn't need anyone but Korea to keep them safe. It was *his* duty. And North didn't need anyone at all.

He turned away, heading wordlessly back to the clearing.

China was still on the log, wedged between SH and Chagang, looking put out. His head swivelled as the undergrowth crackled and the other two nations returned.

"Back from whispering about me, I assume?" he asked, sniffing indignantly.

"I don't talk about other counties behind their backs," North responded, unable to help the emphasis. And still feeling slightly guilty about his earlier comment.

"I will be leaving now," CCCP unceremoniously announced. "I am sorry I could not bring any warm meals with me this time. The sky is too dangerous for a plane, and fresh food would not have lasted the drive."

"That isn't a problem, comrade," SH said politely, freeing China from his press. "Thank you for what you did bring. Especially the letters. Tell Comrade Belarus I'll draw her something next time."

“I will. And I am glad they brought you some heart. But I will still bring a homecooked meal when this war is won.”

Hae inched up to North, whispering in his ‘ear.’

He glowered at her. *‘I’m not asking him for anything.’*

She blinked her big eyes. *‘Pleaaasssssseeeeee?’*

North sighed, grudgingly asking the Soviet, “Do you have peaches and cream in your country?”

“Yes,” CCCP said, bemused. “Would you like me to bring some?”

North shot a look over his shoulder, where Hae was vigorously nodding. She immediately stopped.

North didn’t answer, but the Soviet still said, “Then I will.”

“Ura!” Hae cheered, then squeaked, “SorryKorea.”

North just shook his head, directing his provinces to line up so they could bow (some (North Hamgyong) more grudgingly than others) to send CCCP off. As soon as they had, Hae took off for the woods, calling, “Latrinessorrygot’ago!”

North’s pang of irritation turned to worry. She had better not be having stomach issues again. He would ask Kangwon to give her a full check-up next time she gave blood.

His province was standing next to CCCP at his truck.

“Hey,” he said. “Thanks again for getting me out of Norway.”

“It is no problem, son,” CCCP said, though North knew it had caused him more then a few. “Helping my children is never an issue.”

North hated when he called his provinces ‘son’ or ‘daughter,’ even more than when he called him that. He hated when he called them by their names, too, without ‘comrade’ attached. It was annoying.

Kangwon fiddled with his fingers. “About that postcard…”

“I do not know if it reached its recipient,” CCCP told him. “But it was sent.”

“That’s good enough then. Thanks.” Kangwon’s lips lifted, but his eyes didn’t brighten. They looked almost sunken in, like a foreigner’s.

With the army economization, North had had his rations cut down to those of an army clerk at headquarters, still more than the other provinces, but less than before. He resolved to raise them back to the amount of an active-duty soldier, like his own. He needed them. And unlike his Countryhuman, he would eat all of them.

And he wouldn’t have to worry about there being enough for Gangwon, too.

“Do you need a ride anywhere, son?” CCCP asked China as he padded over.

“To the end of this road, if you’re willing,” the man said. “My Mobile Command is sending someone to pick me up. Would Comrade Korea like to come for the drive?”

Not wanting to give them another chance to gossip about him, or for CCCP to tell China what he’d said, North wordlessly climbed into the BTR.

He’d been trying to force China to sit in the gun nest in the back, or cling to the side. He was displeased when he slid in after him, sandwiching him between the two taller men.

North glared at him. His comrade smiled back.

Thankfully he stayed pressed to the door, giving North a little room in the cab that was only meant for two. At least enough that he could still breathe. He was on edge, hyper-aware of CCCP’s solid bulk pressing against his left, and that the only way out would be clawing his way through China, but he managed to tame his urge to do that without provocation.

They stopped at the mouth of the woods, before the field of stumps. CCCP should have remained behind the wheel, but he maneuvered his massive body out again. He probably wasn't looking forward to the very long drive back to his country.

North knew the Soviet's personal car was modified like the GAZ to hold (some of) his children. He had to wonder if a special frame had been manufactured to make it taller as well. Or was driving always uncomfortable for him?

"Thinking important thoughts?" China hummed in his 'ear.'

"Yes," North said flatly.

CCCP strode over, long coat flapping, and held out his arms. China met him in another hug, as easily as if he was shaking hands.

They really were more physically comfortable around each other, even having spent nowhere near as much time together as North had with the both of them. He could tell China would never feel the urge to fight to escape a warm embrace, and that CCCP wouldn't still need to lie awake until he was sure China was asleep before he could close his own eye, and have to sleep with his eyepatch on.

When they pulled back, the larger country kept his arm around the Chinese man's slender shoulders, China leaning casually into him. CCCP held out his free arm, and North braced himself.

But the hug didn't come. It looked like he reconsidered, placing his huge hand on his shoulder instead, gently squeezing.

He'd felt the bandages earlier. And the heat radiating through them as they were pressed together in the car. And he was treating him like he was fragile because of it.

North opened his mouth, then closed it. CCCP withdrew his hand, and he was left aching.

"You are resilient, son," the man said, with that aggravating tinge to his usually blunt voice. "You will end this war. And I will be with you the entire way, as will all those whose letters we brought."

“And China,” China added.

“I know I will,” North replied, spine straight, clamping down on anything else that might come out of his mouth.

He didn’t need them to remind him he was resilient, only his people. He wasn’t some child whimpering about facing the Imperialist hordes almost entirely on his own, who needed to be soothed. He didn’t need their moral support, only their materiel.

“You will,” CCCP repeated firmly.

Then his face shifted, his eye narrowing and his heavy brows drawing down, lips peeling back from his fangs as his voice grew as cold as the depths of Siberia, rumbling in his chest.

“And one day, America will pay for what he has done to my children.”

North didn’t let himself step back, but he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, his body telling him danger was near.

Usually CCCP tried to portray himself as the image of a kind-hearted, if stern, father. But there were times like these, when he caught a glimpse of the part of him that had been capable of cutting down the Russian Empire, slaughtering thousands of White Army soldiers, and single-handedly storming Berlin to free his stolen children, that the Korean could understand why Nazi Germany had chosen suicide over letting the Soviet get his hands on him.

“No more peaceful coexistence?” China asked, looking small under CCCP’s heavy arm, his thick fingers digging into his shoulder.

“I have tried,” the man said coldly. “The Yankee made his choice when he walked away from the talks to Reunify Korea. You cannot coexist with someone who does not know the meaning of peace. If he truly wants to play this game, then I will make sure he regrets it.”

China hummed, and North relaxed as the Soviet did, his stoic expression falling back in to place.

“Do not fear the atom bomb, sons,” he said. “America knows that if he uses it, it will not end well for him.”

North exchanged a brief look with China. Despite dealing with him for longer than them, and opening his eye to the United Nations and the futility of trying to coexist with a warmonger…

Somehow, he didn’t think CCCP truly understood America.

“It is quite useful that you have your own,” China said idly. “Maybe you should share your research with us. The more the merrier, right?”

North gave the other country a sharp look.

CCCP just used the hand on his shoulder to ruffle his head. “You do not need the atom bomb. I have it. I will protect you.”

“En,” China said, smiling. “I suppose you’re right.”

North tipped his head, eye narrowing in thought.

CCCP looked at him for a long moment, like he might say something, then released China from his hold, heading for the driver’s side.

“Goodbye-“

“WAIT!”

North whirled at the familiar shout, seeing a small dark shape barreling down the road.

“Wait!” Hae called. “Ah- Ah have-!”

She skidded to a halt next to them, doubling over, clutching at something pressed to her chest as she gasped for breath.

Too hard. The short run shouldn’t have winded her that much.

“Ah- have- *a cat!”*

She straightened up, thrusting her arms out, a scrawny yellow

feline dangling with her hands under its front legs.

North's eye slitted. "Is that the one from the last big air raid?"

Hae hunched guiltily, and he knew it was.

"Ah'msorryKoreabutahcouldn'tjus'leaveherthereinthecitywhatifshegotbomb

"South Hwanghae, silent order."

Hae's mouth snapped shut. She looked at him pleadingly as she held the creature out.

Not wanting to get into it in front of CCCP, North said frostily, "You can talk. *Slowly."*

"Ah was wonderin' if Comrade CCCP could take her," she said hopefully, holding the cat towards him. "Ah really want to keep her, but ah know it's too dangerous here. Ah don't have anythin' to feed her, and ah don't want her gettin' hurt."

CCCP took the cat with no hesitation, cradling it in his arms as he ran a hand over its head, dwarfing the skinny animal. It looked frozen in fear for a moment, before it settled in, eyes half-closing in pleasure.

The Soviet examined it for a second, then nodded. "I had a comrade who was fond of cats, and we have kept a few around before. I and my other children will take good care of her."

Hae sagged in relief, her eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "Thank ya so much! Her name is Ten Percent, and she's a girl."

CCCP nodded soberly, though the animal clearly wasn't female.

"Oh, but-" Hae ducked her head suddenly, looking stricken. "Um, don't call her Ten Percent. Call her… Corn."

"Corn?" North asked suspiciously.

His province nodded proudly. "'Cuz 'koyangi' an' 'kangnaengi' sound almost the same."

“Tch.”

“That is a fine name,” CCCP approved where North didn’t. “My children might find Russian words easier, but if they do, I will make sure the spirit of it is preserved, if 'Кукура’ is acceptable to you.”

“Ku-Kukur-" Hae gave up on the Russian name. “Ah like it!”

“Then she will be a welcome addition to the household.” CCCP scratched the cat behind one of its nicked ears, surprisingly gentle, though he could crush its skull with one hand.

“Thank you!”

Mission accomplished, Hae tried to slink away. North snapped his fingers, making her wince and shoot into military posture.

‘I’m dealing with you as soon as he’s gone,’ he promised her with lowered brows.

She pouted.

CCCP placed the cat in the vehicle (after Hae had ran over to pet it one last time). He was about to get in before he turned to North, beckoning him closer. Reluctantly, he went.

“Son,” he said lowly, though North knew China could still hear. “There is something you should hear. Family is not who claims you, but who you choose to claim.”

“What do you mean by that?” North could hear the edge in his voice.

CCCP gave him a look that said he knew what he meant. “Marx and Engels were wise men. As was my own Comrade Lenin and is my Comrade Stalin. But there is no man capable of writing theory to convince someone devoid of empathy to care for others. There is only one solution for someone like that.”

His eye moved to the star eyepatch, opposite his own.

North’s face was set in stone as he bit out, “And we will use that

solution. On America and Syngman Rhee.”

He was tense, but CCCP only dipped his head.

“I am only sharing something it took me too long to learn. You will choose the path you think is best for your country. The future of the Korean people is in Korean hands, as always." He gave him a piercing look. "Just remember that sharing blood with someone does not always make them kin.”

CCCP patted him on the shoulder again, then drew his long limbs into the truck, starting the engine and pulling away.

“I will see you after your victory, son,” he called out the hatch window.

“Bye-bye!” Hae waved as he drove through the field of tree stumps. “And bye Corn! Ah hope you like Russia! Eat lots of mayonnaise an’ kompot, and other Soviet stuff!”

North watched the shadow of CCCP’s armoured vehicle pull onto the highway, heading towards Pyongyang. At the western checkpoint, some of his own vehicles would rendezvous with him to escort him to the border.

He'd stayed too long. The last couple hours of his journey would be in the daylight. And North wouldn’t know if he had gotten safely back to the Soviet Union for days.

Ssi-bal, he should have told him to telegraph.

“Wise words,” China noted, slinking over to his side, not leaning against him the way he’d been clinging to CCCP. Thankfully.

North didn’t respond. They were wise words. But not for him.

He and his brother shared far more important things than blood.

“Ah hope Corn’ll be alright,” Hae fretted, hands on her hips. “It must be scary to get taken someplace else all of a sudden. Ah wish ah could tell her why ah had to give her away.”

She suddenly stiffened, slowly turning to look at North.

He was already looking at her. Glaring.

“Koreaahreallydin’tmeantodisobeyyabutwhenahleftJonsungshewasstillarou

“Were you feeding it your rations?” North cut her off.

Hae shook her head vigorously. “You told me not to give ‘em away, and ah know ah shouldn’t. Ah only give ‘em away on the weekend to our people. She was catchin’ birds, and mice around the latrines.”

Some of the tension went out of his shoulders. Even though a part of his mind whispered that if Hae had disobeyed him about getting rid of the cat, she could also be lying to him now.

“Then it’s fine.”

Hae had squeezed her eyes shut. She cracked one open now to look cautiously up at him. “You’re not goin’ to hit me over the head with your boot?”

“Don’t say that like I do it often,” North grumbled, conscious of China’s presence. “And no.”

“But ah din’t do what you said.”

He sighed. “For the last time- I want you to think about my orders. And if you think I’m wrong, then I don’t want you to blindly act.”

He hadn't reached his limit with her like he had for North Pyongan, since she wasn’t a pushover and was capable of operating on her own. And North was the only person whose orders she followed so ardently. But it was still a problem. He needed her walking next to him, not behind him. If all her concentration was on making sure her feet landed in his footsteps, she wouldn’t notice if he was leading them off a cliff.

Hae blinked, a grin splitting her face. “Ura! Korea’s not mad at me!”

“But I was right this time.” North smacked her over the head, making sure her hat cushioned it. “And I want you to bring any issues you have to me, not hide them.”

Hae’s relief wasn’t dulled. “Thank ya, Korea!”

“Get back to camp and eat your rations.”

Hae saluted, then tore off down the road, vanishing back into the trees.

North watched her go, trying to ignore his uneasiness, the same one he’d felt reading some of the letters his people had given to him earlier.

There were more direct complaints this year, problems for him to resolve. And like Hae gaining more discernment when it came to his orders, it should please him. It was what he’d been trying to coax out of them for years.

But the timing made his skin prickle. Had his actions finally started to convince the masses that they could bring their issues to their Countryhuman in person, that he wouldn’t get offended, and that anything that bothered his people could never be too small for him to deal with? Had Hae’s sympathy for animals finally made her think through his demands for once, and decide she couldn’t follow them?

Or had they started losing faith in him?

“If I told you I was aware of the cat, would you be mad?” China asked from behind him.

“No,” North said, tearing himself from his uncomfortable thoughts. “That was between my province and I. Unless she-“

He stopped, stumbling over his words.

He’d been using the polite hasipsio-che he used with CCCP for China all day, not wanting to risk the informality of his usual speech being translated to the Soviet when he shouldn’t know the Chinese man. But as he had gone to switch from the form he’d been

using with Hae, he realized there was no switch to make.

He'd been aware that he had finally given up resisting using the intimate hae-che his provinces used with each other when he was alone with them.

But when had he started using it with China?

“Something wrong?” the other man asked.

North found his voice, forcing it out. “No.”

He couldn’t go back now. China heard his Korean as Korean. Unlike CCCP, the meaning would be entirely bared to him. If North switched back to haera-che, or even hao-che, it would look like retreating.

His eye flicked towards China, who was still smiling, giving no sign of if he knew what had just closed the Korean’s throat.

It was… fine. He knew he’d begun using hao-che with him… some time ago. Maybe around when they had started sharing a room. And it was easier to just switch between hae-che for the other country and his own provinces and hasipsio-che for the Liaos, instead of adding a third form into it. That was probably why he’d subconsciously started doing it. And he already used it for his provinces. It wasn’t some sacred thing he could only use with one person, even if… It wasn’t. It was just a level of speech.

Still, he wondered if there was anyone South used hae-che for that wasn’t him. The idea made his chest clench.

What speech did he use with America?

“You know, now that our Soviet comrade is departed and our antagonist has gone home, I can finally say I’m the tallest Countryhuman in Korea,” China remarked, picking at the golden thread around his wrists. “Aiya, don’t look at me like that. It was a joke.”

That wasn’t why North was glowering at him.

“Why doesn’t CCCP know that you’ve been staying here?” he demanded in hae-che, even if it twisted his stomach into knots.

China tipped his head, squinting at his sleeve. “Would you tell me or our comrade if your General was ill?”

“No,” North said immediately.

“Exactly. A secret told to an honest man isn’t a secret for long.”

“You should have told me,” the Korean complained. “What if I mentioned you in one of my letters to him?”

“You didn’t, did you?” China smiled as he made a face. “The benefits of having friends that *aren’t* honest.”

“We aren’t friends,” North muttered.

And he didn’t like to hear China of all people say that *he* wasn’t honest.

Satisfied that whatever invisible imperfection that had been bothering him was gone, the other man undid his sleeve buttons, letting the long black fabric fall to hide his hands again.

“So, since we’ve been getting the full gamut of opinions today- what do you think of our Father?”

North stepped away as his shoulder brushed his. “Don’t call him that. He isn’t my father, and you aren’t my brother.”

China gave him one of his mock-pouting faces, pushing his lower lip out and widening his eyes pitifully. “You don’t want to be related to me?”

North was merciless. “No.”

“That works for me,” his comrade said, bouncing easily back. “I’d much rather be your comrade anyway. I’m an only child, more or less.”

Was ‘more’ Zhao Jingjing? Or someone else from China’s past?

North knew he probably wouldn't tell him if he asked.

"CCCP is a useful ally," North answered his question, hoping China wouldn't mention his eavesdropping.

"Mm," the other country hummed, eyes still on the long, dark road, empty now. "And that's all?"

"Yes," North said bluntly.

"Even if he keeps pestering you to join the Soviet Union?"

He knew (was fairly sure) China couldn't have heard them. The Soviet had likely just extended the same offer to him.

It was never official. Not something sanctioned by CCCP's government or presented to North's. This was the first time the Soviet had even mentioned it directly in years, since just before North had declared his People's Republic, asking him if he didn't want to become a Soviet Republic instead, and being met by the same answer the Korean country had given him tonight. The only time he'd even come close to mentioning it before then had been the night North agreed to accept the Joint Occupation.

It was just a wordless offer that hung over them. It was too politically untenable right now, but North knew if, at any time after the war was over, he turned to CCCP and said that he wanted to join the Soviet Union, the man would probably already have the documents ready, just waiting for his signature to slap a Soviet hammer and sickle on him and cart him back to Moscva to live with his other republics.

As much as North's revulsion at the idea hadn't faded at all, the reminder was almost comforting. China's motivations might be murky and unclear, but CCCP's were well known- he wanted Korea to join the Soviet Union. All the assistance he gave, the gifts he brought, the food he made, everything he did was to ensure that North's country wouldn't become an American puppet, but instead part of him.

Maybe he would still do it if he was human. But he wasn't. So

North could say that was it.

And it was better than the other unnerving thing he'd said that night, and that he *did* remind him of every time he saw him, one way or another.

'I want you to be my son.'

"So long as pestering is all it is, then as long as I can use him, I can tolerate him." North bit down as the words left his mouth.

China arched a brow. "Aiya, careful what you say. I might start to think you invited me here just to use *me."*

North gave him the most withering glare he could manage. "I *didn't* invite you here. That is my *problem* with you."

His comrade smirked. "Oh, I'm sure you have a few more problems with me than that."

"If you're looking for criticism, I'll make you a list." It would be long.

"I've actually been enjoying escaping my criticism sessions while here," China said airily. "Though if you're inviting me to one of you and your provinces' little get-togethers, I wouldn't say no."

"I would." There was no way North would ever let him sit in on a criticism session, especially one where-

"Afraid of criticizing yourself in front of me?" China guessed, his smile widening. "Or maybe of giving *me* a chance to criticize *you?"*

"I'm not afraid," North growled, though he'd guessed correctly. "If you have something to say, say it."

He glared at him, challenging him to.

"Mmmm," China deliberated. "No. I prefer to stay healthy. You never know when something you say could cause teeth marks to appear on your arm."

He rubbed his forearm pointedly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” North deadpanned, and his comrade gave a light laugh.

North had to go back to the bunker to change before he left for the city. But he didn’t move right away. He would wait until his provinces were done cooking, and the food was gone. He could get SH to divvy up what CCCP had brought tomorrow.

He crossed his arms over his chest, feeling the burns throb under them as he stared off down the highway towards Pyongyang, listening to the drone of the bombers in the distance, hoping none of them would see the armoured vehicle heading north.

He shouldn't have said that about the Soviet.

It wasn’t like he *wasn’t* using CCCP. The electricity was back on now- if he had truly wanted to, he could have sent a telegram to the northern border and had the crossing guards turn him away. But North had noticed that during the trusteeship, on the visits where he took the man to survey poorer Pyongyang neighbourhoods or villages, the weeks after would see an increase in the amount of string-free aid he received- clothes, medicine, food. If a slightly run-down street could do that, then the long drive here through war-torn towns and smoldering heaps of ash where villages had once stood would definitely see returns.

He hated fishing for aid like that. He hated needing it from the Soviet at all. But his people had needed it then, and they needed it now.

So he was using CCCP. And he would continue to do so for as long as his people required.

But he didn’t want to be.

As much as North would prefer that Countryhumans only dealt with their own people and left foreign affairs to their leadership, and would stay in his country and never meet with another again if he had the choice, neither of those things were realistic. That wasn’t

how the world worked, and he couldn't force the other nations to think it should be. And if he abstained from it on his own, it would weaken Korea's diplomatic position. So they were doomed to make alliances and send letters and… develop relationships.

And since they were, North didn't want those relationships to be ones of use. He wouldn't accept anyone using Korea, and Korea shouldn't need to use anyone. Imperialism grew when a capitalist country's greed overflowed its own borders and it turned to the rest of the world, only seeing the other nations, all their people and resources, in terms of use value.

Feline eyes that were as cold as ever, and that implacable voice, dispassionate even with the red spreading across his uniform.

'Korea needs to stand with Japan.'

As much as he didn't want to join CCCP's 'family,' he admired what the Soviet Union was doing. Uniting countries into one union, each republic contributing to the others without the axe of debt or exploitation hanging over their necks, knowing that they were contributing towards a shared future, not being used for someone else's. It was how the world *should* work, how North wanted it to, even if he thought that borders should remain stronger than the Soviet did. Maybe in a world like that, he could see CCCP's gifts as more than bribes, or those chests of letters as something other than payment. Or fully believe China when he said he was just here to pay a debt to his people.

And CCCP had brought those supplies. Even on his first few visits after the Joint Occupation began, when the Soviet Union had still been ravaged by war and his own people were still starving, the man had brought crates of army rations. Even after he had to have realized that supplying North's people with what they needed would have been a far more effective bribe than giving him things, he still showed up with fresh vegetables and meat to make the only good meals the chosonjip's kitchen ever saw, brought more of what he noticed they liked, like with Hae and her sweet blood bars, made alternatives for North when he made the others desserts, and stepped outside when he wanted to smoke, not needing to be told.

Even if it was all just because he expected North to join the Soviet Union, if he saw it as a bribe or just maintaining a future investment, North… couldn't really call it 'use.' Even if doing so would make him more comfortable. Or less comfortable. Or… He didn't know. Just like he didn't know why he had to reflexively say he was the one doing the using.

His head hurt, his temples pounding with fever and pain that pulsed in his entire body.

He didn't want the Soviet to think he saw the things he did for- his country in that cold utilitarian way. And he didn't want China to think that either. Not… anymore.

Except part of him did. Even though it contradicted his other desires.

Maybe that was another contradiction Socialism could solve. But more likely he would have to wait for Communism for that one. If ever.

"I have to get going," China said from beside him. "My 'visit' today isn't exactly public knowledge, but on the off-chance anyone saw me, I need to take my Little Sisters home, then sneak us back across."

North realized he'd been scratching under his eyepatch again, and lowered his hand. "You should take them home for good."

"Probably," his comrade agreed. "We'll be back tomorrow morning."

North watched the Jeep pull out of the trees farther along the mountain, rolling towards them with its headlights off, stopping on the side of the highway at the end of the path.

China took a step towards it, but no more. "Before I go, I actually do have a criticism for you."

North went to glare at him again, but found he wasn't smiling. He was looking at him seriously from under his commander's cap.

“Don’t avoid reading those letters just because you’re afraid of what they have to say.”

“I’m not afraid.” He *despised* when he said things like that.

“You are,” China decreed. “You don’t want to believe you’re not as alone as you feel.”

The Korean’s teeth grit. He thought he *wanted* to feel this way?

“I was hoping getting those to you might help you realize that more people care about Korea than you think.” China tilted his head at him. “It didn’t work, did it?”

North averted his gaze.

No. It hadn’t. He didn’t know why-

No, he did. But he knew it was unreasonable and wrong, so he couldn’t let the words leave his mouth.

“I do… appreciate it,” he told him, still not looking him in the eye. “I meant that.”

He bit his tongue, not letting those words leave either.

China’s smile ghosted over his face again. “By the way, I noticed that it really is just me you have a problem thanking.”

“Tch.”

His comrade’s eyes squinched. “That’s alright. You know I like a challenge.”

North didn’t know if he was talking about getting him to thank him or… the other thing.

“But do me a favour and read these, at least.”

China reached into the lapel of his jacket, pulling out a set of worn envelopes, slightly wrinkled from the long journey to Korea.

The first had two familiar names on it- Yao Song and Li Meihua.

North didn't recognize the others. But he had shouted several of the family names across the blood-soaked fields of Chorweon, and read them in Meng Yuyu's casualty records, along with the hometowns on the addresses.

'Shancheng Village, Liaotung Province,' read one.

"Whether it's tonight or five years after this war is won," China said quietly. "Please read these."

North hesitated, then took them, staring at the name Hong Mingzhu, written in a flowy, feminine hand, his chest constricting.

"I'll read them," he managed after a moment.

The 188th Division of the 63rd Army had fought and died for him. The least he could do was read what judgements their families had to pass on him for it.

Just not tonight.

"Thank you." China dipped his head.

The words came so easy to him. Even when North hadn't done anything except drag him and his people into his war.

North held the letters to his chest, mouth opening, then let them drop to his side.

"Don't get bombed on the way to the border," he said gruffly. "It would be a hassle."

China's lips curled higher. "Is that an order?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose I'll do my best. You know how good of a driver I am."

North huffed as his comrade started gliding towards his Jeep.

"Oh, and comrade?" China turned, seamlessly walking backwards.

“Congratulations on seven years of freedom from the Japanese devils. Here’s to being free of the Yankee ones by the next.”

He held something from his sleeve up, the little jade stone Kim Hyo-ri had given him, using it to toast the sickle moon hanging over their heads. He tossed it into the sky, spinning on a heel and catching it with one hand as it descended.

“But I’ll still be with you even if we aren’t,” he called, teeth flashing in a half-crescent over his shoulder.

North didn’t respond, retreating under the trees, hoping China couldn’t see him watching him go from the shadows. But as his comrade got into the Jeep, taking the wheel from Liaotung, he lifted a hand directly towards him.

The Korean wrapped his arms around his chest, watching as he drove away, disappearing down the highway towards their border. The letters in his hand burnt against his skin worse than the bombs falling across his country, aching inside, too. Too many aches, all tangled together like a cicada knot.

They were too intertwined to begin unravelling, even if he wanted to. But he could always find that worst one, reaching into that deeper place for it, holding it in a mental grip, not for the first time that day.

He wished he could talk to his brother. His calls for a phone conversation were still being ignored, and he knew they would continue to be. Neither Rhee nor America would let him talk to their… to South.

All those years of yearning to hear his brother’s voice more than almost anything. It was so frustrating to know where he was now, down to the address, but be just as unable to as when he didn’t know if he was even alive or not.

The cord wasn't enough. It couldn’t communicate what he wanted to. Pulling it couldn’t ask his brother if what America had written was true or why he’d done it or if he was okay. It couldn’t tell him that no matter why he’d done it, it would be alright, they could

move past it, but that he needed to finally stand up and demand a ceasefire, to save their people, to fight back for once in his fucking *life.*

North still pulled on it anyway, feeling that intangible cord stretching away to the south, telling him that if he just followed it, he would find his brother, hear his voice, wrap him in his arms, slot that missing piece into both of them like they were meant to, *save* him.

It didn't matter if East Germany had a similar tie. He knew it couldn't ache the same.

North stayed under the trees, looking out at the highway, empty in both directions, waiting for that pull back.

It didn't come.

—

China pressed on the gas, not immediately accelerating as fast as he could've.

He didn't look back, his eye only flicked, but Liaotung still said, "Are you sure we shouldn't have written him our own letters?"

"Good observation skills, meimei," he praised, though he hadn't been trying hard to hide the motion. "But you still want our comrade to be able to look you in the eyes, don't you?"

He wanted his friend to understand how they felt, but had the sense that if he understood too well, he would need to reject them in some way. Long-held beliefs didn't break without some drama. And while there were few things China loved more than drama, he didn't think his friend was in the position to handle it right now. Even if he itched to see how he would react.

"Debatable," Liaotung said, stretching her legs out from the back between he and Liaoxi's seats. "Korea-gege has a very intense stare."

Liaoxi gave a delicate shiver. "And you aren't even the one that

most often has to bear… it."

"The long pause doesn't mean the rhyme isn't broken, Little Sister," China hummed as they approached the checkpoint beyond Jangsan.

"If you gave me a second, it wouldn't be, you tit." She side-eyed him smugly.

"Minus points for insulting gege."

"Bonus points for insulting gege," Liaotung corrected.

"Aiya," China sighed. "Is there any other Big Brother that has to put up with such cruel Little Sisters? Maybe I'll just leave you in your province tonight."

"Back across the river, we shall swim with barely a shiver," Liaoxi announced, and her sister nodded.

China smiled. "Did you have a productive day?"

"Paper and pencils we spread around," Liaoxi reported. "We made sure to cover much ground."

"Perfect." His friend couldn't refuse to let his own people's letters in, even if he tried. "And the other things?"

"We got the-" Liaotung made a face as he cut her off with a tongue click. *"-supplies* handed out. I gave Sun-ja hers, and got some to the mother of that girl you've been watching. 'Courtesy of the PVA.'"

China nodded in satisfaction, not just because Kum-mi would be eating well tonight, but from his province using Kim Sun-ja's given name. The little spa day North's artist had taken them on back in May had been helpful for all involved. He knew he'd been right sending his 'little sisters' along.

Even if he was still a touch sulky that he hadn't been invited.

"But are you sure you'll be okay?" Liaoxi fretted.

"I'll be fine. Our Soviet comrade gave me his own gift box." He

was looking forward to trying his homemade jam. And the tinned fish, obviously. “Don’t worry for gege- he always make sure he eats enough to stay healthy.”

Unlike a certain someone that could no longer hide the tremors that shook him when he so rarely stood still.

His provinces didn’t look satisfied, but knew he wouldn’t be changing his mind. And that he was capable of surviving on far less than half-rations for a month.

His Chairman would know he wouldn't change his mind either. Which meant he'd be more receptive to sending him the supplies he might possibly need for his friend's upcoming birthday, if he settled on that certain idea of his. It was a little risky, and could be slightly embarrassing, even for him, considering he'd never done something like it for someone before, but he thought he would. He just needed to tweak it slightly to increase the chances of it being accepted.

Either way, he was sure he could get what he needed from his Xiao Mao. China may be the supreme enabler in their relationship, but the enabling was most definitely mutual.

He would confess, he was excited. He had always liked watching people face their fears. And he'd very much been enjoying getting his comrade to face this one, as he had after taking that bullet for him.

As they neared the checkpoint, he took his hands off the wheel without warning, leaving Liaoxi to sigh and grab it so they wouldn’t go off the road. He slid down in his seat, shucking off his officer’s coat and pants, replacing them with his infantry uniform and face mask, maneuvering around the arm his ‘little sister’ had so rudely invaded his space with.

Back to being Mao Zhilong, he popped up, taking the wheel from his province just in time to show the nice Security Forces men his ID card.

“Comrade Mao,” one of the usual officers greeted him, scanning the card and looking over the special papers his Countryhuman had

written for the Chinese ‘soldier,’ giving permission for him not to reveal his face. “You at the speech earlier?”

“I was.” His pulse spiked, remembering the way his comrade had screamed out at his people, filled with desperate defiance. “Were you able to attend, Comrade Oh?”

The man shook his head sadly, passing the papers back. “Shift had already started. But we heard the broadcast. Comrade Korea and the General can certainly speak.”

‘Yes he can.’ Especially when his heart was in it. China had been occupied with his trial and post-trial domestic affairs last Liberation Day, but he’d listened to his friend’s broadcast once he returned. And while he hasn’t been able to walk the streets last year, he was certain the difference between then and now had to be that between a path and courtyard.

See? Always fun to watch someone face their fears.

“So what do you think?” China felt the eyes of his ‘little sisters’ on him. “Will we get an armistice this year?”

The man was Security, trained in one of his comrade’s special schools, the urge to be cautious and secretive drilled into him. China watched his face attentively, pretending it was idly.

“One year or a hundred,” Oh said, straightening up and putting a fist over his heart. “I’ll be staying vigilant for the enemy for Comrade Korea.”

Not a direct answer, but China could see the way his lips twitched, the corners of his glowing eyes firming. He wished his comrade could see, but he had a feeling he wouldn’t even if he was here.

“And the PVA will be doing the same,” he said, touching two fingers to his brow in an informal salute. “I hope you have a boring watch. But if you don’t, put a bullet in the reactionary bastards for me.”

The middle-aged man grinned, assuring him he would as the sandbag roadblock was removed, and China drove through, off into

the dark hills between them and their border.

“Nosy,” Liaotung declared.

“Information-gathering,” he corrected, dropping the Korean he’d put on.

“Nosy,” Liaoxi agreed.

“By the way, how was he?” Liaotung asked, leaning back as they started to speed up.

‘He’ was of course a different ‘he’ than their Korean comrade. Both his ‘little sisters’ were aware of how *he* was. His mask was growing a bit rough around the edges.

“Aiya, now who’s nosy?”

“It’s not nosiness to ask about our country’s bus-i-ness,” Liaoxi defended.

“You know how it is,” he said vaguely. “Give an inch and some people will take ten more.”

“And you would know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Liaotung asked dryly.

“I’m an expert, really.” He reached over to spider his fingers up her ankle, taking another inch.

“And some people also gave Luda back,” Liaoxi reminded him. “We must remember that fact.”

“Dalian,” he corrected (even though that wasn't actually the official name), swatting at his other ‘little sister’s’ foot as she tried to nudge him with it.

“He’s being aloof,” Liaotung said, finally drawing her legs onto the back bench, safely out of his reach. “I think he likes it.”

China could still feel CCCP’s arms around him, radiating warmth like a mobile kang, and didn’t confirm or deny. He certainly didn’t

dislike their Soviet comrade's overfamiliarity. It was more the sentiment behind it he wished he could change.

"China is very grateful for all that our Comrade CCCP has done for us," he said, speeding up. "After all, rumour says he might've spared us the trouble of getting rid of that pesky Manchukuo, doesn't it?"

His 'little sisters' knew the truth of what had happened to his one-time sibling and their one-time cellmate. They stayed quiet.

"I'm going to get some sleep." Liaotung leaned back on the bench, sliding down against the drab headrest, stretching her legs out again.

They drove in silence for a half hour, through the winding hills and flat plains between Pyongyang and Anju, a more straightforward route than that they'd taken when first travelling this way with their comrade's army. China kept his eyes out the open side of the Jeep, watching the Korean countryside streak by in shades of grey and black, alert for the slightest dark shadow against the smoky clouds drifting over the claw moon and vast canvas of stars.

"So, how are you and your butterfly?" he eventually asked, keeping his voice low to avoid waking his sleeping province.

Liaoxi's head was turned from him, but he knew she was awake.

"How are you and your fish?" she murmured sleepily back.

Guessing what idiom she meant, China smiled. "Turns out you can find them in trees after all, if you wish."

"I love him," she said, nuzzling into her headrest. "Thank you for indulging my whim."

She was too tired to realize what she'd just admitted. China smiled, reaching over to place a hand on her knee.

"Hands on the wheel, hands on the wheel." She sat up, regaining a little consciousness.

“I’m glad such a nice emotion you get the chance to feel,” her country said innocently, putting both hands back on the hard olive wheel, but refusing to slow down.

He was. She really did deserve to feel it, as her.

Liaoxi held on to the curved side of the open cab, smiling. Sorrow clung to the corners.

She still hadn’t asked after what he had planned for her, or told her sister he was planning something. It filled China with pride, even if her mask was a touch subpar.

She was ready to play her role. All his provinces were. The letters they’d sent for their comrade when he asked, and those they’d sent to him proved it. Even Qinghai and those he’d shattered Sichuan into. It was about time he reconstituted her. The soldier boy would send the coded order in his next letter to his father.

He wished he could be there. He wanted to welcome his ‘little sister’ back now that she’d been broken of the Nationalist in her, to finish taming Qinghai, and to see Xinjiang perform the arts she’d chosen, song and dance, of course, as that was what the western province was famous for. Her letter had mentioned sanam particularly, which was promising. It was typically danced in a male-female pair, but she wasn’t close with the male provinces around her. China didn’t think he was wrong in interpreting it as a silent pledge.

Alas, he wouldn’t forsake Korea. Especially not now. It would have to do that his ‘little siblings’ all knew he was here, minus Tibet, whom he hadn’t been able to visit, and his Comrade Chairman wasn't yet allowed to summon. And they couldn’t risk telling him in a letter. One never knew if a monk would intercept it.

It had been a risk telling the others at all. There were several sensitive cases he’d had to consider deeply before deciding to, such as his Xinjiang. But in the end, he couldn’t have them thinking he was being so scarce because he didn’t care. And it looked like his trust hadn’t been for nothing, as Yankee bombs still weren’t falling farther than the provinces on the Korean border.

When this war was finally over, and China could go home, he knew they would be ready to shake their country to its roots. No. To cut them out and lay new ones.

China's provinces were ready to change.

"I don't feel safe when you look at the road that way," Liaoxi remarked, seeing the glow in his gaze.

"Then why don't you put those pretty eyes away?"

"Rhyming 'away' with 'way.'" Liaoxi shook her head. "Not very clever, I say."

China's hands tightened on the wheel as he was seized by a sudden rush of affection, pressing the gas pedal flush to the floor.

"You don't have to kill us over it," his province said mildly.

"Get some sleep for a bit," he replied, smiling over at her. "Gege will watch the road."

"And I'm sure he won't drive us off," she muttered, closing her eyes anyway.

"If he does, I'm sure you'll wake up to scoff."

Liaoxi hummed, turning in her seat so she was facing him, resting her cheek against the headrest. In a few minutes, her breathing had deepened under the rush of wind.

China reached over, brushing his hand across Liaotung's leg, then tucking her sister's collar over the gap between it and her scarlet scarf, shielding her neck from the air that whistled around their windshield. Even if it wasn't cold, the muggy heat of it could cause moisture in her chest. She didn't need that when their anti-germ warfare efforts had just started to make her sympathetic fever fade. His foot lifted off the gas, just a little.

He gave himself an ironic smile. Even if he had his reservations about CCCP's desire to play house from a political standpoint, he supposed he had no right to judge personally.

‘Sharing blood with someone does not always make them kin.’

They really were wise words. Not that Countryhumans could share blood or DNA, or any of the things that bound humans together in kinship. Even Liaoxi and Liaotung were only sisters because they’d once been one person, and shared a people. And they wouldn’t be for much longer.

A Countryhuman couldn't truly have a family. For most, it was something decided by shared history and land, or colonial relations, like their antagonist and the wretched empire that had birthed him. A meaningless word that meant nothing in comparison to political machinations or realpolitik.

If it did have meaning, it was usually an unpleasant one. In the end, a country could only have one representation.

If you considered a family bond something that could outlast betrayal and match your love for your nation, then the only countries he could name that truly had one were CCCP and his brood, and his comrade and his brother. And…

Well, he had told his friend what he needed to know. They would see, or they would not.

China wasn’t wired to have a real family bond, as he’d mulled over with Jingjing. But he wasn’t adverse to them. It was the opposite, really. He liked the idea of the new-type relationship CCCP and the other Socialist nations were building. ‘Son’ just wasn’t the role he had an interest in playing in that relationship. No matter how even-handed a parent was, there would always be an imbalance between them and a child. And that imbalance was even more severe when you added something like an atom bomb to the parent’s side.

He'd seen the thoughtful look in his friend’s eye, the same as that day he’d hunted him down on Jangsan. Hopefully he would think as deeply on it as China would, even if it couldn’t get him off the stage. After all, all good relationships were built on equality.

Blood was important to China’s nation, even more so than some.

Being a filial son, a dutiful daughter, a son-bearing wife, an obedient little sister, a gracious child. Confucius and other men like him had woven it into their society, entangling the threads likely too tightly to ever truly be removed.

It wasn't like China wanted to. He agreed with that most simple of truths- the strength of a nation derived from the integrity of the home. He just had different ideas of what ‘integrity’ was. He didn’t want the homes of China to breed blind obedience or undeserved piety. ‘Home’ wasn’t the place you were born in, and ‘family’ wasn’t someone you were obligated to love. Obligation and love were antithetical, even to a Countryhuman. China didn’t love his people because he was obligated to- he loved them because they were worthy of it.

He'd always liked the little sibling in plays, what they represented. But he’d never liked when the narrative refused to flesh them out. When the plot sent the hero off, leaving a little brother or sister, or mother or wife back home, or chasing after a father or older brother, and expected you to value the protagonist’s drive to see them again solely because of *what* they were, not *who* they were. It became less about love and more about the cold contractual need to pay back the person they’d been forced to wed, or had birthed and raised them, or grown up alongside, whether or not that childhood had been warm. It cheapened a story, and a protagonist.

China could remember reading those enemy propaganda leaflets in the Beijing library, the sordid tale of the territories of the Russian Empire uniting against their father and taking his head. The words had been supposed to fill the average reader with horror at the idea of barbaric foreigners turning against their own kin, and paint the Communist ideas that had already been gaining popularity across the nation as completely opposed to the Chinese way of life.

But all they had done was make China’s heart pound, and long to meet the man those unfilial children had become. Even before he’d left his tower, he had already decided that the blood inside someone’s veins was truly one of the most boring things to use to justify a family.

It was the blood outside that mattered. That which someone was

willing to shed for you, and you were willing to shed for them, to drench yourself with and let it seep inside you. Not an obligation, but a choice, the choice to die for your country or tap a vein for your comrades. None of the gold dust China had devoured compared to the blood staining the lips of those around him on that long march. Not even his second little sister's.

Family ties were forged with blood, not made of it. CCCP understood that. And he had committed to the forging back when China had directed him towards his Kuomintang. Even if it had showed a disappointing lack of faith in his Communists (one they had more than disproved, thank you), it also showed a willingness to work together in their shared struggle, as did his desire to help their Korean comrade now. Even if he couldn't step into the spotlight, he was taking risks to his own people by working backstage for Korea.

So long as the Soviet was willing to fulfill that 'paternal' role he wanted so badly, and didn't expect China to ever feel obligated to return it with filial piety, then China was willing to consider him family. He would even act the role of son, even if he was striving for something else.

'So long as he's useful, as some would say.' China smiled to himself, thinking of his friend's little wince as he'd said the words, picturing him doing the same as he said something similar about China to his General.

He looked over his shoulder, taking his eyes off the road and keeping his foot on the gas, picturing North waking alone down the dark highway behind him, back to overwork himself. He would have driven him to Pyongyang, if he didn't know he would reject the offer. He could have said it was good his comrade would get the chance to relax his mask, but he knew he didn't do that even when alone (or when he thought he was).

Unfortunately, he didn't think his friend had the same view on family as he and their Soviet 'father' did. His rejection of CCCP's sensible words had been predictable.

It wasn't as if China could blame him. It had taken decades for the

Russian Empire's territories to turn against their patriarch, even with all his mistreatment. And hadn't he felt his own reluctance for just a second as his little sister had looked up at him as the army rushed to leave? And he hadn't known her for nearly as long. Though admittedly, it did have something to do with the nature of her request.

'I want you to eat me.'

And China would be far from the first person who had a right to protest his friend's rigid definition of family, at least eighteenth in line. Nineteenth, if you counted his General. And his comrade would probably put him much farther back on that list, though he was taking the liberty of placing himself ahead of CCCP.

Oh well. That wasn't what he was here for. He had no right to interfere in family affairs. He was simply trying to make sure his friend wasn't the one who would end up consumed, if in a different way than China's little siblings.

And to try and convince him that someone cared. That that new-type relationship was possible, between all the working people of the world. And between their countries.

He reached into his sleeve, steering with his knee as he felt the edges of that waxed paper tucked next to the jade stone, smiling as the Jeep weaved across the road in lazy arcs.

After all, Korea had already proven it to him.

If you asked North to untangle the ball of string that is his feelings about other friendly Countryhumans, he would just set the entire thing on fire.
To dive in to China's view on family, he sort of idolizes the idea of it, which is very tied to lots of things that he's gone through, and also his culture in general. He doesn't like the idea of blind love/piety, and seeks to change it, but he also can't help but admire the concept. He really does love Zhao Jingjing and sees her as his sister, just like he loved □□□□□□□, and loves his provinces. But since he idolizes family as this unbreakable

bond that can't be affected by betrayal (even if it should be), he feels like he can't say he loves them like real siblings. If one of them betrayed him, he wouldn't love them any less, but he would be perfectly capable of killing/reconstituting them. For the sake of the nation, he's willing to reconstitute his provinces *without* them betraying him. He'll grieve and regret that it had to be done, but not that he did it. To him, North is the perfect example of a real sibling- South cut out his eye and is a genuine threat to the country, but he still loves him and has no intention of removing him, where China would without hesitation. So surely China can't truly be capable of real family love. There's a period of time where he sort of reconsiders this (spoiler warning for the Sino-Soviet split) because of CCCP. He doesn't have the option to kill or eliminate him, and he's not truly the one that betrayed/is working against him (a thousand-thousand curses upon Khrushchev and his ilk), and he finds that he can't really cut him off either , even though his government wants him to. He justifies it by saying its for their nation's sake by keeping the countries friendly even if their governments aren't, but he's also fully aware it looks bad for him to still be spending holidays in the Soviet Union when they're asking America if they'd interfere if they bombed him. He does eventually cut him off (and then, well, we know who else he cuts off), which solidifies his view that he just isn't capable of real family love. But he *is* capable of being loyal like a dog. He also learns that grief is much more difficult to accept when the person you're grieving isn't dead.

A reminder that in real life it was sixteen armies against the DPRK (plus Rhee's and medical troops), but in this Norway has joined with a small (mostly ceremonial) force, so that's why North says it's seventeen. Also koyangi and kangnaengi are Korean for cat and corn. 고양이/강냉이. North isn't sure if he hates Hae naming animals or the names she chooses for the animals more.

If you're interested in China's touchiness with CCCP, it's because he tailors his levels with people. CCCP wants that physical intimacy to reinforce that they're family, so China gives it to him. North gets uncomfortable when he's touched,

so China maintains some distance. His ideal touchiness with people he likes is to be pressed up against them or draped across their shoulder like a cat though, so he does let some of that seep through with North (andalsomaybebecauseit'snotthatNorthdoesn'twanttobetouchedbuttha

Sarang, Sarang

The air under the trees was hot and sticky, clinging to North Pyongan's cobalt skin and making him wish for the cool breeze of the open sea as he hiked up Mount Taesong. The higher crags of the eastern foothills prevented even weak fingers of wind from parting the emerald branches overhead.

"Are you alright?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Take no fright," Liaoxi panted from a few paces back. "I'm better off than the ride here. Big Brother made us cool him off the entire time, I fear."

China clearly still hadn't adapted to the summer heat. And, if last year was an indicator, would not.

"Did he bring a fan?"

Liaoxi puffed out her cheeks as she nodded. "He's an awful man."

North Pyongan chuckled, shifting his bag of grain to one arm as he helped her up a small incline.

They padded through the woods, his guards occasionally visible as flashes of green-brown through the maze of undergrowth and slender tree trunks. He disliked having to haul them up into the hills in the heat, but knew they wouldn't obey if he told them to wait at the bottom. Even though it was unlikely one of the enemy air drop operations would be so close to Pyongyang, where the skies were constantly monitored, neither them nor Korea wanted to risk the provinces being alone. And if North Pyongan got captured again…

Well. He would just make sure he gave Kim Don-om and Ho Yong-ik a chance to rest before they left for Sinuiju tonight.

"I'm sorry I have to leave later," he said to Liaoxi as they hiked

through the woods, following the footpath worn through the hills. “It’s Party work. Korea wants me focused.”

It was time for the minor Party cell elections to begin, and to carry out his post-Liberation Day rounds. Their people needed to see their provinces on the ground, still faithfully carrying their flag forward to victory and guiding them with sure feet.

Though the idea of leaving Korea alone right now…

“It’s more than fine,” Liaoxi dismissed. “I’m sure my sister and I can find something to do to pass the time.”

“Like hand out more supplies?”

“If someone told you we do that, they are spreading lies.” Liaoxi said it lightly, not seeming bothered that he knew it was her lying. Or performing, rather.

He smiled to himself, not pushing. He wasn’t sure if Korea knew the full extent of how much China had the Liaos doing, but he knew if he had been able to hear enough refugees telling him to thank the PVA for their donations, then his Countryhuman had, too.

He still wished Korea would thank Liaoxi and her sister directly, and China. But he knew not to push. It was miraculous enough that he had dedicated an entire section of his Liberation Day speech to praising their allies. That was what the Premier did, not Korea.

‘Even if he had that look in his eye he gets when he has to criticize himself at a session.’ It was progress, anyway.

They followed the path until the land started to slope into the dip where Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin’s house was. As always when he saw the little hut his sister and Chagang had built, guilt seized his heart.

He had told them they could return to Ganghwa soon. That had been over a year ago now.

‘Mister Yun Chi-sam died without ever going home. I don’t want that to happen to us.’

North Pyongan took a deep breath, forcing away that feeling, like a broad-banded sea snake lurking just under the water.

It wouldn't happen to them. They would get a ceasefire like Korea said, and it wouldn't take a hundred years. Han-jin and Tae-min would live to see it, so long as he took care of them.

Lifting the sack in his arms, he descended into the dip.

Their boys were home today, and lounging around in the heat like cats in a courtyard. Han-jin was on his stomach in the dirt next to the cooking pit, face down and shirt off, while Tae-min was half-inside, leaning against the open doorframe and fanning himself limply with a hand. Neither of them had noticed he and Liaoxi yet.

"Your skin's going to get darker," Tae-min warned his friend as he stretched out in the sun.

"Don't care," Han-jin mumbled into the dirt. "'S too hot. And you like my tan."

"I *never* said that," Tae-min denied, flushed from the heat. "And you wouldn't *be* so hot if you got out of the sun."

"Lazy." Han-jin spread both his arms, melting into the ground in a puddle of bronzed flesh and curly hair.

"You're going to get all dirty," his friend grumbled, looking away. "I'm going to make you sleep on the floor."

"I'll sleep right here."

Tae-min shuffled sideways slightly, stretching out his good leg as he tried to reach his friend to nudge him with his foot, eyes narrowed and tongue poking from his mouth in concentration. As he did, he noticed the provinces reaching the bottom of the dip, jerking up.

"Hyung."

Han-jin raised his head, blinking muzzily. His eyes widened as he saw Liaoxi, and he shot up with sudden vigour, grabbing his shirt

and tossing it on.

"Sorry, noona," he apologized as he swiftly buttoned up the peasant garment.

"It's no problem, I ken," Liaoxi assured him good-naturedly. "A woman in the army sees a lot of shirtless men."

But not in their army unit. Korea wouldn't let them remove their tunics even at the bunker now (though South Pyongan and North Hamgyong didn't always obey that when he wasn't around). He said it was to conceal their burns from their people and the Chinese, but they all knew he was thrilled to have an excuse to reinforce the rule he had tried to set during their guerrilla days. His sister's label of 'prude' for their Countryhuman had never been false.

Not that North Pyongan would wear his sleeveless summer undershirt even if he had permission. He preferred modesty, too, though the lack of it didn't make him as uncomfortable as Korea.

And he knew he was right when it came to being in public. North Hamgyong really shouldn't take his jacket off around their railway workers, no matter how hot he got working on the lines. Even with the bandages, their workers would spot the blood that soaked them as he hammered a tie into the ground. Every time they changed for the night, North Pyongan could see the muddy red stains he brought home on his undershirt.

They needed to hide them, at least from their people. If they were fearing for their provinces, their steps might falter.

And they needed to hide them from Korea, too. Even if he knew they were there.

Tae-min was eyeing he and Liaoxi, and the Korean province took what he tried to make a subtle step away, putting a bit of space between them. The two had guessed he had feelings for her, but like the rest of their people, they couldn't know he had acted on them.

"You don't have to get up," he told Tae-min, but as usual, he

ignored him, maneuvering his lame leg around and using the doorframe to haul himself to his feet.

He had gotten handy with working around the disability, but he still staggered slightly. Han-jin reached for him, drew back, then reached for him again, though at that point his friend was standing firm with his cane. He ended up patting his shoulder somewhat awkwardly.

North Pyongan eyed Tae-min, but he looked more exasperated than irritated, scrunching his nose as his eyes flicked down to his friend's mismatched buttons, done up wrong in his haste.

South Pyongan had told him about her talk with Han-jin (though he was sure her claim that by simply telling him she thought he was awesome she had single-handedly lifted his mood, solved all his 'stupid emotional issues,' and set him on the path to being a Buddhist(?) was an exaggeration). And she had confessed how she had exposed his fear about being useless to Tae-min to the other boy.

As much as North Pyongan was sure neither had enjoyed that, he thought it had helped. The building tension he had sensed from Han-jin over the months leading up to it had dispersed over the past two. Perhaps all he needed was someone willing to confront him directly, and with less concern than he had been showing him. They were, in the end, men, and his sister was better at talking to them that way, he wasn't embarrassed to admit.

Though he wouldn't say it was all smooth seas between them now. Aside from Han-jin's awkward assistance, he couldn't help but notice that Tae-min seemed to be avoiding his eyes.

Han-jin seemed to notice it, too. He was burning holes into his friend's downturned face, before his own eyes widened as he suddenly whirled to the provinces.

"Did you hear us when you were walking up?"

North Pyongan nodded, and he rushed, "When Tae-min said that thing about the bed he just meant he was kicking me out of the

house, we don’t-"

“Hyung,” Tae-min said sharply, rapping him on the ankle with his cane.

Han-jin’s jaw clacked shut as he ducked his head, wincing.

“We’re well aware what you meant.” Liaoxi sounded vaguely amused.

North Pyongan didn’t entirely see why the two were embarrassed about sharing a bed (which was obvious, considering he had been inside their house and seen that their thin futons were both behind the dividing curtain). But perhaps that was just the view of someone who had spent years curled up with his sister in back alleys, then with his cousins and soldiers in the wilds and foxholes. The winter’s cold and artillery firing on your position didn’t leave space for shame at falling asleep with your head on the shoulder of a man you had only just met, let alone a close comrade.

It was one of those things that made him realize how much of what was normal to him was shaped by their early days, and the decades of war. Even once they won, and he could set down his gun and never take another life, God willing and his duty permitting… those years would never truly fade. They would be with him for a very long time, likely forever. His 'normal' would always be coloured by war, even in peace.

'So long as it isn't drowned in it.'

Politely pretending Han-jin hadn’t spoken, and that he didn’t know their sleeping arrangement, North Pyongan hefted the sack of grain.

“I brought some extra rations.”

It was Saturday, which meant Korea wouldn’t decapitate him for giving away half of his.

“We don’t need them,” Tae-min said immediately, and for once instead of telling him not to be stubborn, Han-jin nodded.

“Auntie Oh Yang-hwa and the others sent us home with kimchi

and stuff yesterday. We've got plenty."

He gestured at the side of the house, where a few boards had been placed over a hole dug between a cradle of tree roots.

"We finally made a real kimchi pit," Han-jin said proudly. "Together."

The corners of Tae-min's lips softened slightly as he leaned on his cane. "And we have plenty of people looking out for us. Lots of the refugees don't. I think you should give any 'extra rations' to them from now on." He puffed air up at his limp bangs. "It's too hot to cook today anyway."

"You might feel better if you just took off your shirt," Han-jin pointed out.

"Not happening."

"Tae-min's afraid of ruining his lily-white skin," his friend informed the provinces.

"I never *said* that."

It was clear even if he had, he hadn't meant it. The boy's skin was shades darker than when they had first met, darkened by spending his days doing laundry and sewing uniforms under the sun. The forearms exposed by his rolled-up white sleeves were especially tanned, marred with small scars where oil had splattered as he helped the older women cook meals for their soldiers.

North Pyongan's heart swelled as the two bickered, exchanging looks with Liaoxi. Her eyes squinched up in the shadows of her scarf, clearly smiling under her mask.

"Alright," he told them, interrupting Tae-min listing out how many freckles Han-jin had. "But if you ever need an extra meal, you only have to tell me."

Tae-min's dark eyes lingered on the sack of rice, then went to his. "How many meals have we taken from you already?"

They were clever, and around enough people at the rest house that would talk. They had likely realized awhile ago that there was no ‘Food Administration Bureau’ program.

“None I couldn’t afford to miss.” Not after Korea had reprimanded them anyway.

Tae-min looked away. “We appreciate it. But we don’t need it anymore.”

“I’m your Provincehuman,” North Pyongan reminded him. “I am meant to serve you. If you ever do, I’ll be here.”

“If we do, we’ll tell you,” Han-jin promised, hesitantly placing a hand on Tae-min’s shoulder. “We should… accept help when we need it, right Tae-min?”

His friend shifted slightly, but didn’t move away. “…Right.”

North Pyongan smiled. “And I hope you don’t mind if I still visit.”

Once it got a bit closer to winter, he wanted to bring his sister up here to replace the straw under their crude roof tiles, as they had at the end of the last one.

Hopefully they would have a ceasefire by then, but… It was best to be prepared.

But maybe he wouldn’t tell Korea about it.

Han-jin shook his head. “Obviously not. Hyung got us this house, he’s welcome here anytime.”

Tae-min nodded. “And if you ever need your rations cooked or your uniform sewed, you can come to the rest house.”

“And that goes for masked noona, too,” Han-jin told Liaoxi. “The aunties love you.”

The Chinese woman preened. “Then time there I will surely say I spent.”

The boy tipped his head. “Is it ever hard to pay attention to what other people are saying when you’re trying to remember what you said before so you can rhyme it?”

“A poet never reveals her method,” Liaoxi said mysteriously.

“What are you gonna rhyme with ‘method?’”

“Something I will say later, so you will never know where I was head-od.”

“Ohhh.” Han-jin elbowed Tae-min. “She’s good.”

Tae-min gave North Pyongan a long-suffering look, and he smiled.

“Thank you.” He shifted the rice sack onto his shoulder. “Then I’ll go find someone else to benefit from the program today.”

“Comrade Pak Do-se and his sister are staying in a cave a little higher up.” Tae-min gestured higher in the foothills. “They’re non-productive workers.”

“We’ll drop by then.” Well, he would. Liaoxi would wait out of sight. Even if she was going around with her sister helping civilians, it was best to avoid them seeing her when they could.

As they left, Tae-min said, “Wait.”

When they looked back, he asked, “Has anything happened with Doctor Gangwon?”

North Pyongan had told them about his cousin’s abduction when they had asked after him before.

He shook his head regretfully. “It looks like we will have to wait for the ceasefire to get him back.”

And longer. It wouldn’t be until a final end was put to the war, and Reunification came.

Tae-min looked down, knuckles clenching around the magpie-headed cane Gangwon had carved for him.

It wasn't hard to guess at what he was thinking. They wouldn't be able to go home until then, either.

And even when he wasn't here, America was still stalling the talks.

Han-jin's fingers twitched for his friend, but he didn't commit this time. "Tell Doctor Kangwon we're still thinking about him."

"I will."

South Pyongan had finally spoken to Kangwon about it, giving him something more meaningful than 'If the Yank touches him, I'll gut him.' And it was Kangwon himself that had told him that, so he knew the way she hadn't been able to look him in the eyes when she had done the same was from embarrassment, not because she was lying.

North Pyongan was proud of his sister. He knew it had been hard for her, even when she cared for Kangwon as much as he did. It had taken him long enough to gather the courage to reach out to him, after all. Too long. And after meeting Guk Gun's daughter, it should have taken even longer for her to… She wouldn't like him implying she hadn't had the courage to do it. But she didn't like having to face too many emotions at once.

Of course, he knew better than anyone that nothing they could say could fix the hole in Kangwon's heart. Only getting his brother back would do that.

He knew better than almost anyone.

They bid Tae-min and Han-jin farewell, following the directions the former had given them up into the hills, looking for Pak Do-se's cave.

As they left, he heard Tae-min mutter, "Come here. Your buttons are wrong."

Looking back showed that he had pulled Han-jin closer, nimble fingers putting the plastic discs where they belonged. The taller boy was staring at him intensely as he did, but Tae-min kept his gaze down, only looking away to glance after the provinces, ducking

when he saw North Pyongan already looking.

“Our boys have come a long way, I say,” Liaoxi said proudly as they left the dip.

North Pyongan flushed, as he always did when she used those words. “They have.”

Though sorrow still lingered in the dark eyes that had watched them closely, even now that Tae-min had thrown off the shadow that had clung to him ever since losing Ganghwa. It was obvious that being driven from his home and losing the people he cared about would still haunt him, as it did Han-jin, and North Pyongan.

A wide, desperate white eye. 'I promise.'

And Korea.

But… he couldn’t help but feel like that wasn’t all it was. It was just intuition, but it was the same intuition that tingled when his sister was being too loud and boastful, telling him she was trying to drown something out. And he was… almost always right about her.

He would just have to keep doing what he could for them, even if it wasn’t with rations anymore.

“I’m glad we met them,” he said.

His comrade nodded, her eyes sorrowing. “To think what could’ve befallen them if we hadn’t brings me fright.”

It brought it to North Pyongan, too. If they hadn’t been there to save the two, Kim Kang-sim would have done worse than maim Tae-min. And even if he hadn’t, his father would have removed them after, the way the Reapers and Rhee’s army had removed their parents.

“We would have been four ships passing in the night,” he murmured. “With two destined to sink.”

Just like he and South Pyongan.

There were so many moments like that in his life. If they hadn't met, if they hadn't chosen that exact road in the mountains that would lead them to Pak Chae-eun, or if they had frozen before they reached the church, if Korea hadn't been found by some of the few people that could point him towards Kangwon, if those villagers so far from Pyongyang hadn't heard about North Pyongan and his sister being imprisoned there, and dozens more. Most recently, if Kangwon hadn't heard a Maine accent before and been able to match it to coast dialect from North Pyongan's province to expose the enemy agent.

Even now, North Pyongan could never understand how the concept of God's hand having no part in all of it as He reached out in the meager way He could, but rather only cold, uncaring coincidence, didn't terrify his cousins. 'Coincidence' was just another word for luck. If it was only coincidence, it could have never happened. And they might miss a hundred other coincidences, and end up worse off for it, ships sailing off into the opens seas.

He knew they had their people to thank for many of those things, and that they had to make what they wanted to happen happen. He couldn't depend on God and pray everything would he okay. He had to help *make* it okay, like at the Supung Dam. And… it might have been coincidence that they had chosen that road in the Kumgang Mountains. But *he* had been the one to get them to the church without freezing.

Maybe the fear he still felt at the idea was just some part of him deep down in the leagues of his soul that was still afraid to take responsibility, to step up and walk beside Korea. But there were so many times where no matter how hard they or their people had striven for something, it wouldn't have happened without what his family saw as luck. They hadn't known that Hae had existed, or even thought that she might. If it hadn't been for one Japanese soldier seeing the light and stumbling across the rumours of where their unit was at the time, or if Korea had chosen to shoot first instead of ask questions…

They would probably only have one Hwanghae. And if they hadn't taken the exact route at the exact time they had in Onsu-ri, they

would have no Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin.

"Do not overthink," Liaoxi chided, sensing his thoughts. "We were there, and you've been able to help the pair."

'Not enough.' He knew he couldn't change the course of the war. But that promise he had made still hung over him like the clouds that would roll in to break this heatwave.

He looked down, and Liaoxi reached out, wrapping her arm around his and pulling him to a halt before they could leave the treeline.

"Have you been feeling okay?" she asked quietly. "I've noticed you've been quiet since that day."

He knew what day she had to mean. North Pyongan hesitated, then made a hand gesture at the trees, sending his bodyguards off to scout where they couldn't hear them. Even though they were his comrades, they were still their people. Korea wouldn't want them overhearing anything emotional. Really, he wouldn't want Liaoxi hearing it either.

"I'm sorry."

"No sorry," Liaoxi replied. "I just feel a little worry."

"I'm alright," he told her.

And he was. She and Hae had reached out to him after the trial, and he had spoken with Kangwon about it when he gave blood. And his sister had given him one of her famous 'He sucked, be glad he's dead' speeches. And while North Pyongan couldn't be glad…

"I don't regret it," he mused. "I'm just… grieving."

He looked down a little shamefully at the admission. He hadn't told South Pyongan that, but she had known. She had told him it was stupid, then stayed with him on watch, even though she had one of the last shifts scheduled.

Perhaps it was stupid. But he couldn't just change the way he felt.

He couldn't make it stop hurting, only allow the ache to fade on its own.

Liaoxi stared at him for a long moment, the only sound the distant thrumming of cicadas that had been spared from eradication, and the rustling of the ferns as something moved through them. Looking into her eyes, North Pyongan suddenly felt the urge to ask if *she* was okay.

"Can I give you an inquiry?" she asked quietly, and when he nodded- "Would you still have chosen to meet Pak Chae-eun, even knowing your relationship had an expiry?"

Her eyes flicked down, looking almost frustrated, perhaps by the confines of her cí.

"Even knowing how it would end," she tried again. "Would you still have wanted to consider him a friend?"

"Yes," North Pyongan said without hesitation.

Pak Chae-eun had been important to him, even in the short time they had known each other, and not just because he had given him faith in God.

He had given him faith in people, too. The bud of it, at least, for Korea and their peasants to water. He had been the first person to extend a hand to them, to help them and show them kindness. In the years after, when he would watch grown men sneer with delight as they broke his sister's ribs in the ring, or when one would ask how much North Pyongan would take for her, or sore losers would hunt them down after, or a farmer tried to sell them out for money, he had kept the memory of the man in his mind like he kept his Bible in his hands.

North Pyongan had never felt like people were cruel or wicked, even if flawed. He had understood that most of them were just doing what they could to survive, too, in the world Japan had trapped them all in, and that those who truly were belonged in the minority.

But he felt like part of that had been thanks to not just his religious beliefs, but Pak Chae-eun. Even if he had been offered another way towards religion, whether it was overhearing a church sermon or having it forced upon him like it had been Sang, he wouldn't have taken it. There could be no better thing to turn him towards the Lord than the kindness of man.

He wouldn't give Pak Chae-eun credit for him choosing to follow Korea or believing in his dream. But he would give him it for the fact that when Korea had extended his offer to join him to fight for their people, not a single part of him had wanted to ask 'What have they ever done for us?'

"You're so sure?" Liaoxi murmured, tilting her head.

"I am," North Pyongan said again without hesitation. "I regret that he betrayed me, but I don't regret that it hurt enough to be a betrayal."

Even if he hadn't truly known him. He had thought he had. And the old priest was still the man that had helped him and South Pyongan, and still would have, right up until the end.

"I think…" He mulled over a way to put it. "It's hard to regret the people you care for. If I had… lost my sister when she was sent to the POW camp-" He couldn't help the small reflexive cross he made. "It would have destroyed me."

He knew he never would have been able to feel whole again. He would never be able to feel like a *person* again, only the part of South Pyongan she had left behind.

"But I would never have regretted knowing her. I would never have chosen not to."

The warmth of her grin as she slid over a fence with fresh clothes in her arms, or the weight of her legs splayed across his as she drooled in her sleep. Her wink from behind Korea's back as he lectured him, and the little snorting laugh she made when she was amused. It would hurt to lose those things, but it would be worse for them to never be familiar to him at all. Even if the weight of the

memories made it hard to walk forward.

"And I feel that way about Pak Chae-eun, too, and everyone I've lost."

Chagang had put it well that night, when he spoke to North Hamgyong, poetic in the blunt way he sometimes was.

'I don't like grief. But it's part of love.'

His lips twitched as he thought of a Mandarin rhyme for Liaoxi.

"Even if love makes our hearts break, if it was that or nothing, wouldn't you take the ache?"

He smiled up at her. She stared back, pearlescent eyes filled with some inscrutable emotion, then lifted her hands, placing them firmly on his cheeks.

"I want to kiss you," she announced, and before he could do more than flush, brought his face to hers.

She was still wearing her mask. He could feel the warmth of her breath and the softness of her lips through the thin black fabric as it chafed against his, and it was making him forget how to kiss back, and also breathe.

Liaoxi made a discontented noise as she realized the mask was getting between them, pulling away slightly.

North Pyongan sucked in air like he had been drowning for a second time, face even hotter than before, feeling like he was about to melt into the leaf litter.

"That… didn't rhyme," he managed lamely, the last word swallowed by Liaoxi as she kissed him again, the mask gone now.

He managed to react this time, placing his hands on her hips, too overwhelmed to hesitate as she leaned into him, still gripping his face with her hands like she was trying to anchor him to her. It was nothing like the other gentle kisses they had shared. She was kissing him almost hungrily, lips melting against his until it was getting

almost unbearable to breathe, before she would gasp against his mouth like she was coming up for air after being waterboarded. North Pyongan certainly felt like he was, head spinning too much to remember they were standing on a mountain with other people on it as he kissed her back, losing track of time and forgetting the agony that wrapped his body, only conscious of the heat melding them together and her lips on his.

She finally pulled back without immediately plunging in again, panting against his lips as he tried to catch his own breath.

"Is it alright if I love you?" she rasped, voice thick, and somehow more heat plumed in North Pyongan, a wave of emotion swelling and crashing over his heart as he moved his hands to cup her face the way she was cupping his.

"I hope it is," he murmured, choking on his heart. "Because I love you, too."

Liaoxi's citrine face lit up, her eyes glistening, and he was about to kiss her again when there was a muffled sound from the trees behind them.

Somehow North Pyongan had felt less fear in open combat before. His insides immediately filled with ice water, sweeping away the warmth as he spun around, placing himself in front of Liaoxi, pistol in hand, hoping it was an enemy he could take out and knowing it almost definitely wasn't.

"Wait, don't shoot!"

The person stumbled out from a cluster of ferns, and North Pyongan realized how they had been allowed past his guards.

"Tae-min?"

The boy's face was as scarlet as his had to be indigo, almost tripping as his cane got caught on a root.

"I wasn't being a pervert, I swear," he rushed, trying to hide his face with one hand. "I stopped looking when you started- I- I didn't mean- I only followed to-"

His slender shoulders hunched as he managed to look up, cheeks still stained red as his eyes flicked between North Pyongan and Liaoxi.

"You're really…"

Liaoxi. He had seen her without her mask.

"It isn't like that," North Pyongan said, trying to block her with his body. "Comrade Liao Sh- Liao- *Comrade Liaoxi…* just got here," he finished, sounding even less convincing than his sister did when she lied.

Tae-min obviously wasn't convinced. "We've known who masked noona is for awhile, hyung."

North Pyongan winced, looking over his shoulder, finding that Liaoxi hadn't bothered to put her mask back on, but was holding it over her face instead, bright orange spilling around the edges.

It looked like he had been the only one that thought Tae-min and Han-jin didn't know who she was.

Yet Tae-min's face was still filled disbelief as he looked between them, and his voice was drenched with it, too. "I mean… You're actually together."

"Um." North Pyongan looked back at Liaoxi, but she was still hiding, looking like a turtle without a shell. "Yes. It looks like it's not impossible for us to be together after all."

He was desperately hoping Tae-min would leave and free them from this awkward conversation. But the boy just shook his head.

"It is," he said shakily. "You're not just a Korean province and a Chinese soldier- you're a Korean province and a *Chinese province.* It's…" His knuckles tightened around his cane, throttling the wooden magpie. "It's *wrong."*

North Pyongan winced. This was part of why Korea hadn't wanted their people to find out he was even with someone they only thought was a foreign soldier.

Before he could tell Tae-min his relationship with Liaoxi didn't interfere with his duty to their nation, Liaoxi said, "No true love can ever be wrong."

They looked over at her, peeking from over the mask still pressed to her face. She wasn't as shy as she sometimes pretended, but it was clear that getting caught in a… moment of vulnerability was making her want to drown herself in the Taedong as much as North Pyongan.

Tae-min stubbornly shook his head. "No, it is. It's not- It's not right. You *can't* be together."

Liaoxi lifted her face, her orange flush fading as she watched him wrap an arm around himself, the other still holding tight to his cane.

"And why do you sing such a song?" she asked softly.

Remembering what Han-jin had said about their bet before he had confessed to Liaoxi, North Pyongan asked, "Because you think we're doomed?"

"You *are* doomed." Tae-min scraped his fingers through his hair, sounding almost frantic. "You're not- You can't be together, you can't have a *future* together."

"Maybe that's so," Liaoxi said, her voice quiet as she took North Pyongan's hand. "But if we don't try, we'll never know."

"But-" Tae-min's face was filled with a distress that went beyond thinking one of his Provincehumans might be compromised.

North Pyongan didn't entirely understand it, but he knew he couldn't leave comforting one of his people to Liaoxi.

"Things might get difficult for us after the war," he voiced the thought he had had the night he confessed to her. "But even if they do, and we can't be together anymore, we'll always have the memories we made now. 'Isn't never worse than was?'"

He couldn't help but smile at Liaoxi as he echoed her words, and

her eyes curved like crescents. She squeezed his hand before letting go, walking to Tae-min, taking his trembling hands in hers as she held them over his cane.

"Tae-min," she said gently. "You heard what Comrade North Pyongan said about aches and breaks. If Han-jin died tomorrow, would you erase him to erase the sorrow?"

"Yes." Tae-min dipped his head, eyes squeezed shut, then said in a small voice, "…No."

"Mm. When it comes to 'doomed,' life can leave us unfaired." Liaoxi smiled at him, mask off. "But the only love to regret is the love not shared."

Tae-min stared down at their interlaced fingers. North Pyongan was shocked to see glittering diamonds fall from his eyes to stain their knuckles as his face screwed up, tears starting to pour down his cheeks.

A sob tore its way from his chest as his legs buckled, dropping his cane to wrap his arms around himself. Liaoxi caught him, slowing his descent, and he buried his tears in her neck as they kneeled on the ground.

North Pyongan hovered over them, unsure of what to do. He didn't really understand why Tae-min was crying, but he still placed a hand on his shoulder, rubbing it as he cried into Liaoxi.

He gave his comrade a concerned look, but she just smiled, patting Tae-min's heaving back until the boy pulled back.

"Ssi-bal," he croaked, voice choked as he swiped his forearm across his face. "I'm still such a crybaby."

"There isn't any shame in crying," North Pyongan told him. "Even if it can't change anything."

Tae-min sniffled. "I'm… sorry for spying on you two."

"It's alright," his province assured him. "Just please don't tell anyone."

“If I tell Han-jin, I’ll lose the bet,” he muttered, wiping at his eyes.

He was going to have to tell Korea the boys knew Liaoxi was here. Or maybe he shouldn’t. Liaoxi seemed fine with them knowing, which meant China must be, too. And he trusted them not to tell the enemy. He didn’t want Korea feeling like he had to isolate them to… keep China safe, as strange as that thought was.

“You should get back to your domicile,” Liaoxi said, picking up Tae-min’s cane and placing it in his hands. She smiled, tipping her head. “I think for you Han-jin has been waiting awhile.”

He opened his mouth, a mix of fear and shame flashing across his face, before he nodded, jaw firming.

“He has.”

Liaoxi stood, and North Pyongan helped Tae-min up, watching as he hobbled away.

Though he stopped before he could go, pressing his chin to his chest. “Um, thanks, noona. And Comrade North Pyongan.” He sounded almost childishly shy. “Thank you.”

“Anything for a comrade,” the Chinese woman said.

“I live to guide our people,” North Pyongan told him, though he still had no idea what guidance he had just helped provide.

Tae-min limped away, leaving him baffled and unsure of what to say.

He awkwardly straightened his hat, embarrassment creeping back in as his mind replayed what Tae-min would have heard and seen as he hid. Even if he had closed his eyes when they began kissing, they had been being… noisy.

“I feel like… I’m missing something.” That was an acceptable place to start. “What happened there?”

Liaoxi hesitated, then slid her mask back on. “I don’t think that’s mine to share. But I think our boys will be just fine.”

She gave him a reassuring smile, taking his arm.

“Then I suppose for more of an answer, I won’t pine,” North Pyongan said, accepting that so long as Tae-min and Han-jin would be okay, he didn’t need to know the specifics.

They stood there for a moment, shuffling their feet.

North Pyongan rubbed the bandages on the back of his head. “About-"

“No!” Liaoxi squeaked, slapping her palms over the sides of her head. “Let’s not talk about that so! *Ever.”*

The Korean man immediately nodded, relieved. “Alright, let’s not. We should go.”

He snatched up the rice sack, calling out for his guards as he fast-walked away, Liaoxi silently walking just as speedily next to him.

“Please don’t tell your sister about this,” she begged after a few minutes.

“Please don’t tell Comrade China about it,” he replied, just as desperate.

But they both knew the two were equally as capable of scenting embarrassment like a shark scented blood. If they were riding alone together to their provinces, South Pyongan would get it out of him. And if they weren't, then she would be waiting for him when they both returned, ready to pounce. The same went with China, even if Korea took him with him on his Liberation Day tour.

“If I died tomorrow, it would be bliss,” Liaoxi sighed, pulling her crimson scarf over her eyes.

“Please don’t,” North Pyongan said mildly, though he knew he was going to feel the same. “I would miss you. Even if we’re doomed, let it not be so soon.”

He couldn't see Liaoxi's face past her scarf.

"I'm sure it won't be," she assured him after a moment. "I know tomorrow you'll still have me."

As embarrassed as North Pyongan was, he couldn't help but feel warm, drowning out even the pain of his burns and aching in his stomach. He felt full for the first time in months.

'I love you.'

His heart thrilled, and he wanted to take Liaoxi by the hand again. Only the knowledge that his guards were watching now stopped him.

Even if the talk of being doomed made him uneasy, it was washed away by that pure feeling, the same one that had filled him yesterday as he looked up at Korea on the theatre steps. He no longer thought of Jesus Christ when he was lit by the flame of the setting sun- only his Countryhuman, though not in the way Korea was afraid of.

Love.

North Pyongan didn't deny evolution, but he couldn't believe Hwang when he said that love was a trait developed for survival. Even if humans needed it for breeding and social bonding, what did Countryhumans need it for? They couldn't reproduce, and they didn't need love to survive. And they didn't evolve. Or at least, there wasn't any proof they had.

Hwang said theory posited that it was an incentive to treat their people well. But they didn't need an incentive- in the far distant days, when historians mostly agreed that each tribe of people would have had one Tribehuman to represent them, if they didn't protect those people, they could simply leave. There were no true borders or state organs to stop them. If their representation didn't provide, the tribe members could just walk away and join another, or make a new one. And their old Tribehuman would dissolve. That *was* their survival incentive.

And when you were a revolutionary, you knew that more often than not, love did not lead to survival. When Kim Pan-suk ran to

distract the reactionaries on Ganghwa, when Han-jin went back to try and rescue Chun-hui and her family, when North Pyongan followed Kim Jin, even knowing it was a trap, when Korea threw himself into Seodaemun or Seoul, when his sister jammed the muzzle of her pistol into her chest to avoid being used to hurt the people she loved, and every time their soldiers took to the field to battle for their families and those they would never meet, they were always risking death, and sometimes met it. And they wouldn't have if they didn’t love the people they were fighting for.

North Pyongan believed love was a gift, granted to them by something. He saw it as God, even if others didn’t agree. Surely it had to be *something.*

Korea hadn’t liked the idea, and shut down he and Hwang’s conversation about it. North Pyongan knew that just like his dislike that there could be an invisible hand guiding his actions, the idea that he only loved their people because he had been designed to was violating to him. But his Countryhuman had misunderstood- he didn’t believe God chose *who* they loved, he just believed He had given them the ability to. Though Korea hadn’t seemed to like the idea of that, either.

And in the end, it didn’t really matter what or who had given them the ability to love. They could and did. And even if it hurt sometimes, even if for someone that could live forever, it would hurt more often than not, North Pyongan was glad for it.

Liaoxi, Kim Il-sung, Pak Chae-eun, Tae-min and Han-jin and all their people, his sister and cousins, Korea. He didn’t regret loving any of them. He always would.

Even if they were doomed.

맴맴맴맴미

Liaoxi doesn't think North Pyongan is homophobic, but she doesn't want to even risk it, or risk him telling Korea with good intentions only for *him* to be homophobic. She knows he's an honest man, and she's shares the same view of honest men as her Countryhuman.

Soooo funny and coincidental that the moment countries start going 'actually, fuck sanctions,' and start majorly trading with the DPRK, the DPRK's economy shoots up and living standards do too. Almost like it wasn't Kim Jong-un single-handedly deciding to eat all the rice and rather that sanctions regimes are designed to isolate and cripple a country economically so that Socialism looks like it starves people when really it's because they aren't allowed to participate in the same trade that every other country requires to develop. What a coincidence. Remember- the US doesn't enacts actions because it thinks Socialism doesn't work. They know it *does,* and that scares them. So they have to do everything they can to make it look as unappealing as possible. And yet the DPRK and Cuba have persisted, and done great things even while being strangled. If they were allowed to exist normally, we would have two more China success stories in the world. Also *so* funny and coincidental there's a warmongering Call of Duty about killing North Koreans coming out at the same time even the West is having to admit that the DPRK is prospering.
Also you'll notice something- when America does something bad that it's been doing forever, they compare themselves to the DPRK. 'Trump built a statue of himself, what is this, North Korea?' (I shouldn't have to tell you why building a statue of a war hero during a period of economic growth when there were already statues of other war heroes, then building a statue of a man who had already passed in another period of economic growth is not the same as building a gold statue of a man who is a known pedophile that supports genocide and has literally done nothing except dismantle the few even *slightly* good things America had during an economic downturn when the majority of Americans are homeless, deep in debt, living paycheque to paycheque, etcetera, as well as destabilizing the world). But then when the DPRK does something good, it gets compared to the West. They're calling some of the new Pyongyang neighbourhoods 'Pyonghattan.' No man, it's Pyongyang. Those houses they're building aren't owned by landlords that will charge the people living in them more than they can afford while they sit on their bourgeois asses and do nothing. Thousands of them aren't sitting empty while people sleep on the streets because they can't afford them at all. It

isn't filled with drug addicts and women forced to sell themselves to get by and masses of the unemployed being driven out by cheap foreign workers (not the foreign workers' faults, to be clear) and AI. As they say, when America does something uniquely awful and uniquely American, it's 'What are we, a bunch of Asians?' And when a country they have done everything they can to crush succeeds despite that in a way only they could have thanks to Socialism, it's somehow 'They're copying us.' No. They are *better* than you, and even in the depths of famine you helped exacerbate they have always *been* better than you because somehow with all your wealth, people still starve to death in your country. And the prosperity they have now doesn't come at the expense of other nations'.

Learning Experience

Hwang had a plethora of things to accomplish now that Liberation Day had passed. Travel to he and Hae's province to assist with the Party cell elections after visiting Kaesong with Korea, attend to the factories to make sure work was continuing smoothly even with the electricity shortage, continue work on the short course drafts to prove he and his sister deserved to be two separate provinces, survey the damage done by the latest bombings, resolve any issues communicated to them by their people. He'd known about all of these at least days in advance, and planned accordingly.

But now, unexpectedly, he first had to tell an old comrade that her husband, and his former student, had given his life for their cause.

"Suzuki Yoshi." Korea dipped his head to her as she rose from her seat in the underground dug-out, a rough half-tunnel carved into the earth on the outskirts of Pyongyang.

"Korea-sama." The Japanese woman inclined herself just slightly.

Hwang witnessed a flash of her, over three decades younger, on her knees as she pressed her forehead to the ground, taking responsibility for her country as Choi Jung-nam stood anxiously behind her, and felt his chest seize.

Her hair was still silky and straight, pulled into a loose bun at her nape without a streak of white to be seen glimmering amongst the chestnut strands, and she didn't stand much taller at forty-eight than she had at seventeen. Her black eyes were still clear and bright, but rested amidst more wrinkles than the last time he'd seen her, that day in 1938.

And they were filled with far more grief, a shadow under the dim light that reflected from the ends of the tunnel.

"Though it's Choi Yoshi now," she said, the edges of her lips curving, and the shadow deepening.

Right. She and Choi Jung-nam had been married in Korea, allowing her to keep her family name at first. But after soshi-kamei policy came into affect in 1940, married couples had to share the same one, at least in the family registry. And it was still mandatory in Japan.

And she had chosen his. Even knowing it would mark her as the wife of a Korean, sharing in the discrimination her husband would have faced for the crime of being one.

Korea's mouth opened, then he nodded stiffly. "I can't stay. North Hwanghae will inform you of what you need to know. But..."

Hwang's Countryhuman's jaw feathered, and he drew himself up slightly.

"Choi Jung-nam died for his country," he told her. "He played an important part in the war to Liberate it. Korea will never forget him."

The shadow in Suzu- Choi-san's eyes swelled, tears glimmering in them as she was met with the truth she had surely known.

Her bottom lip disappeared into her mouth, working as she tried to speak. She only dipped her head.

"It was what he wanted," she managed after a moment, barely above a whisper.

Hwang saw the look that flashed across Korea's eye, and averted his own.

Again his Countryhuman's mouth half-opened before he said, "I need to leave."

Choi Yoshi nodded wordlessly, her lips thin and pale as they suppressed her grief.

But as he reached the mouth of the tunnel, Korea looked back over his shoulder.

"There will be a place in Korea for you and your family once the

war is over, Comrade Choi Yoshi."

He slipped out before either of them could say anything, as the woman started to tremble.

Hwang fumbled in his pocket, retrieving his handkerchief and offering it to her.

Choi Yoshi gave a wavering smile. "You still carry these?"

"...Yes," Hwang confirmed, then stood awkwardly, unsure of what to do as she dried her eyes.

It was fruitless. New tears only welled again.

"I... wasn't aware you were coming," he ventured, then winced.

He should've extended his condolences first. But now if he did, they would seem like an afterthought.

They weren't, he just... had no idea how to begin something like this.

'Tell my family I love them.'

Choi Jung-nam should have been here to do it himself. Hwang had never been skilled at extending sympathies, and his old student had known that. He'd stuttered enough when Choi Yoshi had told them about her father.

'So how could you leave something like this to me?'

Choi-san took a shaky inhale before she spoke. "I was taken on as a special correspondent for the Vladivostok *Pravda* branch. That's... That's where we're staying."

"Is your family well?" Should he have asked that there? Did it seem like he was asking a personal question just to make up for not inquiring before?

Choi-san nodded. "Our..."

She stopped, the sorrow in her eyes enveloping them once more, liquid limning her dark lashes.

'Our.' A simple word. But like 'was,' the weight it bore in this moment was crushing.

"Hae-jung didn't like leaving," she said after a moment, throat flexing. "He had to say goodbye to the girl he liked."

'I think our youngest might marry Japanese.'

"And I didn't like leaving our neighbours." Regret tinged Choi-san's voice, still smooth and light, despite her sorrow, never having fallen prey to her husband's vice of smoking. "But we did. If any of us stayed..."

Even if they had been willing to risk it for themselves, they could've been used to hunt down the rest of their family.

"We were smuggled out in a fishing boat," the woman told him. "Everyone made it safely."

'Everyone.' Another word that was weightier than it should be.

Hwang cleared his throat. "That's good. I'm glad."

"We've been under supervision. Some of your Soviet-Korean countrymen are keeping us safe." Choi-san twisted the handkerchief absentmindedly between her hands. "But *Pravda* reached out all of a sudden. They said they were given a chance for an exclusive interview about the war, but it was only open for a journalist that could speak Korean."

Sending a Japanese was uncharacteristically ethnically oblivious of the Soviets. There were also plenty of Koreans in Vladivostok, and Hwang knew that- at least as of a decade ago- several had been journalists, or worked in a similar field. He had a suspicion he knew why she had been the one to receive the offer.

"I was supposed to get here yesterday," Choi-san said, tucking an escaped strand of hair behind her ear in a familiar gesture. "But we were delayed by an air raid."

Hwang's brows furrowed in alarm as he sharply surveyed her. "You're unscathed?"

"We got off the road in time."

"Good. That's good."

"And... what about you?" Her clear eyes looked to his hands, shrouded in bandages.

Hwang curled his fingers, hiding the blood that spotted his palms, caused by gripping a pencil. "I'm... coping."

He should've chosen a more confident word. But the pain in his body, both physical and emotional, was making it hard to access his files.

"That's good," she murmured.

They lapsed into a heavy silence, Choi Yoshi twisting the handkerchief around in her hands as if trying to wring the tears from it.

More than ever, Hwang cursed the way words failed him in situations like these, as they had with Cho Sok-young. He knew Hae would know what to say to her, what actions to take. She already would have hugged her, and managed to bring at least a temporary solace. But even if Hwang could muster the courage to do that, he knew it wouldn't have the same effect as if his sister did it.

"I came because I want to know what happened," Choi Yoshi said eventually, lifting her eyes to his.

Of course. Hwang usually loved informing people of things, but casualty notifications had never been a strong suit of his. And Korea never left them to him unless it was absolutely necessary.

But he knew this time it was.

"What do you know?"

"Only that he came here to help." Her lip dimpled as she bit the

inside of it. "And that he's dead. I understand if you can't tell me-"

"I can," Hwang assured her, pushing his glasses up.

Korea wouldn't have utilized the invisible hand of CCCP unless he saw it as something he needed to do. And if he hadn't wanted Hwang to inform their comrade of what her husband had died for, then it wouldn't have been.

So he did. He told Choi Yoshi of how Choi Jung-nam had infiltrated the north to offer his services as an agent, and how he'd kept an eye on America. How he had chosen Grace Hartman as his access point, and later risked the mission and his life to attempt to free her from her country's clutches. And how, ultimately, he had lost one of those, going out screaming *'Manse!'* in the streets as Hwang listened, helpless, over the phone. How the woman he'd tried to save had finished his mission for him, getting them the intelligence they needed, exposing the leak and allowing them to feed false information to the enemy, using it to capture an important height at the front and inflict damage on the American soldiers before they cut her off.

He tried to prove to her that her husband hadn't died for nothing.

He didn't voice it aloud, not wanting to burden her grief with his guilt, but the root cause of the loss had to be clear. If Hwang had just rejected his offer, if he had prioritized his former student's life over a useful asset, the man she had married would still be alive.

But still, as he finished recounting what he knew of Choi Jung-name's activities during the months he'd been in Korea, after a long moment of digestion, Choi Yoshi, instead of accusing him for her husband's death or bursting into tears, asked, "Is that American girl okay?"

Hwang had to swallow before he could answer. "I hope so."

Choi-san's head bobbed slightly, still twisting the handkerchief in her hands. "But he really did help?"

They were squatting next to the wall, backs against it. Hwang had

his head turned from her to polish his glasses, but now he put them back on to face her.

"Yes," he said, trying to project confidence past his own sorrow so she could see he meant it. "The leak was in a position to observe our movements and learn about critical operations, and endangered the lives of several of our Provincehumans, soldiers, and civilians. And by exposing her, she was given a chance to escape the death penalty for espionage. He saved her life, too."

Hwang drew in a breath that he couldn't prevent from trembling, though his voice remained steady as he placed a hand on his former student's shoulder.

"Choi Jung-nam died a martyr."

Choi Yoshi's eyes squeezed shut, her slender throat working. "Good," she whispered, and the handkerchief went limp in her grasp. "He wanted... You know he always wanted to help Korea."

'Korea is going to be free, and I want to have a hand it that.'

"He did," Hwang said quietly, and somehow the woman let out an amused huff.

"Your glasses are misting over."

She removed them from his face, polishing them with a dry part of the handkerchief and shaking hands, leaving his eyesight blurred for two different reasons. It returned to one as she passed them back.

"I'm sorry," Hwang said. Even if Choi Jung-nam hadn't wanted him to say it to his wife on his behalf, he needed to say it on his own. "I shouldn't have accepted his proposal. It was-"

'Callous, severe, thoughtless. Clinical.'

"I shouldn't have," he finished, glasses sliding forward as he looked down at his boots.

"You say that, but he had to beg you, didn't he?" Choi-san asked.

'No matter the cost.'

Hwang's silence answered her, and she gave a sad smile.

"Of course. That was my Jung-nam." She shook her head. "Even if you had turned him down, he would've got himself into trouble anyway. He couldn't just sit back and watch." Her eyes flickered. "Even when I told him he never had."

He was aware of that. He was. Just as he was aware that capturing the leak had been imperative, and that if Choi Jung-nam hadn't been the one to be assigned, with his need to help a foreign woman that somehow reminded him of his own daughter, she might not have been. More lives could have been lost, or members of their family taken.

It hadn't been enough to save Gangwon. But the one silver lining to that, as ashamed as Hwang felt to call it that, was that America couldn't use him as another item to drag out the ceasefire negotiations. And if one of the northern provinces had been lost due to Pak Um-ja's espionage, then that was exactly what would've happened.

And yet Hwang couldn't bring himself to let that comfort him. He didn't want to.

"Sensei, do you feel guilty?"

Hwang hunched, pushing his glasses up again as he admitted, "I feel a certain culpability."

He may have recovered from his initial anguish quickly, but the guilt had lingered. It didn't matter that Korea had been the one to give his consent for their comrade to become an operative. Hwang had known he would, because he needed to. Bringing the matter to him had been the real decision.

Choi-san shook her head sadly. "Sensei, we were risking our lives every day back when we were in school. Even if Jung-nam's father bailed him out if we were caught with you, there still would've been consequences for him. And there wouldn't have been anyone to save

me."

Hwang looked away. In those early days when he had extended his 'extracurricular' offer to Choi Jung-nam, and later Suzuki Yoshi, he'd been preoccupied with worrying about getting himself imprisoned. Had he even spared a thought for what would happen to them?

"But we were happy to do it," Choi Yoshi said, her eyes solemn. "We were willing to take the risks, because we wanted to learn. Just like my husband wanted to free our country."

Hwang knew Choi Jung-nam had been more than willing. He had returned to Korea for it, after all, risking himself even before making contact with him.

And he knew in his brain and heart that even knowing how events had played out, he would have made the same decision he had made. The leak had needed to be eliminated. Choi Jung-nam had been willing to do it. And Hwang was more than his former teacher- he was a Korean Provincehuman. He could never set his personal feelings above the mission, even if part of him wished he was the sort that could.

"It's not your fault, sensei," Choi-san said gently. "And if it is, then it's mine, too. I had more of a chance of stopping him than you. I knew he wasn't just coming here to work."

She truly didn't place any fault with him.

Hwang knew logically that she shouldn't. It had been Choi Jung-nam's decision, and Korea had made the final one. It was Rhee's traitors that had carried out his execution, and America that had blackmailed Pak Um-ja into betraying her country, and that had brought war to Korea in the first place. Not him, and not her. As Kangwon had said- they couldn't blame themselves for things that were beyond their power.

Perhaps he was just reacting like he had after Sincheon, when he'd been so desperate for Hae to be hurt by him not sending reinforcements, wanting her to blame him to justify how he blamed

himself.

But she hadn't. And neither did Choi Yoshi. And he knew Choi Jung-nam hadn't either.

'I chose this, Prof.'

He knew what he'd been saying when he told him that, voice crackling across the phone line. The very thing his wife had just told him.

'It's not your fault.'

It wasn't his fault. And he would do it again. Yet...

"If I could go back," he said quietly. "I would hesitate for a little longer."

Choi Yoshi smiled sadly at him. "And we wouldn't."

Hwang closed his eyes, looking away as he polished his glasses again.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment, realizing he'd done exactly what he wanted to avoid. "I didn't mean to infringe on your grief."

"You aren't infringing." Choi Yoshi turned slightly to him, resting her hand on the thin knee drawn up to his chest. "You were never just our teacher, Hwang. You were our friend, too. You still are."

Hwang's throat swelled, making his words come out choked. "And you're both mine."

His first and only, for that near-decade he had worked for the enemy. The only people he'd genuinely looked forward to seeing, the only ones that listened to him and told him about their days and spoke to him as a *person.* The only ones that made teaching worth it.

He inhaled deeply, wanting his words to be clear as he told her the one item he'd left out of his account.

"He wanted me to tell you he loved you." He fought to keep his voice steady. "He loved you ever since you smacked him in the face with the copy of Uchida Roan's *'Yaregaki'* I had him track down. And that he'll love you-"

'Until I-'

"Forever."

Choi Yoshi's mouth opened, then closed. "Hai," she managed after a moment. "That's my- That's-"

Her face screwed up, hand flying to cover her mouth. It did nothing to stop the strangled whimper from escaping.

"Yoshi-san," Hwang began hesitantly. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head, nails digging into her cheek. "No," she whispered through her fingers. "I'm not."

There wasn't anything he could say to that. But he had to try. Not because Hae would, but because Choi Yoshi was his friend, and Choi Jung-nam had been, too. And because he wanted to.

Remembering the long night spent talking with Choi Ki-tak through the farmhouse door about his family, he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I didn't have much of a chance to catch up with him. If you don't mind, would you like to tell me what I missed?"

Choi-san nodded mutely. "B-But I need to do that interview."

"It's alright," Hwang assured. "I have an inkling that I'm the one you're supposed to interview. And Korea will give us the time we need."

"Then..." She drew in a shaky breath. "I would."

So Hwang took off his tunic, spreading it on the dirt floor of the tunnel so they could sit, and Choi Yoshi settled down cross-legged to share with him the parts of their lives he hadn't been present for,

and that they'd never had time for before. Of teaching their children to read and write Korean and Japanese, utilizing the methods taught to her by him, of Choi Jung-nam sitting Hye-ja on his lap to look over schematics and doing what he could to make sure their daughter's spark for the same work her father loved didn't die, even when she couldn't receive the schooling for it, of their grades and hobbies and what raising them in Seoul had been like, sending them to the same school Choi Jung-nam had attended, using the Choi family's money to get them the education they needed for their futures while educating them properly on the topics that mattered in private- the history of Korea, Socialist theory, critiques of the Japanese colonial government, the same banned books they had once pored over in their illicit meetings, now with hundreds more added to the list, and that how they were treated for being half was wrong. That the Korean names they bore were just as important as the Japanese ones, even once they were no longer allowed to use them in public. How once they were old enough to understand the severity of what they were learning, they had told them how the Occupation harmed both their countries, how it was killing Korea and crippling Japan and how it needed to *end,* the righteous anger of children now sharpened into that of adults who had the words to explain why they were angry, and the knowledge of what needed to be done to fix it. And eventually, who the person they owed their own education to really was.

She told him about watching them grow into teenagers just as righteously angry as their parents, and into an upstanding woman and young men. Of Jung-ui's architectural program and he and Hye-ja's partners and their weddings, of paying bribes to stop their sons from being drafted to fight Japan's war, of the hardship in the final years of it and the heartache of leaving Korea when it was so close to being Liberated. Of organizing their countrymen in Japan and fighting back in the little ways they could. Of the meals she made for their Korean neighbours and the clashes she had with the owner of the building.

And she told him about she and Choi Jung-nam. About their proposal, how the first thing he'd done after returning from university was embrace her, even though they'd never shared anything more than books and the brush of hands before, and how

when he had asked her to marry him, she hadn't hesitated for a second. The blissful early days of marriage and the comfortable routine they'd fallen into in the later ones, her working as a copy editor and he working his way up as a civil engineer, leaving in the morning and coming home to each other at night, refusing to quit the job she'd worked so hard for after becoming a mother, but still making her husband and kids lunch before she left for the day, and how he repaid her diligence with refusing to go out drinking with his colleagues, no matter how much it slowed his rise in the ranks, coming home instead to help with dinner. The life that was their norm for the majority of their years, only interrupted when they discovered some piece of information they thought Korea should know, and contacted Korea's Army to meet secretly with them.

She didn't just share the idyllic moments, but those of turmoil, too. Her struggles with media censorship and the papers she worked at being closed down. The arguments about cutting off his father and the guilt she felt telling him he couldn't, knowing that they needed his money and influence to keep their children safe under Japan, and those about his job, how he despised building shrines and offices for the Japanese, feeling that it made him a nation traitor, though they both knew it was one of the few professions that could keep him from being drafted in the war years. Her struggles with media censorship and the papers she worked at being closed down, and how she had fought ardently against moving back to Japan, but Choi Jung-nam made her anyway, too fearful of what could happen to a Japanese woman in the chaos that would come after her country's defeat. Witnessing the fire bombing of Nagoya from safely in the countryside and hearing of her family's demise under the atom bombs. The joy they shared as Korea was finally Liberated, and the heartbreak as it was only Divided and occupied once more, along with Japan. The poverty they'd faced in the post-war world, cut off from the Choi family fortune with Choi Jung-nam making a meager wage as a Korean, and her unable to find work at all as the American SCAP government silenced leftist ideas and cracked down on female Japanese reporters and broadcasters for their role in wartime propaganda, and the job she'd clawed for all her life to give women a voice suddenly became a symbol of the wicked, scheming Oriental to the foreign men that now ruled her birth country.

Choi Yoshi laughed and cried as she spoke, the emotions eclectic, not always aligning with the contents. She smiled as she recounted the night Choi Jung-nam had burnt the rice for dinner, and she'd been so overwhelmed with their children she locked him out of the house, and tears streamed down her face as she told him how his eyes shone as he held their firstborn for the first time, and Hwang listened intently to all of it, all of the parts that he'd missed due to war and Division, serene and ugly, of his two favourite students, and his first friends.

Against all odds, he even found himself chuckling at some points, even though he should have been hearing all of this as they sat around a table at the house he shared with Hae, drinking makgeolli and trading stories, all four of them. Even if it should have been a tale instead of an obituary.

Their final conversation had taken place as she chopped scallions for dinner. As Choi Jung-nam kissed her on the cheek and told her he was leaving for Korea, and she wiped her hands on the checkered kitchen cloth and calmly told him to come back soon.

Choi Yoshi lapsed into silence after, everything she'd needed to say said. Hwang knew she hadn't run out of words. The rest was private, or there was simply too much remaining. He knew he could never recount every moment with his own family. Decades of knowing someone was a lot of time to make memories, and for things to fall through the cracks. He couldn't remember every little joke GG had told him or every time North Hamgyong had lit his cigarettes. He only knew that they'd happened, and that they meant the world to him, remembered or not.

Choi-san was crying, tears silently streaming down her face. Yet as she stared at the earthen wall, eyes distant as she perhaps read through some of those more private files, a small smile graced her lips.

Normally Hwang would never say you could truly know the answer to something without asking. But right now the question that had lingered in his mind since that phone call was answered decisively by the gentle reverie of her expression.

For Choi Yoshi, the price for all those years of love had indeed been worth it.

There weren't any words to share. No nuggets of wisdom to be found in his mental filing cabinets for how to comfort her. Hwang simply leaned over and wrapped his arms around his old friend.

Choi Yoshi clutched at his back, fingers digging into his bandages, though he made no complaint as she started to tremor, shaking like the earth of her country had once shook under her husband's boots as the world upheaved and society crumbled around him, and she and Hwang waited anxiously to hear if he would ever come home.

"It wasn't enough!" she sobbed, the thin veneer of composure she'd been clinging to since he arrived crumbled away under the force of her grief. "Forever isn't enough if he's not *here!* Even if he was, it wouldn't be enough!"

'Forever' was an inconceivable amount of time, even to Hwang. It went beyond what the human mind could comprehend, even for someone with conditional mortality.

But he just choked out, "I know," holding her tighter as her tears soaked his neck, saltwater stinging his burns.

And if he was crying, too, that was fine. It was only his initial grief that he'd recovered from. He knew this one would linger. He wanted it to.

'Promise me you'll look out for my family.'

He would. He would make sure Yoshi was finally able to be a journalist the way she was meant to, even if it would be a struggle convincing even a minor paper to let a Japanese back into the media that shaped their country. He would make sure Hye-ja was able to take the engineering classes she wanted, and that Jung-ui and his wife's future children wouldn't be discriminated against for their mixed blood, and he would ask SH to introduce Hae-jung to a woman from here.

Yoshi-san was pressing into him like she was trying to escape the

cold, and even though the air in the tunnel was sweltering, Hwang pulled her closer, trying to warm her, his glasses digging into the side of his face as he silently vowed that once this war was over, he would make sure the rest of her life was the one she and Jung-nam had deserved to live from the beginning, because even if she wasn't Korean, she would always be his student.

Just like Korea would try to keep that reckless promise he had made to their people, North Hwanghae would keep his promise to Choi Jung-nam.

I was with father in the car as I was thinking about this chapter. Tears started streaming down my cheeks and he just leaned over to pat me on the shoulder without saying anything. Couldn't tell him what I was thinking about so he probably thinks I'm not well.

I made some art yesterday that I think looks very good. I am excited to post it. ^^

An Interlude: Two Halves, One Whole

1910

The city was empty when he formed, and his head was too full. Sights and sounds and memories he'd never seen or experienced swelled his skull like it was fit to burst, blurring his vision and locking him in place, unable to discern which of the sensations he was being bombarded with were real and which were fake.

Blinding sunlight, raised voices, the sense of something stretching and snapping into two and *tearing open the floorboards, rummaging in the compartment those cretins had never found, scroll upon tome upon ledger pulled out, flying like paper entrails, too many to be saved, 'Curse you, of course you would not give me enough time.' But he had possessed it, he just had not wanted to let the knowledge go, had not wanted to admit what was coming, all of them so blind and stupid, even he who had considered himself beyond his fellows' arrogance had not been able to escape the centuries of idleness. Pressing copied papers and thick waxed scrolls into dirty hands, skin too rough to be trustworthy brushing his, making him flinch, but still better than the soft limbs of those he had once supped and recited with that he* ***knew*** *could no longer be counted on. The first and the last, those were what mattered, what was lost to the mist of time and revision and that which showed their downfall that would surely be painted over by the country that already had to be here. His suite doors were locked from the outside, a final measure from that fool against interruption, but he refused to go for the tunnels through which the couriers escaped. There was no changing the mind of a god, or emperor, he knew that too well. The table, so close, a brush in hand, ink smearing across the paper, all his contingencies vanished like smoke because he had been foolish enough to think they would be told of when it was coming, the brush lifting, coming down like the hand of 'god' was*

*coming down on their nation, '**Damn** you, Joseon-'*

And then nothing. He tried to cling to the memory, filled with a sense that if he relinquished it, he wouldn't be getting it back.

But the delineation between what was history and what was now was growing more distinct, and as a shout rent the air, undeniably in the present, it hardened, an impenetrable wall. His memories were now someone else's, and he was left with only the dregs.

He seized on one of those dregs as boots pounded towards him.

'Hwanghae,' he thought, reeling around, arms pinwheeling as he tried to balance himself on spindly legs that had never been used before. *'I'm Hwanghae.'*

"He formed in the city center after all," a rough voice said, not in Korean.

'Japanese.'

The rush of common sense flooded him. The years of war and enmity that had led to this- being forced open, the Imo Mutiny, the attempted coup, the Donghak Rebellion, the protectorate, Gojong, the 'treaty,' the government's weakness and Joseon- the Korean Empire's- betrayal. And the annexation.

It was August 22nd, 1910. And Korea, his country, had just been Occupied by Japan.

"Thank His Divine Majesty," another grumbled. "I didn't want to chase him all over Kaishu."

'Wrong name.' Haeju, they were standing in Haeju. His capital.

Hwanghae's head was no longer muddled with history, but his vision remained blurry. It was bright out, but the world around him was displayed in smears of azure, brown, and slate. And dark blue, slashed with red like open wounds.

The men around him were wearing dress uniforms. But he knew that the long objects he could see in their hands were anything but

ceremonial. They sent a chill along his spine, even when indistinct.

Tachi. These were no bamboo swords. They were ready to cut him down if he showed any resistance.

He was surrounded, he could hear them all around him in the dusty town square, fully armed. And he was defenseless, skinny and barely breaching their chests, it appeared. And naked.

Panic sparked inside him, his mind racing, presenting a hundred morbid possibilities for what they could do to him.

Would they imprison him, torture him, even execute him? But Japan had likely decreed that the old Provincehumans be dissolved to remove those who had too much pride to accept colonization after long years of being considered divine, or nearly. Surely that meant he was going to keep the new ones?

'New ones.' There had to be others like Hwanghae right now, thrust into this exact scenario.

No, he couldn't think of that. He had to get out of this.

Perhaps Japan had simply wanted easier provinces to kill. Hwanghae's body felt stunted, childlike. His eyesight was too blurry to even see his feet as more than white smears, but he was certain he was one.

But that would be unseemly, wouldn't it? Executing the Korean Provincehumans would only reinforce the image of an invader coming in and crushing their way of life. Even if that was what Japan was doing, surely he would want to conceal that where he could. Imprisonment was more likely, or attempting to groom him into a mouthpiece for the Empire. That idea was so instinctively abhorrent, he would actually prefer to be imprisoned. But neither was ideal.

These thoughts all flashed through his mind in a second as one of the blurs ordered in a cold, smooth voice, "Restrain him."

*'Think, **think.**'*

He actually seemed to be good at that, as the idea came almost immediately.

"Wait!" he blurted, holding out his hands. "I have a proposition!"

"Translate," the smooth voice ordered, and another man began to before Hwanghae said in Japanese, *"No need."*

It came as easily as the Korean, and while it was thrilling to so easily be able to speak a foreign language, he knew in the back of his mind that it was wrong. Korean was the only language of Korea, unless one counted the Jeju dialect separately. He shouldn't be able to speak Japanese. But the treaty the Korean Empire had signed had... programmed, that was the word- him to. He was forced to know the language of the men around him, while only one of them could speak his.

'That bodes poorly.' This all did. The birth of a Provincehuman was supposed to be a grand affair, with crowds and public feasts. It was what had taken place after the Gabo Reform, when the eight provinces had been shattered into twenty-three, and a year later, when they'd been reconstituted into thirteen.

Yet here Hwanghae was, alone, surrounded by armed men, and- Good *gracious,* he was very much still entirely naked.

Connecting that to the snickers he could hear from off to the side, he quickly covered what needed to be covered with his hands, though it was far too late.

He'd been hoping that by speaking the same language as the presumed officers he would come off as more composed and respectable in order to have his proposal taken seriously. Between his nudity and the fact that his seemingly white skin was now definitely a deep red from shame, that was now probably somewhat ruined.

But he still used Japanese as he repeated, "I have a proposition."

The blurry man the smooth voice had emitted from raised his hand, holding off those closing in on him. "Speak."

"May I first ask what you plan to do to me?" He tried to sound solely curious, with no traces of dread. He did not succeed.

The cool answer was, "That is for His Divine Majesty to decide."

His lungs constricted, obturating his oxygen intake.

Japan.

Heart in his throat, he asked, "Would I possibly be able to speak with him?"

The man's voice hardened like ice, the tachi he was holding shifting in his grip. "Why?"

"Only to talk," Hwanghae quickly elucidated. "I mean him no harm. I'd simply like to share some ideas I have involving my role in this... arrangement."

He had almost said 'Occupation.' He had to watch his tongue. Words had power, and if he didn't use the right ones that made him seem enthusiastic, or at the very least apathetic towards the annexation, he was sure he would pay the price for it.

"Japan-sama has no time for provinces," someone to his left scorned, and the smooth-voiced man snapped, "Do not pretend *you* know what His Divine Majesty has time for."

A zealot. Hwanghae latched on to that.

"I would simply like to provide my skills to help usher in this era of peace and prosperity for our nations." Even if he didn't know what skills he had yet. "It is an honour that Korea has this opportunity to cooperate with Japan-sama like this, and I would see that we don't disappoint."

He wouldn't call the foreign country 'His Divine Majesty.' He already felt a sense of shame at saying the rest. Compounding with his nakedness, it was starting to overwhelm him. He wanted to melt into a puddle in the summer heat.

"Explain," the man in charge ordered, and Hwanghae outlined his

idea.

The man was silent after, considering, while Hwanghae struggled to contain his mounting fear.

If he refused, should he run? He was small, perhaps if he was quick he could dodge through the officers and disappear into the streets.

'The streets I can't even see.'

The streets he couldn't even see. He knew any thoughts of escape were just a fancy. If the man denied his request, he would be subject to whatever fate Japan decided on. A fate that would seemingly be ordained without ever even setting eyes on him, if he truly 'had no time for provinces.'

He waited, heart pounding so hard it shook his thin frame, unable to even wring his hands, needing them to keep himself modest.

Finally, the man decided.

"It will be proposed to His Divine Majesty for his consideration. For now, you come with us."

Hwanghae sagged with relief, even if it was only going to be temporary. At least it hadn't been outright rejection.

"Of course," he confirmed as agreeably as possible. "But if I could ask for one more favour?"

Someone grumbled, but the lead man said, "Speak."

"Could I please have some pants?"

Some time later he was sitting in an office somewhere in Haeju, dressed in plain brown trousers and a simple grey shirt, sitting on an uncomfortable wooden chair and surrounded by cream walls that were just as blurry as everything else. Even though he'd had the presence of mind to try and map out where the Japanese were

taking him, it hadn't done any good.

He was bereft of methods to calculate how many hours had passed. There wasn't anything to do in here but sit and sift through his common sense, and it was easy to lose track of how long he had been doing that. Asking questions of the men he could hear talking outside proved fruitless. His desire to know who would be put in charge of his province, what Japan planned to do with their country, or simply what time it was had gone ignored. Even using Japanese, he might as well be talking to himself.

Perhaps this hadn't been a good idea. The proposal, yes, but perhaps he should've just asked for it to be passed on. If the Countryhuman was anything like his officers, he-

The door opened, and as Hwanghae saw the white smudge with that red sun that burned through his poor vision, his bowels went watery.

He immediately shot up, bending at the waist in the deepest bow he could manage without dropping to his knees, something he hoped wouldn't be demanded.

The man in the doorway made no sound, and the province stayed frozen, head pointing almost directly down at the floor, trying to remain composed.

'So soon!' He'd thought he would have more time. Japan had been in Korea then, that was for certain. And if he had no time for provinces...

"The province is more respectful than its country."

The voice was flat and impenetrable, but Hwanghae couldn't call it cold in the same way the officer's had been. It wasn't simply icy. 'Ice' implied there was something to freeze, and that it could thaw. But this cadence was entirely devoid of any warmth. It had never known it, and never would.

Japan moved into the room with an almost feline grace Hwanghae could discern even with his poor vision. The object at his waist

making that slight rattling sound couldn't be anything but another sword.

The door closed behind him.

"Kneel."

Hwanghae had known from the first few words that this was a country that would brook no questions. But he couldn't help the one that tried to leave his lips.

"When you say 'its country-?'"

"Kneel," Japan ordered again, no more heated, but somehow even flatter, and Hwanghae hurriedly kneeled.

He almost sat cross-legged, but at the last moment folded his legs under himself so he was sitting on his calves. It was respectful, but his newly-made muscles were already feeling the strain. And he didn't enjoy the feeling of Japan looming over him.

'At least I didn't have to perform full prostration.' As of yet.

He couldn't see, but he lowered his eyes anyway, respectfully avoiding even looking at the Countryhuman's boots as he observed him with a gaze the province could almost feel piercing into his skin.

He'd hoped he would find something useful to negotiate with in his common sense, but he only had political knowledge of the country. This Japan had been formed in 1868 when a Tokugawa Shogunate weakened after being forced open by the United States of America had been overthrown and dissolved, and had done nothing but rise since then- modernizing, defeating Qing in Korea and installing a veritable puppet government once his influence was removed, annexing the Ryukyu Kingdom and seizing Taiwan, and invading mainland China with the other foreign nations, coming out victorious there before doing the same against the Russian Empire, but this time standing on his own, the first time an Eastern power had claimed victory against a Western one.

There was nothing he could use to negotiate with in there. If

anything, he only gained the knowledge that the country standing before him was not one you negotiated with. You would give him what he wanted, or he was fully capable of taking it by force.

Hwanghae swallowed, the gulp audible in the quiet room.

"Japan was told the province had a proposal."

The province took a deep breath, making sure he kept his gaze on the floorboards before him. "Yes."

"It may give it."

'Here goes everything.'

Hwanghae breathed in, trying to feel the flash of common sense that had given him inspiration once more, the smell of old paper and ink, the rustling of pages.

"I would like to be a teacher."

Japan observed him in silence. He clasped his hands tightly on his lap.

"It will explain its desire."

Mouth dry, Hwanghae gave the same answer he'd given to the officer, using the most respectful speech possible. "Because Kokai-do is honoured that Japan-sama has chosen Korea to be part of his empire. And he would like to play a role in the cooperation between our nations."

He despised the words, despised using his Japanese name. But he didn't retract it, keeping his eyes on the ground.

'Grovel now, not be executed later.'

Japan's gaze bored into him from across the table, until-

"It lies," he flatly announced, and Hwanghae's heart dropped into his stomach. "It is not wise to lie to Japan."

"I-I am deeply sorry," he said, hands fisting on his thighs, and if the Countryhuman was going to see through him so easily then he may as well tell the truth. "I just don't want to be imprisoned."

"The province thinks it has a right to raise Japan's future?"

'And what is Japan's future doing in Korea?'

Hwanghae didn't let the words escape. "No," he said swiftly. "Of course I don't. I only thought since the Hwanghae before me was a scholar, and I already have common sense of arithmetic and literature, I could be of use in a school. You wouldn't need to waste funds training me, or even pay me the same salary as other professors, and it doesn't even have to be as a teacher! I could be a useful teaching aid or secretary."

He was aware he was babbling, his voice growing higher and thinner with every word, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Perhaps I'm not as enthusiastic about this cooperation as I initially claimed, but I'm truly not against it. Korea has been fighting modernization for too long, and I'm truly thankful you opened us up, it was bound to happen eventually, and it was better Japan than America or France. This isn't entirely my ideal, but I wouldn't even exist if it wasn't for you, so I couldn't possibly begrudge you. I'm actually excited to see what we can accomplish together." Hwanghae was lying again, but hopefully he was talking too much to discern it. "I'm certain that played a part in why you chose to dissolve our predecessors. Elders are too set in their ways, it's the youth you have to mold. And if you keep me in a school environment, then our youth will see that Japan has at least one of their Provincehumans' support, and be more open to supporting the- cooperation."

And *he* would be able to mold them.

"Forgive my audacity, but I think it's something that could benefit the both of us, when you also consider-"

"Silence."

Hwanghae's jaw clacked shut, holding back the flood of words that still wanted to burst forth.

Had he said too much, been too honest? Was even that little admittance that he wasn't one hundred percent loyal to Japan enough to see him punished?

He held very still, head down, trying not to shake, and utterly failing.

"It is afraid," Japan noted, and Hwanghae squeezed his ineffective eyes shut.

"Yes," he admitted, and his voice cracked.

It was deeper than the fact that Japan was taller and almost definitely more muscular than him, an adult compared to his fifteen years or so body, if his voice was anything go by, and that he couldn't even see him properly. And it was deeper than the tachi tied to his waist or that with a single word from him, Hwanghae could either be executed only mere hours after being formed or thrown into a prison for what could be hundreds of years, or experimented on. It was more primal than all of that.

He was a province alone with a conquering country. And every bit of common sense he had was screaming at his body that that had never ended well.

"It is wise to be afraid of a god," Japan said eventually, still with zero inflection. "And it speaks true- it is better to be opened up by Japan than America."

'Why are you doing this to my country when yours has already experienced it?' Another question Hwanghae swallowed.

"It is decided." The words almost made him look up. "Japan will allow the province to decorate a school."

A decoration. Not entirely the position he had wanted, but he would take it.

Relief blossoming in his chest, Hwanghae bowed his head until his

brows almost touched the ground. But not quite. "Makoto ni arigato gozaimasu, Japan-sama."

"If it is unworthy, the privilege will be revoked."

"I understand."

He didn't want to push the limits of reasonability on someone who had just referred to themselves as a god, but he needed to. Otherwise he knew the 'privilege' would be revoked.

"Kokai-do doesn't wish to take advantage of Japan-sama's generosity," he began meekly. "But he seems to have been formed with a disadvantage. I'm afraid I seem to have limited eyesight. If it isn't too much to ask, could I receive some eyeglasses?"

He couldn't see Japan's reaction to that. He could only hear, "It is unsurprising that the Koreans would be formed with flaws. Japan will eliminate them."

Hwanghae shrank down slightly, his mouth dry. "And when you say eliminate...?"

"It will work to pay the blessing off."

Technically if he was paying for it, it wasn't really a blessing. Hwanghae was wise enough to not tell him that.

"Sincerely, thank you very much," he said again, relieved for a multitude of reasons.

Paying glasses off didn't worry him. He wasn't doing this for money. And he needed to see for what he was aiming to do.

"It will be moved to the capital for observation."

"Of course," Hwanghae agreed. "If you kept me here, you would be risking locals feeling loyalty towards their province instead of you and-"

"Silence," Japan ordered again, and he obeyed.

The man bored into him with his gaze, almost *through* him. "Loyalty is owed only to gods. And Japan is Korea's sole god."

"Yes, Japan-sama." Hwanghae bobbed his head vigorously, boring his own hole into the floor, making sure to hide exactly what he thought about that.

"Continue to be reasonable," Japan ordered in that same clinical tone. "Prove to Japan that Korea is worthy of a title other than 'barbarian.'"

The cords of Hwanghae's throat flexed.

The Countryhuman didn't say anything else, not even farewell. He simply turned on a heel, his indistinct form heading for the door, boots clipping on the wood.

This time, Hwanghae couldn't stop the words from leaving his mouth in time. He needed to know.

"If Kokai-do could please beg an answer, what is happening to the Korean Countryhuman?"

The red disc on Japan's flag was turned to him again, like a blood spatter on snow. His voice was frigidly empty.

"If the province wishes to retain its blessings, it will ask less questions."

Hwanghae dipped his head expediently. "Yes, Japan-sama."

The other Countryhuman left the room, and he collapsed forward, legs quivering as they released the painful pose, holding his face in his hands.

So many questions he had wanted to ask, answers he'd wanted to learn. Now he knew he never would. Japan would never answer them. And Hwanghae... He honestly never wanted to be within ten paces of the man again. Perhaps that made him a coward, but he had a feeling it gave him a better chance of being an *alive* coward. He was sure by now he was the type of person to put his foot in his mouth.

He hoped Korea was okay. And the other twelve provinces. Perhaps he could try and contact them once he had a chance.

He had achieved what he'd aspired to, at least. He would be able to work in a school, even if it wasn't as a teacher. Seoul was unexpected, but it was more opportune anyway. There were more places of learning there, which meant more students, especially already educated ones.

And this was a gamble. What he'd said about youth being more willing to accept the Occupation 'knowing' that one of their Provincehumans did was true. At least in Gyeonggi they would hopefully be more likely to view him as a fringe traitor, one whose level their own representation would never stoop to, whereas a Hwanghae student might simply think their province truly was loyal to Japan, and that that imported they should be as well.

He didn't want to sway students into supporting the Occupation. He wanted to teach them to *resist* it. And to educate them.

He knew this desire didn't come from the old Hwanghae. The man had been a scholar, not a teacher. Educating the masses was below him.

But *this* Hwanghae knew if they ever wanted to be free of this Occupation, if he ever wanted to be a real teacher, and for their country to be independent again, then they would need the youth. And he was certain he could teach them why what was being done to them was so wrong, and to speak out against it.

In fact, now that his pulse was slowing as the terror drained from his system, Hwanghae found himself looking forward to it. He had so much to learn that wasn't in his common sense, and so much to teach that was. And perhaps if enough students protested, if enough voices rose against the annexation before Japan had the chance to entrench himself, it could be over in a few months.

Hwanghae's fist clenched, pulse picking up again, this time in anticipation.

This would be worth it. He *knew* it.

—

She skipped happily down the street, enjoying the nice weather. Winter had lasted a long time this year, even snowing in April, which hadn't been good for the crops. But now it made for a nice, cool summer. Or at least cooler than summer usually was.

She shouldn't actually *know* how summer usually was, since this was her first day alive. She shouldn't know that other stuff either. But there was something sayin' that in her head. She guessed it was just common sense.

She thought there might be more things in her common sense, but her head felt like it was all stuffed with cotton, making it hard to hear. Her name must be packed in there, too.

Anyway! It was nice out, and it would be a lot nicer if everyone stopped looking at her that way.

There were a bunch of people on the road she was skipping down. Some of them were sitting on thin blankets with fruits and vegetables on them, and more were standing around, talking to each other and looking all tense. They'd either been examining the food or the people around them, but the moment they saw her, she was all they could look at.

Their mouths were open and their eyes were almost as big around as the peaches in one woman's basket. They actually looked a little funny, but it was hard to giggle when it was her they were staring at like that.

She knew she was naked, and she knew that was supposed to be embarrassing, unless it was a mama who'd had a son, then it was fine for her chest to be out, which was confusing. But she wasn't a mama, so it should be embarrassing for her. It was why she was trying to skip, so she wouldn't just curl up into a little ball on the ground.

She couldn't really help it, she'd just popped into existence between two houses near the fields, and the only thing there was a pile of rotten scraps and a dog that took off the moment she tried to

pet it. So since she couldn't help it, it was really unfair everyone was making that face at her. They were lucky to have clothes, even if some of them looked a bit rough, all the threads coming out.

One man was *really* staring at her, and since he was sitting on a blanket, she skipped over.

"Howdy!" she said, trying to smile at him.

He just looked up at her with those big ol' eyes, shaking like a leaf. No one else said anything.

'Rude.'

It felt like something about the way they were acting wasn't right. She was a... Provincehuman! That's what she was. And her name was... K...Kaishu? Nope, that didn't sound right.

Anyway, she felt like people should be happier to see a Provincehuman. Or... not happier. When she thought about how they should be acting to see her, it made her even more uncomfortable, so she guessed this was okay.

She smiled at the man, even though he really was being a little rude by not saying 'howdy' back. She pointed at the smaller blanket underneath him, the one that didn't have all the food on it.

"Can ah have that?" she asked as nicely as she could. It took a moment to figure out how to make the words come out.

He blinked at her, looking confused, even though she thought it was real obvious why she'd want it.

'Oh!' She knew what she'd done wrong.

"Can ah *please* have that?" she tried again.

The man's furry eyebrows furrowed. "I'm sorry, Your... I'm sorry, I can't speak Japanese."

Japanese? She was just speakin' normal, wasn't she?

"Pak, get your ass up an' give her that sheet!" an older woman hissed, and the man jumped up, quickly holding the blanket out to her, bowing deep as he did.

"Of course, my apologies, Daedo."

Daedo? Was that her name? She didn't think so. It sounded wrong, but in a different way than Kaishu did. She didn't like either of 'em.

"It's okay," she chirped, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders and holding it closed at the front. It wasn't the best, but since she was so tiny, it managed to cover her completely.

'Much better.' Now everyone could stop staring at her.

Except they weren't.

"What's she doin' here?" a guy muttered from behind her. "Ain't the entire reason market's set up here today 'cuz they shut the city down to catch her?"

"That's just a rumour," someone dismissed.

"Well it clearly ain't anymore when she's walking around the edge of town givin' us a show."

There was a slapping sound, like someone had just got hit.

It was still rude to talk like she wasn't there, but she wasn't paying attention. She was fixated on a ripe yellow pear all nestled in with the other fruits the merchant was selling. This was the perfect time to pick them, and this one looked *really* juicy. Maybe if she asked real nice, he'd give it to her.

But before she could, a door slammed and someone ran out of one of the beat-up lookin' huts along the road.

"What are y'all standin' around for?" a man demanded, skidding up with wide eyes. "The Japs are goin' to be lookin' fer her!"

Everyone's faces fell. Some of 'em looked mad, and some looked scared. A few even took off running.

She looked around nervously. For some reason the word 'Jap' made her belly clench. For a second she thought she smelled smoke, and spun around as something like a voice whispered in her 'ear.'

But there was no one there, just an auntie that was backing away from her. And no one was screaming 'Fire!'

"We've got to get you out'a here," the man said, and before she could say anything, he grabbed her hand and started to run.

"Where are we goin'?" she asked, but he didn't answer, leading her off into the rundown houses.

Her legs got achy real quick as they charged through alleyways and side streets, holding on to his hand with one of hers while the other held on tight to the blanket as it flapped around her legs. He was pretty much dragging her.

"Can... we... stop runnin'?" she gasped, and he looked back, his eyes all bright, but not like he was happy.

"If you're askin' if you can rest, we can't," he said, pulling her down another alley. "They'll start searchin' when you don't show up in the square, and the roads out are all bein' watched. Ah need to get you somewhere safe before-"

They rounded the corner and he screeched to a halt so fast she slammed into him, his hand suddenly crushing hers so hard it hurt. She leaned around him, panting, to see what had happened.

Standing in the road were a whole lot of men with swords. And they didn't look happy.

Awhile later, she was lying on the floor, kicking her heels back and forth as she waited for the person the man in the weird uniform had said was going to come see her. She didn't know who it was, but it had to be someone really important, because he had a real long name. 'His Divine Somethin'-or-Other.'

She wished he'd hurry up. She was starting to get bored. And the

little grey room she was in was dark, and the floor was cold. She'd liked it better outside, where the sun was shining and she could smell the freshness of rice paddies in the air. And there were people to talk to, even if some of them were sort of rude and didn't seem to understand her.

And she wanted that pear. Her belly felt empty, which she guessed made sense when she hadn't eaten for her entire life, but still didn't feel good.

Maybe she should've just stayed outside. But those guys had been pretty insistent she went with them. And she didn't really know what else she'd do anyhow.

She sat up, thinking she heard that voice that wasn't a voice again. But there was just a stone wall.

Her head felt funny. It felt like... there was something she'd forgotten, even though she didn't have any memories to forget. She kept trying to sit still and remember what it was, and almost felt like she could. But she got bored quick, and whenever she opened her eyes or changed positions or called out to see if the guys that brought her here would talk to her, it all went away again.

Huffing, she crossed her arms, leaning back and drumming her bare feet on the floor.

'Hurry uuuuup.'

A door slammed somewhere in the brick building she'd been hauled into, and she perked up. It wasn't the first time it'd happened, but she must have some kind of summoning power, because this time the footsteps outside were definitely coming her way.

She jumped up, excited, brushing off the clothes the men had put her in.

Okay, it wasn't clothes. It was a big rice sack one had cut holes in for her arms and head, then shoved over her. And she really wish they'd left her the blanket the merchant had given her, because the

floor was dirty and now there were smudges all over her white skin, and it had also been the first thing she'd ever been given. But the sack was still something to wear, so she'd made sure to thank them.

The heavy door with the bars on it swung open, and a guy walked in.

He was way taller than her, and looked like he had muscles under his uniform, making her feel even shorter and pudgier. He looked different than the other folks, with a round head and no ears or nose. She didn't have those either, so she wondered if her eyes were pure white like his. That would be neat, even though she'd liked the nice brown ones the guy that took off with her had, too. She could tell by her body that their skin was definitely the same shade of white, far paler than any of the people outside, more like the colour of the clothes they'd been wearing, or the clouds in the sky. But his face had a big red circle smack in the middle of it.

Well, she guessed she didn't know if she didn't have one, too. She couldn't see her own face.

"Leave us," the man ordered, and she remembered he was there and uncrossed her eyes, giving up on trying to check herself for red.

"Howdy!" she said, excited to meet someone new, even if he had a big... sword! in his hand.

He stared at her, but in a different way than all the people outside had. It was a kind of creepy.

And he wasn't answering her. Jeez, what was *with* everyone?

"Chosen is prone to abnormalities," he finally said, which was clearly still not a greeting.

She puffed out her cheeks, disappointed that he was rude, too. "Ah'm not an 'abnormality.'"

The man tipped his head at her. "It speaks in Kansai dialect."

"And ah'm *not* an 'it.'" And she didn't even know what a 'Kansai' was.

"It is an abnormality," the man said, stalking towards her, his long sword held out to the side. "But it will be remedied."

That not-voice was trying to talk again, screaming something at her, raising all the hair on her body, even though she didn't know why. As he came closer, she tried to listen, tried to figure out what it was saying. She almost saw someone, a man with icy blue skin and a gold shape on his face, the strings of his fancy horsehair hat swaying as he bent over a paper, inkbrush flying.

"Oh!" she said, happy to make out at least a bit of what her common sense was trying to tell her. "Ah know you! You're Japan!"

She froze, eyes flicking to the side. She'd barely even blinked, but suddenly that sword blade was at her neck. That very shiny, very sharp sword blade. It pressed a thin, cold line into her skin.

"Um." She looked at the man on the other end of the weapon. He stared back at her. His pure white eyes were... a little scary.

"The abnormality dares speak Japan's name directly?" he asked, and she thought maybe winter had actually lasted even past April.

She looked side to side. Especially the side with the sword on it. "...Ah guess? Ain't that your name?"

He stared at her again, all creepy-like. She held eye contact, slowly raising her hand and pushing the sword away.

His head snapped towards the motion, and she froze, pursing her lips innocently, even though the back of her hand was still touching the blade.

His eyes flicked backed to her, his head tipping to the side like... Like somethin'.

"It is not afraid."

He was making her a bit nervous, and her belly felt tight. But that could be because she was still hungry. And even though he *was* a little creepy, it wouldn't be nice to tell someone that. And unlike everyone else, *she* wasn't rude.

"Nope," she confirmed. "But ah don't think you should go around pointin' swords at people you just met."

'Or at all, probably.' If he hadn't stopped when she said his name, she could have got hurt.

Japan stared at her again for a long time. A *real* long time. Long enough that she looked down to make sure she wasn't suddenly naked again.

Then he lowered the sword.

"It is an abnormality in more ways than one," he announced, makin' her pout. "It will be permitted to exist, for study."

That... made her a bit uneasy. But he probably didn't realize how that sounded. She thought maybe he wasn't good at socializing.

"So your name *is* Japan?" she asked, because he hadn't answered her.

He stared into her eyes. She stared back, blinking.

"Yes," he finally said.

She grinned. *'That wasn't so hard, was it?'*

She wondered where 'His Divine Somethin'-or-Other' was. But maybe with a name like that, he was too important to visit after all, so he sent this guy instead. His Divine Somethin' must not be coming.

"Ah like your outfit," she said as he tied the sword back to his waist (where it belonged).

He was wearing a red an' gold sash like the other guys had been, but his uniform was all white, and all the buttons were shaped like flowers. It was much prettier than her beigey rice sack, and looked softer, too. Maybe he could get *her* clothes like that.

"It is divine raiment."

"Oh!" she said. "What does that mean?"

His eyes cut to her. "No amount of questions the Koreans can ask will banish their ignorance. If they were wise, they would stop."

"But ah don't know anythin'," she protested. "How do ah learn stuff if ah can't ask questions?"

"It does not need to learn."

"Ah do," she insisted. "Ah don't even know my name."

Wait! If she knew his name, maybe he knew hers.

"Do *you* know it?" she asked hopefully.

Japan tipped his head at her again. "It does not know its name."

She was pretty sure just because he was leaving the last sound off his sentences didn't make them not questions.

She shook her head. "Nope."

"What does it know of Japan?"

And *that* was a real question. She didn't want to answer him if he wasn't going to answer her, but *she* also didn't want to be impolite.

"You like pointin' swords at folks?"

He stared at her. He didn't look like he thought that was funny.

"Ah don't know much," she admitted. "Ah just met you."

"Japan exists in Chosen's common sense as Chosen exists in Japan's. Search."

She puffed out her cheeks, trying to think real hard. She guessed her common sense was a real thing, and it actually told her that as she tried to search it. And that the room she was in looked like it was a hundred and twenty centimetres by a hundred and twenty. And that enough time had passed since she got here that it must be dark outside now. But for Japan...

"Ah think we beat ya in a fight a long time ago," she said, pulling herself out when she wasn't finding anything else. "In a bunch'a ships."

His face didn't change, but the room got darker all of a sudden.

"Oh, but ah don't think that was actually you," she said quickly, trying to make him feel better. "Ah think it was another Japan."

"It was," he said coldly. "One that carried a false mark of divinity. The Japan of now will never suffer defeat. Gods do not know loss."

Was he saying he was a god? She had a few scraps of god stories in her head, and she felt like they were supposed to look... more godly. He sort of just looked like a guy. A guy in nice clothes, but still a guy. Well, a country-guy.

"Oh," she said. "That's good, ah think."

He looked at her again. He must like looking at her, even if he didn't look like he did at all.

"It has nothing else about Japan?"

There was something, she thought. Something scary that made her insides churn and her feet want to take a step back. But it was like there was a wall between her and whatever it was, stopping her from grabbing it.

And he didn't seem scary. Just creepy and weird. A *tiny* bit.

"Nope." She shook her head. "Can ah know my name now?"

Japan's gaze burned into her. She adjusted her rice sack.

Eventually he said, "The province is Kokai."

She frowned. She'd thought hearing her name would feel like catching something from her common sense. But 'Kokai' just smacked off her like a pebble.

"Ah don't think that's it."

Japan's white eyes narrowed. "Then tell Japan what it thinks its name is."

"It's..." It was so close, somewhere in her head and sitting on the back of her tongue.

She screwed her eyes up and thought as hard as she could, tryin' to reach for it. But every time she almost caught it, it slipped out of her hands like a... slippery thing.

And then it slipped right out of her.

"Ah don't know." She hung her head. "Ah guess it's Kokai."

"Japan's word is law."

That seemed like a fancy way to say 'I'm right.' And she guessed he had to be. She couldn't see why he'd lie to her after all.

"What's goin' on, by the way?" Kokai asked curiously. "What am ah doin' in here? And why are you here?"

She didn't know much about Japan, but she knew they weren't in his country, and he wasn't... hers? She didn't know what that meant, but she didn't think he was supposed to be here.

"Because Chosen has entrusted itself into Japan's care," Japan replied. "And Japan is going to lead it to greatness."

'Chosen.' Kokai paid attention to the word for the first time. Something about it felt off, but she didn't know what. All the not knowin' was starting to frustrate her.

"What does-?"

"Stay." Cutting her off, he thumped on the door with his fist, and a second later it opened so he could step out.

The door slammed behind him.

She trotted over, trying it, but it didn't seem to open from this side. Maybe it was broken.

She could hear a muffled voice through it, one of the guys that'd been watching her before.

"Japan-sama, what do you want done with her?"

"Japan will be keeping the province."

The man sounded surprised as he said, "But we already have-"

"Is the subject questioning his country?"

Kokai shivered as the room got colder, hugging her rice sack to her.

"No, Your Divine Majesty," the other guy said right away. "Your will is supreme. What would you have us do?"

Their footsteps moved away, and she couldn't hear the rest.

'Your Divine Majesty?' So Japan *was* the Somethin'-or-Other guy? But he'd said his name was Japan. Weird.

Kokai pushed her lip out, pushing on the door a bit harder, hoping it would fix it. Nope.

Again she was left to boredom, and trying to make her common sense work right. But she could only find more old stories, and a lot of food stuff. Sowing and harvesting times, what sorts of fruit grew nearby, where pears grew nearby, how many kinds of pears there were, things you could make from pears-

She *might* still be thinkin' about that pear.

Eventually Japan came back. But he only said, "It will follow," before he turned on the heel of his shiny boot and took off again.

Kokai skipped after him, deciding she'd been right about him not knowing how to socialize, but relieved to be out.

She peered at the doors they passed, more steel ones with bars. None of the rooms looked very comfortable. They were empty.

"What happened to the guy ah was with?" she asked Japan, stretching her stubby little legs to keep up with his long ones.

She'd been dragged off by the uniform men, and lost sight of him.

"He has received what he deserved."

"Like a reward?"

His boots clacked on the stone floor.

"You should give him one," she advised. "He was real nice."

*'**He** actually **answered** me.'*

"So was the guy that gave me the blanket."

Japan's head turned slightly. "Another assisted the province?"

She nodded happily. "He was a merchant. He din't know what ah was sayin', but he gave me his sheet anyway so ah wouldn't be naked. But ah never got a chance to say thanks."

She could blame the pear again.

"Do ya think you could thank him for me?"

Japan looked forward again. "It will be dealt with."

Kokai hopped, pleased she could help. Maybe he'd give him a reward, too. She knew peasants didn't make a lot of money, so even a little could help out a lot.

She followed Japan outside and towards some kind of thing with four wheels that wasn't a cart. It was a... thingy. Again, she felt like it was *right there,* but just a bit too far away to catch.

Suddenly, even though it was nighttime already, things got even darker.

Kokai put her hands up, trying to pull the smaller rice sack off her head, but someone shoved it farther down.

"Keep it on, girl," someone ordered.

'Girl' was better than 'it,' she guessed. But she didn't like the way he growled it at her.

A lot nicer, he said, "Everything is ready, Japan-sama."

"What's goin' on?" Kokai asked.

The... crickets out in the fields sounded nice. But an answer would've been nicer.

Instead she was picked up by the waist and shoved into the thingy with a squeak.

"What's happenin'?" she asked as someone climbed in. "Where are we goin'?"

"It will not ask questions," Japan said, and then the thing started roaring and sputtering so she couldn't ask them, and they started rolling forward.

Kokai rocked with the motion, too excited now to be upset. They were going so fast! The town must be flyin' by. She twisted her neck this way and that, even though she couldn't see through the sack as they rattled around.

But the excitement wore off quick. The ride was taking *forever,* and Japan still wouldn't let her see. She was one of the few people here (she thought) that got to use a thingy like this, and she couldn't even look around!

Carts were better anyway. Even if they were slower. At least they were quiet, and she could pet some kind of animal.

It was getting cold, too. Fall was coming, and she was sure this winter was going to be as cold as the last. She didn't know why. She just felt it in her bones.

But Japan wouldn't even let her snuggle up to him. She'd been inching closer, even though he was a little weird, but then all of a sudden, he said, "The province will not touch Japan," which she

thought probably meant 'Back up.' So she'd scooched back to her side of the bench, shivering.

After at least eight ri, they stopped, and Kokai was being lifted out of the thingy by a man from the one that followed them, even though it wasn't that big and she was sure she could've climbed out herself. Grass swished under her feet as she was led somewhere, then finally she could see again.

Even though the ride had felt like days because she'd been so bored, it was still dark out. Kokai craned her head back, mouth open as she looked up at the lights glimmerin' in the sky.

"Look at all the stars!" she said excitedly, tugging on one of the guy's sleeves.

But he just knocked her hand away, and none of them looked up.

Kokai pouted. They were probably used to seeing the sky, but this was her first time. She kept her face craned upwards as she followed Japan and the men, not really paying attention to what they were saying.

"The peasant said it should be around here."

"They have been dealt with."

"Yes. Small family. But what about the land?"

"Korea belongs to Japan now. This land is part of it."

"Of course, Japan-sama."

"All subjects aware of the abnormality know that to spread knowledge of its existence would be to spread dissent against their god."

"Yes, Your Divine Majesty."

"The province will come here."

Realizing that Japan was talking to her again, and that she'd fallen

behind, Kokai skipped over, though she didn't stop looking around.

She couldn't help it. There was so much to *see!* The fields around them seemed to stretch out forever, just like the black sky. They were wheat, and she really wanted to run over and see what it smelled like up close, and felt like. She wanted to roll in the grass and climb the trees in the little copse in front of her and run until she reached the dark shadows on the horizon that had to be mountains. She wanted to see it all in the sunlight, even more than she wanted that pear, or any food. She bet if she was skipping through the fields instead of in a dank dark building, her common sense would work just fine.

She only managed to take her eyes off the world when she reached Japan, and that was because she saw something new.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing at the wooden square in the ground.

"A root cellar."

"Ohhhh. They're for keepin' kimchi an' potatoes an' stuff in." Kokai beamed, proud to know something.

They weren't usually underground, she didn't think, but the soil around here was soft enough to dig one easy, but firm enough it wouldn't collapse.

One of the men grabbed an iron ring on the hatch, pulling, and it opened with a squeal, exposing a dark square.

"Go in."

Kokai looked over her shoulder, thinking she'd heard wrong. And then that the words hadn't been meant for her.

But Japan was looking right at her.

"Go in," he repeated flatly.

Kokai looked at the dark hole, like a little patch of sky with all the stars ripped out.

"You want me to go in there?" she asked uneasily.

"Yes."

"But it's dark. And it's a hole."

Japan's eyes bored into her, and his hand rested on the hilt of his sword again.

"The province will do as it is told."

Kokai glanced around at the men, hoping one of 'em might say something. But they just stood there, faces blank.

Well... She supposed there wasn't any harm. It *was* just a hole, and it wasn't like she wasn't scared of the dark or anythin'. And if there was something scary in there, it probably would've come out already.

And maybe there was food. Kokai brightened at the idea, thinking of kimchi and salted fish and cured meat, things she'd never had but her common sense told her were tasty.

Lured by the idea, she trotted over to the hole, looking down into it.

It really was dark. She couldn't see the bottom.

She really wasn't afraid of the darkness, but staring down into the black, her insides felt sick, swirling and roiling like she was about to throw up. She thought she could hear that screaming again.

Nervously, she looked back at Japan. He watched her, expressionless.

In the dark of the hole, her common sense would trickle back to her, broken and disjointed, never whole, but enough so she knew what had really happened. That Japan wasn't only not supposed to be here, but that he'd invaded her country, conquered it with tricks and soldiers, and that the only reason she even existed was because he had dissolved the person before her, *murdered* him. She would understand that she hadn't been entrusted to Japan- he had

enslaved her. It wasn't much, but it was enough that if she had known it, she never would have climbed into the hole.

But she didn't. And she really didn't see why her new friend would do anything bad to her.

So ignoring the not-voice's screaming, she sat down, the grass dewy and wet against her thighs, and slid her legs into the root cellar, turning and grabbing on to the rickety wooden ladder.

And, hand by hand, she descended into the hole.

It was even darker inside, and she wanted to close her eyes against it. Instead she tilted her head back, keeping them on the stars.

The ladder felt longer than it was, long enough that she started worrying she was climbing into a well, and would find slimy things at the bottom. But then her feet thumped onto the floor with a suddenness that startled her, cold, damp earth against her bare soles.

With an effort, she made herself let go of the ladder, though she quickly put one hand back on it, anchoring herself in the darkness. The shadows behind her felt thick, too thick to search for kimchi.

"Is this good?" she called, trying not to sound nervous. "Can ah come out now?"

Japan's face appeared in the square of light, blocking out the stars. "Japan will return."

Kokai's grip on the ladder tightened. "What do ya mean?"

"Japan is leaving. The province will stay here."

Kokai's stomach felt like it fell out. "B-But ah don't want to stay here!"

"Chosen signed itself over to Japan," Japan said, cold as the dirt she was standing on. "Japan decides what Chosen wants."

And then the hatch slammed, and Kokai was alone in the dark.

Her heart thudded in her throat, her legs trembling.

He wasn't actually leaving, right? He wouldn't actually leave her here? She hadn't done anything!

But the engines on the thingies roared, muffled through the layers of earth, and she heard them drive away.

Kokai broke from her freeze, scuttling back up the ladder, almost falling as a rung snapped, slamming against the hatch.

'Open open open open o-'

It rattled, but didn't budge.

"Settle down in there," a bored voice called, the man that'd been talking to Japan. "Even if you get out, I'll just toss you right back in."

"Please let me out!" Kokai called. "It's dark in here!"

"It's a hole," another man said. "It's gonna be dark."

"Please! Ah don't-" Her eyes had started to sting. "What did ah do? Why do ah have to stay in here? Please *answer me!"*

But they didn't, no matter how much she begged and pleaded and promised she'd never ask questions again or even talk so long as Japan came back and *let her out.* And when something made a sound deeper in the hole, making panic burst inside her as she slammed on the hatch again, another rung under her feet broke, and she fell, slamming into the ground and driving the breath out of her.

Kokai lay there, gasping for air, eyes squeezed shut, waiting for whatever it was to git her.

But nothing did.

Obviously. It wasn't like anything big could survive in a root cellar. It was probably just a bug, or a rat, and those weren't scary.

She took a deep breath, wrinkling her face at the musty air, but calming down a little.

Japan had said he'd come back, so she probably wasn't going to be here for long. He probably just... had things to do. He was His Divine Majesty after all, and someone called 'His Divine Majesty' had to be important, and have lots of important work, like she'd thought earlier. And she hadn't done anything bad, so there was no way she'd be getting locked up for good. If she was, why wouldn't he just keep her in that room with the broken door?

He'd come back soon to let her out, and she'd tell him she really didn't like being down here, and then he'd let her stay somewhere else, or maybe even go exploring.

Kokai sat up, scooching back to lean against the wall, and then not because it was damp and cold. She sat up straight, crossing her legs and staring into the dark.

There was another skittering sound. She closed her eyes.

That's right, Japan would come back any second, she told herself, pulling her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. Then she could get something to eat to stop the aching in her belly. It didn't even have to be a pear. Whatever it was would taste even better than that if she was eating it under the sun.

Kokai would be out of this hole any minute

any hour

any day now.

She knew it.

Japan and his impenetrable reasons for locking a little girl in a hole in the ground for eleven years. Even if you realize the reason, the method is still impossible to understand. I think when I edit Safeway Pyongyang and Warring Pyongyang after Chasing Liberty is done, I'm going to make Nipponia just a little weirder about Hae.

When the peasant guy calls Hae 'Daedo,' he's calling her Great Province. It would be the most common way for peasants and commoners to address their Provincehumans under Joseon/the Korean Empire. They all also had specific ranks and titles, but if you didn't know them, using that was the easiest way to not get executed or flogged for disrespect.

The Japan before Imperial Japan wouldn't have been called Tokugawa Shogunate or Edo usually, her official name was just Nihon/Nippon. The other two would be more like titles. Tokugawa nobles would mostly call her Tokugawa, for obvious reasons.

Also yes, Japan was literally just going to go in there and chop Hae's head off immediately. And would have if she didn't say his name the exact way she said it.

Pear Blossom

1952

She wrapped her arms tighter around the warm thing she was holding, tryin' to burrow into it as her eyes squeezed shut tighter. If she opened them and all she saw was dark-

"Hae, you're breaking my ribs."

Hae's eyes flew open to see grey light leaking in the door of the root cellar, and beamed as she shot up.

"Hwang!"

Her and her brother had gone to sleep on opposite ends of the oval-shaped room, but she'd ended up wrapped around him. Somehow. Completely by accident.

"Good morning to you, too." He winced a li'l as he sat up, holding a hand to his ribs as he reached for his glasses.

Hae was used to her family pretendin' she'd broken their bones with her hugs (which she'd never *actually* done), but this time she was worried.

"Oh no! Did ah break your scabs?"

She glanced around the cellar, alarmed, but settled down as she realized it was just them and the sacks of grain and crocks of kimchi an' stuff in it. It was okay to talk about the burns then.

Hwang looked around too, glasses on, before he said, "It wasn't you. You know they always bleed in the morning."

Hae did. She could feel some of her own bandages were wet, especially the ones around her underarms. Cha almost never woke up with his burns bleeding, unless his province got bombed overnight, 'cuz he slept like he was lined up for inspection. But she

was a wriggler, as Chungbuk called her. She always woke up with fresh spots.

Korea did, too, even though he never moved in his sleep. She guessed it was 'cuz one of them was always being bombed, or Pyongyang, so so was he.

Or it was just because he had so many.

"Sorry," she said to her brother anyhow, knowing she at least hadn't helped. "Ah really din't mean to cling."

"It's alright," he said, stretchin' a li'l, wincing again. "Were you having a nightmare? You were whimpering in your sleep."

"Ah don't know," Hae said blithely, then jumped up, ignoring the way her skin crackled. "C'mon, Korea's waitin' for us!"

"He never came in last night, I see," Hwang noted.

Hae hadn't really been expecting him to, even though she wanted him to. They were at Kaesong, and their negotiators' camp was here. Every day Nam Il and the others woke up to drive to Panmunjom, hopin' they wouldn't get bombed again, just to be told the stupid Yankees still didn't want to hand over their comrades or sign. And even though the talks were recessed again right now, they still had to do important stuff like try to restart them and look at their POW lists. They'd spent half the night talkin' to them, so Korea had probably spent the whole night.

"Looks like Comrade Mao Zhilong din't either," Hae muttered, squinting around.

"Instead of being jealous of our ally, have you considered that the only reason Korea lets him sleep near him instead of you is because *he* doesn't try to suffocate him in his sleep?"

"Ah'd never suffocate Korea," Hae announced. *"Or* break his ribs."

Hwang sighed, turning to face the wall so she could get ready.

Hae took a second to check her bandages, making sure they

wouldn't leak. Kang had changed them last night before she left, but they'd be cheerin' up kids today, so she had to make sure she wouldn't bleed through. They'd had to see enough blood.

Her elbow was all better now. She'd taken all her medicine like Kang and Korea told her to, even though it made her feel guilty. On top of hiding Ten Per- Corn from him, she'd had a bellyache for the past month. But now it was all gone, along with her infection. Only her sympathetic fever was left, so she got to keep workin' with no problem.

The clips holding the wrap around her belly had gotten tight while she slept, so she loosened them a li'l. She didn't really mind when the bandages were tight, it was sort of like getting a firm hug all the time. But she didn't like it so much when she was inside like this.

She knew Korea did mind the bandages. He'd made her and Hwang ride in the backseat last night (lettin' Mao Zhilong ride in the front, *hmph*), so he hadn't noticed she was still awake when the others weren't. He'd been tugging at the ones around his neck, taking one hand off the wheel to do it, even though he never did that while driving unless it was to swat Pyo. And even then he usually got someone else to.

Hwang was probably right that he didn't want her sleeping with him 'cuz of her clingin'. She'd tried to hug him on Liberation Day before he left that night, happy he hadn't gotten mad at her for holding on to Corn, but he'd pushed her away, even though they were alone. She thought the lovin' he got from the crowd after his speech might have done a number on his burns, so he didn't want her breaking them open again.

She could still feel the blood soaking his side as bombs fell on Pyongyang.

Hae shook her head, shakin' the bad thoughts right out as she finished buttoning her tunic up.

"Ah'll wait outside while ya change," she chirped, skippin' out before Hwang could answer.

She felt a li'l better outside, taking a big whiff of fresh morning air.

The root cellar wasn't really underground, the rock walls and domed roof covered in mud and straw just made it feel like it. It was nice an' clean since the People's Committee was using it, and she was used to sleeping in them from the Occupation days, and a bunch'a small, dark spaces, like the bunker. And she *wasn't* afraid of the dark anymore because soldiers weren't afraid of the dark. She just... She'd rather have slept in there with Hwang *and* Korea.

And Mao Zhilong, she guessed.

"Howdy comrades!" she greeted her an' Hwang's guards, pushing those other thoughts away.

"Good mornin', Comrade Hae," Pong-ju said, and Man-won said, "Morning."

Kong-sun nodded from where he was doing his stretches. He wasn't very talkative. Whenever Hae tried to chat with him when they were all together inspectin' factories and stuff, he just gave her short answers. He was nice, though.

"Good morning, comrade," her brother's other guard, Hak-sol, said. "Is Comrade Hwang awake?"

"Ayuh!" she replied. "He'll be right out. Was everythin' quiet last night?"

They told her it was, just a few deathbirds flying by in the distance, and she nodded in satisfaction, happily scanning Kaesong with her hands on her hips.

The town was a neutral zone, and the Yanks would get in trouble for bombing it. Even though that didn't mean it was safe since they already had, twice, even killing that poor boy, it meant it felt a li'l more normal than most places. Most of the big buildings had been knocked down before it became neutral, but plenty of low ones had been rebuilt to hold the kids, old people, and crippled soldiers that were sent here. She could see peasants heading out to the fields in

the pale dawn light, and women going to the river with bundles of laundry on their heads. It was Sunday, so gaggles of children were already takin' to the streets to enjoy their last day without school, laughing an' getting under folks' feet as they ran down the road. Plus the teahouse pavilions over by Janam Hill where the talks had been being held before were swarmin' with foreign correspondents and army vehicles, which would *never* be clustered together in the open like that in another city.

But they were still near the front. The distant thunder Hae could hear wasn't a storm rollin' in. She could tell today would be hot and dry like the past couple weeks. It was artillery, firing on their land and murdering their soldiers. This was GG's land, so she couldn't feel it, but she could smell the sting of smoke under the fresh air, and see the long black streaks as it drifted towards them like a lazy snake windin' above the Imjin River.

And it *didn't* feel normal. It was like those first few months after Liberation, when Hae still had to fight the urge to duck into an alleyway when someone greeted her, her body thinkin' it was too dangerous to be out in the open where the Japanese could git her, and folks had still cringed when someone in uniform walked by. Safety hadn't been what any of them were used to.

The way people were getting up and going around their days wasn't normal anymore, not to her and not to them. Even when it was clear, they still looked up at the sky.

The door to the root cellar opened, and Hwang came out, eyebrows crinkled.

"Have you seen my-?"

Hae handed him the short course papers she'd snatched on her way out.

"Ah took 'em so you'd wear your uniform properly," she said proudly.

It'd worked. His buttons were all done up in the right holes, and his epaulets were on the right sides. Hae didn't even know how he

managed to get 'em mixed up sometimes.

"Ahem." Her brother coughed, glancing at his guards. "Of course, thank you."

In the light, she could see his eyes were squintier than usual, and he had deep dark shadows under them. He'd said he was talking to an old friend last night, but couldn't tell her who until the war was over, since it was confidential. He said it was a good talk, but... Hae felt like that wasn't all it was. He'd been too quiet on the drive here, starin' out into the dark as they crossed their province.

They both needed to cheer up, so she said, "Let's go, ah want to see Korea," and took off, Hwang hurryin' after her as they headed for the teahouse near the eastern hill.

Tons of people greeted them as they passed, calling them Comrade Hwanghaes, Comrade Hae an' Hwang, or Comrade South and North Hwanghae, depending on how well they knew them and what they felt like.

Hae greeted them all back, giving an extra li'l skip whenever they used that last one.

After Liberation, when they were finally goin' to become politicians, she'd wondered if Korea would still let people call them 'South and North,' since it might be a li'l confusing for them since they weren't actually two separate provinces.

And... because of how the Southern One stayed behind in Seoul. She'd known where their names had come from by then.

Hwang had asked, and Korea said they would keep the directions, since both of them being Hwanghae would be even more confusin', and he didn't want folks calling them by their nicknames (even though lots of them did that anyway). So when they were first presented to their people, Hae got to introduce herself as South Hwanghae 'but you can call me Hae!' (which she hadn't meant to do, and maybe *might* have somethin' to do with why people used their nicknames so much). It was on her official portrait, too, and her Party membership card. '황해남도.' And it was how people

called her at important meetings an' criticism sessions, just like how they called Hwang North Hwanghae. It was what *Korea* always called them. He'd never used their nicknames, not even once.

Everyone was already used to callin' them that, and thinking of them that way. So wouldn't it be confusing now for them to be just Hwanghae? Like... they weren't Hae *or* Hwang, but someone new.

Her chest tightened with a surge.

That wasn't how merging worked, she reminded herself. Kang and Gang were both still Kangwon, Hwanghae would still be Hae and Hwang, and-

Korea had said she wouldn't disappear, so they- *she* wouldn't. Neither would Hwang. They'd just be...

'You would be becoming who you were supposed to be.'

Mm. That.

"Hae? Are you alright?" Hwang looked up from his drafts, and Hae realized she'd fallen back next to him, her arms wrapped around herself.

"Ah'm okay," she chirped, skippin' harder than before.

She knew mergin' wouldn't make them different people. But their people might not understand that, right? They might think Hwanghae was different than the Hae and Hwang that fought to Liberate their country for all those years, and led the Agrarian Reform and literacy campaign, and were fightin' this war for them now. And that could make them feel more distant from them, right?

Hae made sure her arms kept swinging as she skipped faster, needing to see Korea.

Anyway, Korea wanted them to be super close with their people, and they'd spent decades puttin' down roots with 'em, making sure they were all tangled up so they could help them grow. Wouldn't changing them now tear all those roots up, or at least weaken them?

Hae had said that to Hwang, and he'd really liked the metaphor, enough to put it in his 'Why Hae and Hwang Should Be Two Separate People Forever Please' essay. And she was sure she was right. And since Korea always made right decisions, he'd see that when they eventually told him what they wanted.

Even if he didn't, he had to.

Her heart leapt as she spotted him coming down the road from the teahouse, and she dropped out of her skip to tear towards him.

"KOREA!"

He barely looked up from the telegraph he was reading, stepping to the side so Hae went shooting past him. Her boots skidded so hard she sent plumes of dust spraying up as she spun around, launching herself at him again. He dodged again, but on her third attempt he held his hand out so she'd smack into it, bouncin' back.

Hae rubbed her forehead, pouting, though her hat had stopped her burns from bursting.

"Did that hurt?" Korea asked, all flat. "Good. Next time don't act like a bull in public."

Hae remembered there were other people around. "Oops, sorry Korea."

'In public,' he'd said. Maybe she could try and hug him again before he went back to Pyongyang later.

Even though she was achin' for one now.

"We keep a low profile while we're here." He was looking around with his eye narrowed, observing Kaesong as it woke up. "We're too close to the front."

Like he'd known it was comin', the 'thunder' to the east rumbled louder.

Right. And even though they had lots of security around who could

get in and out of the neutral zone to make sure that the reaction'ries couldn't invade again, and that their soldiers didn't mess up and accidentally march through like that one time, which meant it was real hard for spies to get in, they might risk it if they thought they could steal Hae and Hwang like they'd stolen Gang.

'Ah'd like to see 'em try.'

Even if 'Merica succeeded, Hae didn't have the Southern One's evil Commands anymore. And she'd never spill Korea's secrets just cuz of a li'l torture. They couldn't make her tell them Mao Zhilong was here or that his name wasn't Mao Zhilong, and they couldn't make her shoot Korea. She'd kill the Yankee, 'cuz Korea said it was okay if it was him or her, and she'd mmmmm- beat the tteok out of the Southern One. Korea wouldn't be happy, but he'd told her to do what she thought was right, even if he didn't. And she knew beating the tteok out'a the Southern One would be right.

But... like with Corn, maybe she wouldn't *tell* him she thought he was wrong. She would every other time, though. Even though she knew Korea really, *really* didn't like being wrong.

"Rest assured, Korea, we'll keep an eye out for interlopers," Hwang said, reaching them with their guards.

"Ayuh!" Hae agreed. "And Man-won an' Pong-ju will keep me safe!"

She linked arms with them, then dropped them when Korea gave her a Look.

"Come on," he said, striding off. "Rations, then we tour the town and visit the children."

Hae was excited to finally see the kids hurt by 'Merica's bombing so she could let them know her an' Hwang an' Korea an' everyone else cared about them. But now that she was here, she was a li'l nervous, too. She also hoped Hwang wouldn't say the wrong thing.

Not that she thought he would on purpose! Even if he was worried about it, Hae knew for sure that her brother was a warm person. She'd known ever since the night Korea learned most of them

couldn't read, and even though Hwang had been a li'l rude about having to teach her, after, he'd sat with her in the snow and answered all the questions she had, not even stoppin' when he started to shiver, only when Korea told them to go to sleep.

But he did sometimes put his foot in his mouth, like he said, even though Hae had never seen him do that (she didn't care if it was a metaphor, it was a weird one- feet din't belong in mouths). And you had to be careful with kids, especially the kids they were going to see.

She'd just keep an eye on him for Korea.

They had a real quick breakfast with the rations they'd brought from Pyongyang, her and Hwang sittin' with the other soldiers while Korea walked away to see how they were doing for food stores.

They left without him eating. And without his rations.

Hae would always defend Korea against her cousins when they were being mean about him, but she was starting to think SH and Kang were right- their Countryhuman was a *tiny* bit of a hy-po-crite. *She* just wouldn't say that out loud.

"Korea," Hwang asked as they headed farther east to the edge of town where all the farmland was so they could speak to the peasants before they all left for the fields. "Did you find out what the Americans hit last night?"

His eyes flicked to their Countryhuman's neck and the clean white bandages poking out of his collar. Hae was pleased to see he'd actually changed them. He must want to not scare the kids either.

A li'l while after they left Pyongyang, more blood spots had showed up on Korea's throat, letting them know the Yankees were bombing them for the gajillionth time. And that wasn't Hae usin' the tool of the reaction'ries by exaggerating.

Korea kept walking. "Salvage supply dumps and our hidden vehicle concentrations in Pyongyang."

Hwang frowned. "I thought you predicted America wouldn't bomb the capital for some time?"

Hae bobbed her head in agreement. That was the whole reason they'd been able to have the Liberation Day speech outside, which she'd been really happy about. She liked seeing Korea and their people under the sun more than in a dark theatre. She got to see the light in their eyes as they looked up at him better. Even if it was easier to see how sunken his cheeks were, you couldn't even notice them once he got going.

"'Predicted!'" Korea snapped, aggressively enough that Hae blinked and Hwang flinched a li'l. "How am I supposed to have any idea how that Imperialist operates?"

Hwang shoved his glasses up. "Of course, apologies, Korea."

Korea's jaw twitched, and he looked away. "His steel production must be recovering fast," he said, flatter.

Hae's heart sank.

Hwang opened his mouth, then closed it like he thought better about what he'd been goin' to say. She silently cheered him on for keeping his foot out'a his mouth.

"Or it's a show of force to make us *think* his production is recovering swiftly," he said instead. "Either way, it's either another trespass in an attempt to make us break off from the talks, or a threat as an incentive to sign away our POWs."

Korea's voice was chilly. "We will not."

"Nope!" Hae agreed, tryin' to grab him again (and being pushed away). "We're goin' to get all our comrades back, whether 'Merica likes it or not."

"I hope they received our statement," Hwang fretted, looking south.

They'd made one for the guerrillas still fightin' behind enemy lines, and one to be sent to the POW camps down there, Korea

congratulating their captured comrades on Liberation Day, cheering 'em on and telling them he was proud of them and their resistance efforts. They'd published it in the news, too, 'cuz the Yankees were supposed to let the prisoners read it.

But Hae knew they wouldn't. 'Merica didn't want them knowing Korea loved them and was fightin' to get them back. He wanted them to think he'd forgot about them and wouldn't be coming to save them, like Japan had done to her in the hole.

She still couldn't remember all he'd said to her. And she wasn't goin' to. Even if she had to remember everythin' else, the beetle and the *dark lonely bored* and the needles, she was going to keep his words forgotten. Korea said she didn't have to remember, so she wouldn't.

And he deserved to be forgotten.

But she knew he'd told her she didn't have a Countryhuman. That she was alone.

It made her blood boil to think of the Yankee doin' the same thing to their soldiers, tricking them into thinking Korea didn't care so they'd sign themselves away to him.

Korea didn't answer Hwang, walking faster.

Kaesong was an old, old city. It'd used to be their capital way back when Koryo was alive, so there were lots of old stone buildings and fancy tile roofs, with dozens of narrow alleys winding every which way through 'em. There were Western-style and more Japanesey houses, too, 'cuz of Yankee missionaries and the Occupation, but Japan hadn't messed with it as much as he'd messed with Pyongyang and Seoul, which were bigger now. And since the city had been below the Parallel before the war, and Rhee didn't care about the countryside, plus their army hadn't held it for long before it was made a neutral zone, there hadn't been many factories or anythin' for the Yankees to destroy. Though Hae still saw some of the taller buildings were missing walls and roofs, and some gaps in the rows of houses were filled with stacks of pale stone that'd been collected and were waiting to be used, most of the damage was

farther out, in barns or places the Yanks thought could be storin' food, trying to starve their army out on its retreat.

And most importantly about Kaesong, they harvested lots of ginseng here. Korea liked ginseng.

Their tour didn't take too long, 'cuz everyone in the city was mostly dependents, veterans, or orphans, people who the State made sure got enough food, and havin' a lot of officers here for the negotiations meant they didn't need to worry about anyone having to write to them if some of the new recruits were abusing their positions or trying to press-gang people.

People like that pissed Hae off most of all. They were the Korean *People's* Army. She didn't think bein' new and not done your political training yet meant you should be stupid enough to think you could pick on the people and get away with it.

But she never got to give 'em a piece of her mind. Korea liked to deal with that kind of stuff himself, or send their military police and political workers to deal with it. Her and the rest of their unit just got told which areas the complaints came from so they could pay special attention to them. Their job was to make sure the idiots had learned their lesson, not teach it.

Sadly.

Anyway, none of them were here. Just a lot of peasants Hae got to talk about crops with, Party members Hwang chatted with about the Party elections and got feedback for the short courses from, and their peacekeepin' force and the Chinese's.

"I notice Ch- Comrade Mao is conspicuously absent," Hwang noted as Hae waved to some of the PVA soldiers eating their lunch rations by a townhouse, beamin' as they waved back. "Where is he?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Korea clipped.

Hae frowned, lowering her hand. "Korea, SH says it's been almost two years since he showed up, so you should be nicer to him by now."

Even if she didn't like Mao Zhilong, that was just 'cuz she still couldn't let his bribery work. She was allowed to take stuff from him (she didn't even have to ask first now, so long as it was just candy or fruit!), but she'd accepted that first milk candy before Korea had said so. But even though she wasn't allowed to like him, *she* still treated him nice.

Hae knew Korea wasn't actually being mean. If he *really* didn't like Mao Zhilong, he'd just beat him, for real, not like the pl- sparrin' match they'd had before. And he wouldn't talk to him the way he did. But what if Mao Zhilong didn't know that?

Korea's jaw flexed. *"South Hamgyong* doesn't have to deal with him all day every day."

"You might have to deal with him less if ya din't let him sleep in your room," Hae grumbled.

He glared at her. "What was that?"

"Nothin' Korea!"

"I'm just worried," Hwang cut in to save her. "As you said, we're fairly close to the front. And Comrade Mao Zhilong is a key political officer."

Their guards weren't supposed to know who he was either. Hae had been doin' a good job not telling Pong-ju and Man-won. She hoped it was working. If they got caught and they knew...

Well, it wasn't like they didn't already have to do that if they were captured. Korea would've told them to. Hae didn't like it, but she got why it was necessary- their guards went everywhere with them. They'd seen the insides of a lot of their factories an' air raid shelters, and people slipped up sometimes and told the provinces about supply dumps, though they usually had to move them right after. And they knew where the bunker was for sure, and Hwang and SH's knew Korea had been sick, and Hae's knew she had died.

She would have to take herself out if she was taken, too. Even without the Commands. Even if she killed the Yankee and beat the

Southern One, she'd still have to worry about Rhee and his traitors going after Haeju.

And she couldn't do what she'd need to to get rid of the Commands completely.

She knew Korea would never let Haeju be taken again. Ever. But she also knew he'd still want her to remove herself from service, just in case. Just like Pong-ju and Man-won. The difference was she might be able to come back.

She didn't like it. But she knew why they had to. And she knew they would. So she din't want to give them Mao Zhilong as another reason to.

"He's slippery," Korea said about him. "He'll be fine."

But Hae noticed he lifted his head, looking east, where they could hear deathbirds droning now.

Then he shook himself.

"Stop worrying about him," he ordered as they headed for the side street that would take them back out'a the city center. "He's not as stupid as he acts."

Hae knew. He was 'sly,' as SH said (before covering her mouth with her hand).

Korea looked back at them, eye narrowed, like he did when he didn't want to say something. After a second, he asked, "Do you know when...?"

"When what?" Hwang prompted when he didn't finish.

Korea shook himself, looking away. "Never mind. It's-"

They rounded the corner and he stopped in his tracks, Hae almost bumpin' into him. A guy had just come around the other corner, stopping like they had, eyes flying wide open. She recognized him from last night, the officer that led them to the root cellar, but in plainclothes now.

He blinked, lookin' surprised. "Comrade Korea?"

Korea's hand had twitched for his gun, but he didn't grab it. His eye widened, too. "You-"

"Ah, there you are."

The officer jumped, face paling, and Hae looked over to see Mao Zhilong had appeared in the street behind him.

Korea stiffened, shoving her away (she'd grabbed on to his arm, whoops).

"I was walking around sight-seeing, and I noticed someone tailing me," Mao Zhilong said lightly, slinking up behind the officer. "'Surely I'm much too trusted of an ally to be being officially observed,' I thought, which made me worry he might be a saboteur. So I decided to do some tailing of my own. But it seems you two might know each other?"

He tipped his head, smiling at Korea. Hae couldn't see his mouth, but she knew he was.

Korea stiffly stared at the officer. The officer stared back, eyes wide. They flicked towards Mao Zhilong, loomin' over his shoulder, then he slowly raised his hand to his brow in a salute, his back rigid.

"I'm sorry, Comrade Korea," he said, all mechanical. "I didn't recognize our comrade, so I made the decision to follow him to see what he was up to."

"'Didn't recognize?'" Mao Zhilong asked, sounding hurt. "Aiya, we met last night. Am I really so forgettable?"

"It's the mask, Comrade Korea." The officer's voice was as stiff as their Countryhuman's expression. "I'm so sorry, Comrade Korea."

Korea jerked his head in a nod. "Don't let it happen again. Get out of here."

Hae had been keeping her hand on her pistol, worried the guy

might be a spy trying to kidnap Mao Zhilong, waiting for Korea to tell her to *git* him. But as she looked up at him, he didn't look suspicious or mad. Their officer probably couldn't read his face as good as she could, but their Countryhuman was actually apologizin' back with his eye.

'Ohhhh.'

The officer Korea had just thrown under the trolley dipped his chin, turned on a heel, and quickly marched off.

Mao Zhilong watched him go, smilin'. "Letting him go so easily? And here I thought you were getting *more* paranoid."

Hae puffed out her cheeks. He was teasin' Korea. She hated when people teased Korea, unless it was Pyo or Chungbuk. And that was only 'cuz he didn't actually mind when they did it. Most of the time.

Korea didn't answer, shoving past him.

"Though I suppose you must be, considering I haven't been graced by an escort in awhile."

Korea hunched. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mmmm," Mao Zhilong hummed. He caught Hae squintin' and winked at her.

Korea *was* paranoid, but Hae never got why people said it like it was a bad thing (even if he had been... a li'l more prickly than usual, SH'swordsnothers). Paranoia was good when anyone around them could be a reaction'ry just waiting to cut their neighbours open and drive nails into their heads. If he'd been having someone watch Mao Zhilong before, it was 'cuz he didn't know if he could be trusted around their people. But they knew the Chinese guy was okay now, so that wouldn't be it anymore.

She wanted to tell Mao Zhilong the real reason Korea had someone stalkin' him (because she really would like him if she was allowed), but she knew her country would be mad. So she just *'hmph'*ed at him, hoping his feelings weren't too hurt (and snatching the milk candy he held out to her).

She snagged something else as they skirted the edges of the city, headin' south.

People were set up for market on one of the roads out, lots of peasants comin' in with midday pickin's and townsfolk coming to buy, all bundled up in loose white clothes and straw hats with big brims. They talked and laughed with the sellers, some of 'em trying to haggle, and Hae skipped happily, thrilled to feel like she was actually at market again, instead of hidden under the trees while everyone kept sneaking glances at the sky, barely even focused on what they were buying, just wantin' to get out of the gathering area before some Yankee plane realized they were down there and dropped a bomb on them.

Even though she could still see eyes flicking up.

Some of the sellers had carrots and turnips spread out on blankets, still with dirt from the fields on them, and beans, lots of beans, red, green, and black. There were also clay jars of shoyu, doenjang, and gochugaru, made with the salt the State was makin' sure people received. One old guy even had an old wooden ammo crate he'd packed with bottles of alcohol (that Hae squinted at, making sure they *were* old and that he wasn't violatin' the 'no wasting grain on alcohol' rule; he didn't look nervous when Korea did the same thing, so she decided they were).

There was no seafood, even though they were close to the sea. And definitely no clams.

But out of all the stuff there was, it was the fruits she fixated on- juicy peaches and little gold chamoe, with a few vivid green melons that were almost the size of her head tossed in, all arranged on brightly-coloured pojagi or nestled in crates and baskets like gems looted from the old tombs in the hills. Hae's mouth filled with saliva so quickly she got scared she was goin' to throw up again, her belly already forgetting that she'd had breakfast just a few hours ago.

One of the peasants caught her oglin' (she loved that word) his wares, and beckoned her over. She glanced at Korea, but he'd stopped to help a woman with a water jug balanced on her head, so nothing stopped her from skippin' up, then remembering she wasn't

supposed to skip.

"Howdy!" she greeted.

"Howdy, Comrade Hwanghae," he said back, even though he didn't have a Hwanghae accent. "Or Comrade South Hwanghae, my bad."

Hae beamed. "It's okay!"

Since they'd been stuck below the Parallel, the people from Kaesong hadn't got used to calling her that. The Southern One hadn't known there were still two Hwanghaes at first, so they might not have either. But this guy had still corrected himself real easy.

She looked over to see if Korea heard, but he was still busy helping the lady set the jug down while Mao Zhilong flirted with her.

"I saw you were interested in my harvest," the peasant said. "Would you like a fruit? They're from my own trees."

Hae's mouth watered again as he picked up one of the gems, holding a round, pale yellow pear out to her. She almost reached for it before she trapped her hands behind her back.

"It's alright," she said (a li'l wetly). "You don't have to give us stuff anymore. We're the People's Government, so it's *our* job to give *you* stuff."

Even though he didn't look old enough to have met any of the Provincehumans from before, Hae knew he could still think like that, especially since they hadn't been able to visit Kaesong at all to start teaching people it was wrong (and obviously the Southern One never had, and Rhee and 'Merica never let GG do it). She knew from her common sense that the old Gyeonggi had been all snooty and already had everything she could ever need, but whenever she came down to the town or villages, people still gave her stuff for free, all their hard-earned crops they'd broken their backs harvesting when they already had to pay too many taxes.

It made Hae proud when her people offered them things 'cuz it meant they were generous, and that they thought she was doin' a

good job. But back then, the provinces hadn't actually done anything for them. They'd just handed over their stuff because they felt like they had to, like some people felt like they had to leave their best harvest out for their ancestors just to go bad. That wasn't being generous- it was just being superstitious and afraid. And old Gyeonggi had never turned them down, even though she was rich enough to even have ice to make bingsu.

The old Hwanghae had done the same thing. But not the new one. Hae didn't want people ever being afraid of her. (Except for traitors and Yankees, *they* should be *real* afraid.) She'd only accept free food if she was really *really* sure it wasn't a bribe, and if whoever gave it to her was doing it because they had enough to spare.

And right now, no one did.

"If it weren't for you, my trees wouldn't be mine," the peasant told her. "I'd still just be the man taking care of them. Giving away one pear won't kill me."

She was tryin' *real* hard not to look at the fruit he was still holding out.

"And if it makes you feel better-" He looked side to side, then leaned forward, cupping his hand over his mouth so he could whisper, "If folks see a Provincehuman sampling my stock, they might buy more."

Ohhhh. That was true. Hae still didn't want to take something someone else could buy, but-

'Oh!'

"Alright," she caved. "Ah'll take it. But ah've got to pay."

"Then I won't complain too much," the man said, passing her the pear.

Hae eagerly took it, rummagin' in her belt pouch and pulling out the wallet she kept her Party membership card safely in, handing him some money from her salary. With all the soldiers watching the marketplace, they didn't need to worry about any lumpenproles

jumpin' him later.

"Thank ya!" she said loudly. "This is the best lookin' pear ah've ever seen!"

As she said goodbye, a few people were already coming over to look.

'Hehehe.'

Hae trotted back over to Korea, who was dragging Mao Zhilong away from the lady. His eye narrowed when he saw the fruit in her hand, so she quickly explained what she wanted it for, and he relaxed.

It really was a good lookin' pear. Nice and round with no punky spots, and good firm flesh. It would probably be real crispy an' juicy an'-

Hae wiped her forearm across her mouth, glancing over to make sure Korea hadn't seen, and tucked the fruit into her bag before she could drool on it, trying to make herself forget it was there as they carried on.

Kaesong was surrounded by hills, with Mount Ryongsu and Mount Nam across the highway to the south, and Mount Yami and Mount Jine to the west (they were really all just steep hills). To the north were the real mountains, the Songaks towerin' over the city like they were keeping an eye on it. Koryo had built his big fortress at the foot of them, building walls around the palace and more around all the commonfolk that settled down in the river valley to farm and trade, so he could lord over them.

Also prime ginseng pickin' territory.

Kaesong was full of li'l streams that came out of the mountains to wrap around and through the city on their way down to the Imjin River in the southeast, like roots searching for water, even though they were already made of it. The soil here was naturally real fertile, but as they walked along one of the thinner tendrils, Hae made a note to suggest channelizin' some of 'em once the war was

over. This year definitely wasn't a cold wave, and the blazin' sun had dried up a few of the shallow ones, leaving trails of rocks. GG would complain since this was really part of his province, and he'd have to help lead the diggin', but people would be happy if they didn't have to go so far to do laundry, and if they could grow gardens easier. And even though the Imjin didn't flood as bad as the Taedong or the Pothong did, when it did, the streams flooded worse, and the carved banks weren't enough to stop them.

The hospital and the orphanage were by a branch of the main stream, northeast of Janam Hill and outside the city a li'l, so in case the Yankees started bombing it again, they didn't have any excuse to hit them. Even though Hae didn't think they needed one. It wasn't like they'd ever got in trouble for the germs they were dropping. Or the napalm.

They didn't have to go all the way there, though. Korea led them through the maze of chosonjips, and they popped out on a dusty stretch of riverbank a ways north. Less-fancy chogajips lined the other side, with wattle and daub walls and straw roofs.

The stream was wide here, but more shallow, with patches of sand covered in scrub brush pokin' up through it, and a set of wading stones crossing the narrowest part like a belt. A boy was standing on one, lifting himself up to balance on one leg before hopping to the next stone and landing with the opposite foot, making some of the other kids cheer.

They were scattered around the river, a dozen of 'em. Some were frolickin' in the water, shrieking as they splashed each other, and others were squatting around the bank, playing games with stones and sticks. Two sat a li'l way away, a girl with her legs pulled up to her chest, her brown skirt all puddled around her as she scratched at the dirt with a stick, and a boy watching her draw. A few older women were farther along, doing laundry and keeping an eye on the kids, and a couple militiamen in thin jackets were smoking on the back stoop of one of the chosonjips. They were the only ones that noticed them, saluting.

Hae waved back, but noticed Korea wasn't paying attention. He'd stopped, and was watching the kids with a dark look in his eye.

She glanced back at them, heart squeezin', knowing what he was looking at. She tried to take his sleeve, but he stepped away again.

"Korea?" Hwang turned back. "Can we go over?"

Their Countryhuman nodded, and her brother approached the river, looking way too serious.

He looked back over at her as he went, asking a silent question. Hae answered with a blink.

She could feel it. She'd been feelin' it for a few hours. But Korea didn't need to worry about them when they were here for the kids. And when she knew he always felt it, too.

Mao Zhilong looked at Korea, pushing his scarf back so he could flutter his long lashes at him. Hae liked- would like him, but she *hated* when he did that.

But Korea sighed. "Fine. But keep your mask on. I *mean* it."

"If that's an order," Mao Zhilong said mischievously, flittin' off.

"Korea." Hae tugged on his uniform, careful not to touch his arm this time. When he looked, she shuffled her feet. "Ah brought some of the letters folks wrote us on Liberation Day. Ah thought the kids might like to see. Is it okay if me an' Hwang read 'em a few?"

Korea didn't say 'yes' right away, making her pout.

The letters had made her really happy. After Korea left that night, her and the others had stayed up for hours going through them all, and hadn't finished half. They couldn't even read a lot of them, not even Hwang.

The idea that so many people around the world were cheerin' them on, hoping they won, filled her with joy, making her forget her empty belly for once (CCCP's pickles had also helped). Hae had never even heard of 'Tan-gan-yi-ka,' but someone from there that lived in Britain had sent them a letter, telling them he wished both their countries could be free soon.

They'd never had that during the war against Japan. The only people that cared that weren't Korean were the Chinese and the Soviets, and they'd been dealin' with their own stuff. And even they'd turned on their people, worrying that they were Japanese spies when really they hated Japan even more than them. So sometimes it felt like no one cared at all. And even when Korea and the General said before that the eyes of the world were on them now...

Hae believed them, always, she'd known they were right. But now it *felt* like it. There were people out there, everywhere, that were all still dealin' with their own things. But they were also watching Korea, thinking about them, hopin' they beat 'Merica and all his bloodthirsty puppets and the Southern One, and Liberated their country. Hae and her family and their people weren't the only ones that cared about Korea now.

But she didn't think he felt the same way. She'd seen his face light up whenever he read them the letters he received from the General after he'd left for the Soviet Union, or when one of their old comrades would write after Liberation to let him know they were alive. And even if it was obvious he'd look that way when it was one of their people, he'd looked the same way when one of the Korean-Soviets had came all the way to Kangwon to track them down and give them that letter from CCCP, before he'd even known him. She'd been watching him as he opened those Liberation Day letters, hopin' to spot it again, thinking maybe she'd see that shadow disappear from his eye for the first time since she'd died.

But she didn't. It had just got darker.

It was there now as he looked away.

"Go ahead," he clipped.

"They're the ones ah read to you last night on the drive," she told him hopefully. She'd been tryin' to distract him since he always got all tense when he drove now, and she'd been trying even harder after the bloodstains showed up on his neck.

"I said go ahead." His face didn't change at all. "Now get over

there. We're here for a reason."

Hae was still holding his sleeve. She attempted to wrap her fingers around his wrist instead. He pulled away.

She tried not to pout, knowing he was just as crispy as her. And she couldn't let the kids see her look upset. She took a few steps for the river, where they'd noticed Hwang an' Mao Zhilong now, looking back when she realized Korea wasn't coming.

"Go," he repeated, still not looking at her. "I'll be over in a minute."

She knew he needed alone time first, just like they'd had to wait at the bottom of the stairs so he could be alone before the speech. Korea was *not* awful with kids the way SH said, but if he was thinkin' about stuff he didn't want to be thinking about, he could make a scary face. And they had to be real careful with these ones. They weren't just normal children.

Hae looked over at one of the boys that'd been splashin' in the water, and was coming over to investigate Hwang. Most of them were wearing shirts, but he wasn't. He was tiny, barely taller than even her ribs. Someone like CCCP could probably wrap his big hands entirely around his waist.

But there was already something wrapped around him. Long red weals patterned like the water he flicked at another boy. They stretched across his belly and up his thin chest, worst on his left side, where a thick mat of them was. Hae could see from his rolled-up pants that it had got his legs, too. A stray one clung to his neck and jaw, shiny pink swollen flesh, even though the wounds were old. He hadn't been sprayed with cool river water, but liquid fire.

And he wasn't the worst one she could see.

Hae thought of smoke an' flames an' screaming, and the stench of burnt flesh, and wanted to hug herself, or wait for Korea to come with her.

Instead she grinned and skipped over to the riverbank, callin', "Howdy, comrades!"

"Hello, comrade!" the kids all called back, trying for one voice like how they'd greet their teachers, and gigglin' as they ended up all scattered.

Hae grinned, even though some of the voices had been broken or slurred. All those letters from their comrades across the world had made her feel better. But it was her job to make everyone else feel better.

She glanced over her shoulder, where Korea was still lurking under the eaves of the chosonjip, her heart aching.

Even if right now she couldn't do it for the person she wanted to most of all.

'The pear blossoms are always surrounded by the dust, but never stained by it.'

I like old poetry better than new poetry. New poetry embarrasses me (which is not the poets' fault). Old poetry is always like 'I saw a peach tree the other day. Immaculate.' That really speaks to me.

Hae could develop a life hack where she walks into the bunker room and Korea immediately tells her to get out, she's not sleeping with him. So she 'hmph's and tells him she's not there to cuddle with him, she's there to cuddle with Mao Zhilong, thereby assuring she gets to sleep in the same room as North, and since it's so small, she's pretty much right next to him, and can easily roll over to cuddle with him. However this could not work because North would immediately eviscerate China the moment she said that. Wouldn't even see him move, there would just be bloodstains on the wall.

Singed Petals

Hae thought it was the cutest thing when li'l kids stared. They'd see something they thought was neat, and gape at it with their mouths open and eyes all big and wide. She thought she'd probably looked like that after Korea rescued her from the hole, and she couldn't stop starin' at the mountains and sky and fields of golden autumn rice. And him. Though she knew the first time she'd ever laid eyes on his face, she'd looked a thousand times more awed. She'd been seeing the Sun for the first time, after all.

The children that gathered around her, Hwang, and Mao Zhilong looked awed, too, but it wasn't the bad kind that peasants had used to look at their Provincehumans with, and that made Korea uncomfortable when they still sometimes did. They were lookin' at Hae the same way they'd look at any ol' soldier as they clustered together on the riverbank to gawk at her.

"Hyungs are so tall," a boy said in amazement, craning his neck back to look up at Hwang and Mao Zhilong.

"Are you wearing a mask 'cuz you're a spy?" the shirtless boy asked the Chinese guy.

A girl furrowed her brows at Hae. "Why do you have so many bandages? Are you hurt?"

She yelped as the boy that'd been jumping on the rocks jostled her, leaning over her shoulder to look at their firearms and ask, "Can I hold your gun?"

Hae giggled, and one of the women rushed over, leaving her laundry behind.

"Children, children," she fretted, hovering over them. "These are your Provincehumans and..." Her eyes flicked to Mao Zhilong, seeing his PVA uniform.

"Single," he supplied, Hae whippin' her head over to him.

"I-" The woman blinked. "What?"

Hwang cleared his throat. *"This* is one of our close Chinese allies."

"Yes," the lady said, pulling the boy makin' grabby-hands for Hae's pistol back. "So show some respect. You didn't even bow, you little ruffians."

All the kids looked real dismayed, the way Hae did when she realized she'd done somethin' Korea had told her not to. Their moms had probably seed-drilled it into them to bow to older folks, but they'd been too excited to remember.

"Sorry!" a girl said, bowing at the waist, and all the others rushed to follow her, bobbin' like ducks.

"I'm so sorry for their behaviour, comrades," the lady said, bowing too.

"It's alright," Hae chirped, looking over her shoulder.

Korea was still lingering by the chosonjip. He'd looked away, even though they weren't even bowin' to him. But at least he hadn't crept off.

"I've never seen a Provincehuman before," the boy interested in her gun said, excited as he peered up at Hae (she loved kids- they were the only ones that had to do that). "Your eyes are so weird, it's cool!"

"In-su!" the lady hissed.

"It's okay," Hae said. "They are pretty weird."

She didn't mind that. Korea's eye was white, so as far as she was concerned, pure white eyes were the best eyes ever.

She leaned (she still wasn't so tall she got to crouch) over, pulling her bottom eyelid down a li'l to show In-su more of her eyeball. "See? No pupils. You can't even tell where ah'm lookin'."

"True for anyone but you," Hwang muttered. "You aren't exactly subtle."

Nope! Korea scolded her a lot for starin' at him in meetings.

"Whoa," the boy breathed. "Cool!"

"Ah hear you're super strong an' stuff," an older-looking boy said excitedly. "How does that work? Are your muscles made different? Can you really not feel pain?"

"Those are all just rumours," Hwang told him, pushin' his glasses up as he got into teacher mode. "Provincehumans aren't any internally different on an anatomic level, only on a biological one. Though we have certain advantages compared to the average person, those come from our military training, not any genetic marvel. Aside from-"

Hae poked him, sensing he was about to go off about borin' stuff, and he coughed.

"We're made of flesh and blood like you," he told the kids. "It just repairs itself faster."

The older boy smacked a palm into his hand. "Ah told you, Yeon-ae! But that's still so awesome! You heal faster? How does it work?"

Hwang went off ramblin', but Hae didn't stop him this time, 'cuz the kid seemed interested. She got to answer her own questions like she was at a press conference- about Korea (she made sure just to say he was amazin' and not everything she'd *really* like to say about him, since she didn't want to embarrass him), how her guns worked, if she'd ever flown a plane, and what being a soldier was like.

Hae thought about slinking through the alleys of Sincheon with her rifle clutched tight in her hands, forcing herself to walk slow, even though the screaming was getting louder and louder, like the woman was being torn open, because she knew if she gave their unit away before they were in position, the people doing whatever they were doing to her would get away and do it to more people,

and told the kids it was fun.

Sincheon hadn't been about being a soldier, anyway. It was about being a province. Soldier stuff *was* fun, bouncin' around the battlefield and killing bad guys, making sure they'd never hurt anyone again. It was just the stuff that came after that wasn't, the casualty counts and medical tents, and recognizing the body you were carrying off the field.

But they didn't need to know about that. SH had said they were never going to be able to stop fighting. Even once Korea kicked his ass, 'Merica was going to be lurking out there, and they might need these boys and girls to join the army someday so it would be strong enough that he wouldn't *even* think about invading again, and no traitors could ever overthrow them. She couldn't scare them out of it.

And the war would be over by then, so hopefully these kids would only ever get to experience the *real* fun parts about being a soldier- the trainin', scarfing down rations with your comrades, sharing stories about their homes an' families in the barracks at night, and getting praised by Korea for doing a good job.

"I wanna be a soldier!" In-su declared, swishin' a stick he'd picked up around in the air. "I'd kick all those Yankees' butts, *and* Rhee's!"

"You can't be a soldier if you don't learn discipline," the woman scolded him. "And Comrade Yun Sun-ok says you didn't listen to her when she asked you to come in last night."

"Ayuh," Hae agreed. "'A disciplined army is an ever-victorious army,' so make sure you always listen to your commandin' officers."

In-su pouted, but the orphanage lady gave her a thankful look.

She looked down as someone tugged shyly on her sleeve. It was the girl that asked about her bandages, her hair done up with a piece of string.

"Um," she said, wrigglin' her shoulders like Hae did, one arm hanging at her side. "Oppa said you could feel pain like we do. Does

that mean all those bandages hurt?"

It wouldn't be the bandages that hurt, but Hae got what she meant. And why she was asking.

She made sure to look her in her eyes and not anywhere else, or towards Korea. "They hurt a li'l," she confessed, keepin' her voice bright. "But they're not too bad."

"Did you get fire dropped on you, too?"

"Sort'a," Hae told her. "We feel all the napalm and bombs the Yankees hit you with."

The girl's eyes widened. "All of them?"

"It's not as bad as getting' hit with 'em ourselves," Hae quickly said, not able to stop her eyes from flickin' down this time.

She looked relieved, holding her arm close. "That's good. I hope you get better soon, miss."

Hae did, too. She wanted to stop waking up and going to sleep soaked in blood and pus, take a bath without soaking in bits of her flesh, and be able to work the fields without breaking open like something she'd forgot on the fire for too long. She wanted to be able to hug Korea and her cousins again without it hurtin' them. And most of all, she wanted her skin to heal, 'cuz it meant their land had, too, which meant the war was over.

"Ah'll be better real soon," she said chipperly. "Korea'll make sure of it."

She said this louder, hopin' to cheer him up at least a li'l.

"So those are *all* burns?" a boy asked, looking at the bandages covering her head and hands (and ruining her charm).

"From bombs hittin' our land?" The kid Hwang had been telling about their biology looked up at his wrappings with curiosity. "How does that work?"

Hwang opened his mouth, but before he could answer, In-su gasped, eyes bulgin' out of his head.

"It's Korea!"

Hae felt her heart skip at the words, even though she'd known he was there. She jumped around to see he'd finally decided to come out, marching over from the shadows under the eaves with an expression that sort of said he was entering active combat.

The lady straightened up, and the comrade she'd been doing laundry with hustled over from the river, drying her hands. She was wearing the same white smock over her choson-ot that the first woman was, and had her long curly hair pulled back in a thick bun so it wouldn't get in the way of her chores. Hae could see the back of her neck was soaked in sweat, and wondered if she could convince her to let her chop the bun off. She'd brought her scissors.

"Comrade Korea-"

"You don't need to bow," he said before they could, all tight, and Hae could hear SH in her head scoldin' him about being polite. Which was probably why he'd sent her off to her province instead of letting her come along like she'd asked.

"None of you do," he said as one of the li'l girls tried.

She looked up at him, blinking in shock. All the other kids gaped, too, and the women looked... scandalized, that was it.

It wasn't just that they'd been told all their lives to make sure to bow to adults, and especially adults with authority, and were now being told not to bow to the most important adult in the world (Hae could say confidently) that was making them look that way. Korea was doin' it again. The kids were using overly polite speech the way kids were taught to, but he'd just used hao-che with a girl that didn't look older than eight, like she was just as good as him.

Hae paddled her feet smugly. You'd never see Joseon or any those other stuffy ol' 'Koreas' doing *that*.

The kids looked thrilled, too, but the one orphanage lady looked

frazzled, head swivellin' between the children, herself, and Korea. Even though he'd told her not to bow, she made a jerky li'l half one.

"Comrade Oh, it's fine," the other women soothed. To Korea, she said, "I'm sorry, we're both still getting used to how things work."

"Comrade Ri Jung-hi." Korea nodded to her. "You were part of the Worker's Party southern branch, and came north-" He didn't pause, but Hae could see his hands flex under the bandages. "-during the tactical retreat."

Jung-hi looked pleased he knew that. "Yes, Comrade Korea. And now I'm back home."

"And Comrade Oh Ryong-jin is from Seoul."

"I, ah, y-yes, Comrade Korea." She'd sounded confident with the kids before, but now she stuttered, trying to figure out what speech she should be usin', before sticking with hasipsio-che.

He dipped his head to them. "Thank you for your efforts in taking care of Korea's orphans, comrades."

"It's the least we can do," Ryong-jin said, a li'l calmer as she placed her hand on In-su's shoulder, making him squirm.

"Thank *you* for coming to visit," Jung-hi added. "And Comrades North and South Hwanghae as well. We were so surprised when we received the message."

"You knew Comrade Korea was coming?" a boy cried, soundin' betrayed. "And you didn't tell us?"

"Don't blame your guardians," Hwang chided him. "Our schedules need to be kept as classified as possible."

"So we can't tell people you're here?" another kid asked, sounding disappointed.

Korea was going to say 'no,' so Hae caught his eye, blinking quick.

'You should let 'em.'

He narrowed his eye.

She pursed her lips, tiltin' her head a li'l, silently telling him kids were light-mouths.

She knew she'd really want to tell someone *she'd* met Korea if she was a child. She wouldn't if he told her not to, but even she sometimes forgot about things she wasn't supposed to do if they weren't super important, like how she was supposed to knock before she entered his room. And kids din't know that military confidentiality was super *super* important. People would find out they'd met them anyway, so they might as well be able to brag to their friends about it. They should all know how great Korea was.

He considered, then told the boy, "You can tell them. But not until tomorrow."

He lit up. "Yes! Chang-sik's goin' to be sooo jealous!"

Hae giggled, though she frowned as she realized something.

All the kids around the river had came over to see them, except for two- the girl drawing in the dirt and the boy with her. They were on the other riverbank, a li'l ways back from the water, where the low stone bank was. The boy was standing now, lookin' like he was saying something, but the girl had turned around, sitting with her back to them, her stick held tight in her hand.

She saw Mao Zhilong was watching them, too, as he told a boy he was a Chinese spy back from a super-secret mission in the south.

She got distracted as Korea straightened up, turning to the kids.

He asked for all their names first, getting a cute li'l roll call, then asked, "Have you all recovered well?"

The excitement in the air dimmed, and some of the kids looked down or away. The girl that'd asked about Hae's burns cradled her arm to her chest, and Hwang winced a li'l, even him hearing that Korea had been too blunt.

Hae had been doing her best not to stare, but now that Korea had

mentioned it, her eyes couldn't help drifting.

Out of the twelve children, all ten on this side of the river were burned. There was the shirtless boy with the weals, and one who'd hobbled over on a foot that was just a lump, dead white skin carpeting the calf it was attached to like vegetable mildew. The ear of the curious kid was merged into his head like a lump of lard left in the sun, the skin around it all bubbly and bumpy, like his entire neck and shoulder had melted and congealed. The arm the girl held to her chest was shrivelled and pale, thinner than the other one, and the last three fingers on her hand had fused together. The others all had those same thick red welts comin' out of their collars, their sleeves, their rolled-up pants. They bulged out of their skin, so smooth and unnatural looking, Hae almost felt like she could reach over and pluck them off like a slug from a cabbage leaf.

She couldn't, though. They were part of their bodies, left there by the Yankee deathbirds spewin' fire from their bellies.

Hae could still remember Chipyong-ri, watching the silver cannisters tumble from the sky and burst with plumes of flame, splattering sticky, burning jelly across the field, and how the Chinese soldiers had screamed as it clung to their skin, just like their soldiers had screamed on the way south. Not for their comrades to put it out, but for someone to kill them. Grown men and women that would rather die than feel the pain for one more second.

And these kids had burned like them. The youngest couldn't be older than five, but the thumb he was suckin' on was grey-white, all the colour burnt out of his hand like it was the ash on North Hamgyong's cigarettes. Hae could picture him slapping at the napalm that caused the dead patches his neckline showed, only for the jelly to stick to his hand, scorching it, too.

She'd been hit by white phosphorous on their way to the Raktong, a stupid stray ember that fell back down to earth to land on her arm, burnin' through her uniform and down into her skin in a flash. She'd screamed, trying to beat it off, but it had already reached her flesh, sinking down and refusin' to be budged. She'd never felt anything like it before and never had since. Not getting shot, not

the needles, not the bayonet to her belly or her ribs getting kicked in at Sincheon. That pain all came and went, turned sharp or dull, got better or worse. But that one li'l ember didn't change, eating down into her with an agony that was almost boring because of how the same it was, like all those long hours of being chained in the dark unable to see or hear or move concentrated into one spot on her body, bringin' her to tears and burning away all her thoughts.

If SJ hadn't noticed and screamed her name, and one of their comrades hadn't tackled her to the ground and torn off her jacket so he could scrape it from her skin with his knife and douse her with his canteen, Hae knew she would've kept burnin' and burning.

But you couldn't do that with napalm. You couldn't swat it off or douse it, or even smother it. It would just burn until it burned itself out.

Her breath hitched in her throat, not able to stop seeing the burns now that she'd looked, knowing how bad they must've hurt, even after the flames were out, the way their heads must have been filled with hot agony and the choking stench of melting fat and burning flesh, the same stench that hung over Sincheon as she found another chunk of raw red meat with a face and the same stench suffocating her now.

Something touched her ribs, and Hae flinched, afraid it would be hot.

But it was just Hwang, pokin' her. His face was all worried, and she realized she'd been hugging herself with one arm, and had the other hand over her mouth and 'nose,' making the burnt-meat smell worse than it should be.

She quickly put her hands on her hips and a smile on her face, grinning at her brother to let him know she was okay, and keeping it on, upset that she'd let it fall around the kids, especially after Korea brought up their injuries.

Their burns couldn't make her scared or sad. They made her angry. Fear was useless, but anger would help her kill more

Yankees and Southern soldiers, and win this war for Korea. Anger would help her make sure no one else would burn.

But these kids didn't need angry. And they probably didn't need Korea bringing up their injuries either. He'd known exactly what to say on Liberation Day, meltin' away all the anxiety and fear Hae had seen in the faces in the crowd while she waited for him to come out, and loosening the knot in her own belly, at least for a bit. But... sometimes he really didn't seem to know how to talk to children.

But that did *not* mean he was bad with 'em.

"I'm all better, Comrade Korea," the girl with the burnt arm- Su-jin- quietly volunteered. "It doesn't hurt no more."

The others all agreed, but one boy said, "I'm worried about my big brother. They won't let him out'a the hospital."

Hae could see Korea's jaw twitch, and he looked down the river. She couldn't see past the ridges of Janam Hill, but she knew where he was lookin'.

"Ah'm sure he'll be okay," Hae told him when Korea didn't say anything. "He's probably just takin' a bit longer to get better."

Korea tore his eye away from the hospital. "What is his name?"

"Min-ho."

"I'm going there soon," he said. "I'll ask how he's doing."

"Can you tell him I miss him?" the kid asked.

Korea's eye flickered. "I will."

His face lit up in relief. "Yay!"

"And what do we say?" Ryong-jin prompted.

"Thank you, Comrade Korea!"

"I'm all better, Comrade Korea," In-su said first, puffin' up his thin

chest.

His scars weren't as bad as the others, even if that didn't mean much when you were talkin' about an eight-year old. They weren't swollen or dead like the napalm burns, but all wrinkly and pitted, and purple-red where they spread across his arms. They made her think of Kang Dong-joon, the burned man from Sincheon.

"You can even conscript me if ya want," he said enthusiastically. "I'm ready to go back down south and kill traitors!"

"You're too young for the army," Korea said seriously. "You can join in a few years."

"But the war'll be over by then," Hae made sure they all knew.

She turned her smile on Korea. He didn't look at her.

In-su pouted. "Aw."

"That's a good thing," Korea said, sharp enough that Hae told him to be nicer with her face. He gave her a look, but added, "But we will always need loyal soldiers to safeguard our country."

The boy's eyes lit up. "Don't worry, Comrade Korea, I'll be the best soldier you've ever seen!"

"No, I will!" the shirtless boy waved his hand, and the other kids all started protestin', saying *they* were going to be Korea's best soldier.

Korea usually liked when kids did that, but as they ran around pretending to shoot Yankees, Hae snuck a look at him, and saw that even though his face had softened a li'l, his eye had only grown darker.

She looked over as Hwang nudged her, and realized the boy with the clubfoot- who'd said his name was Kwan-mo- was watching the others and lookin' all upset, his burnt foot hid behind his other ankle.

Her brother wrinkled his forehead at her, so Hae trotted over.

"Don't worry," she told Kwan-mo. "You don't need two feet to be able to do stuff for the army. There are plenty other jobs that help, like-" Makin' uniforms probably woudn't sound fun to a kid. "Building guns an' ammunition, and testin' 'em."

"And if you have the mind for it, you could go into university for mechanical engineering, and even become one of those that design new weapons systems," Hwang added.

"Really?" the boy asked, looking like he liked the sound of that.

Hae nodded vigorously. "The Yankees are always goin' to be comin' up with new ways to kill us, so we'll need to come up with new ways to kill them!"

And that was... a li'l scary. Hae wasn't *scared,* it was just sca*ry.* 'Merica already had the napalm and white phosphorous, and the germs he grew in the poor bugs that made folks' skin rot and organs shut down, and diarrhea themselves to death. He had the weird gases he shot from artillery shells that blinded their soldiers and fried their nervous systems. What else could he come up with to murder their people?

And he'd already made the worst weapon of all, that atom bomb he waved around like it was a flag on Liberation Day, but nowhere near as good. Could he make a worse atom bomb, one that would'a burnt *all* of Japan to the ground instead of just two cities, and that *could* burn Korea?

Hae glanced over at her Countryhuman, still watching the kids as Mao Zhilong showed them his guns, and saw his face covered with nuclear burns, eyes leaking black like Japan's in that picture she'd looked at once with the others and then never again, even the empty one. Her stomach churned.

If America had a pistol pointed at Korea, she could shoot him dead 'cuz she had one, too. But she couldn't keep him safe from the atom bomb. CCCP was the only other one that had those, and even if he was real nice and brought them the letters and food and took Corn home to give her a good life, *Hae* wanted to be the one to be able to protect Korea.

She wished...

"To defend ourselves," Hwang corrected her. To Kwan-mo he said, "But we will need to develop new weapons and vehicles for military use, both to advance with the times and decrease our reliance on imports."

The kid only looked maybe six or seven, so he was confused.

"'Develop' means 'make,'" Hae told him. "And 'reliance' means we got'a depend on other people for stuff, which we don't want to do."

Korea didn't, which meant she din't either.

"Yes," Hwang said. "We receive- *get* most of our military supplies from the Soviet Union and China right now, but we need to start producing them domestically. That means in Korea."

"But we already make our own submachine guns." Hae slung hers off her back, showin' the kid (it was safe 'cuz Korea had told her to make sure her weapons were all unloaded before they got here). "And they're already better than the Soviets' or the Chinese's."

She didn't actually know if that was true. All that mattered to her about guns was that she could pull the trigger and they could shoot bullets, and she thought their Type 49 did that about as well as the Type 50 and the PPSh-41.

But their people had made it, so that automatically made it better.

She heard someone clear their throat behind her, and added, *"Much* better," without lookin'.

Kwan-mo ran a hand over her gun with big eyes. "I could make these?"

"If you have the aptitude for it and are willing to devote-" Hwang cut himself off as an elbow hit his ribs (gentle so nothin' burst).

"Ayuh," Hae said confidently, puttin' her Type 49 back on. "Soldiers won't have nothin'- anythin' to shoot while they're runnin' around if people don't make guns. So that would make you just as

important to the army as them."

A big ol' grin split the boy's face round face, and he limped off towards his friends in a hurry.

"Didja hear that?" he called. "I'm going to make guns, and hyung and noona say I'm going to be more important than all of you!"

"Not what we said!" Hwang said, looking stricken as all the kids protested.

Hae giggled, thrilled to finally be called noona by someone, and happy to see him get sucked into their play-fightin' (it was okay to use that word for kids), even if it made her sad he'd felt left out in the first place.

'Damn 'Merica an' the Southern One.'

She looked over at the kids on the other side of the water again. Ryong-jin was trying to wrassle the ones on this side into behavin', but Jung-hi had gone over to them. Her and the boy were talking to the girl, whose back was still to Hae. The woman had a real gentle expression on her face. But Hae could see the sad clingin' to the lines.

She was about to go see what was wrong when In-su successfully tripped up one of his friends, who laughed as he went down with a *'thump,'* dust plumin' up.

"See, Comrade Korea?" In-su panted, smilin' real wide as he bounced happily. "I'm gonna be a great soldier! I'll take down Rhee and shoot America like *'boom!'* And then I'll kill the South for ya!"

Hae barely had time to think *'Uh-oh,'* before Korea was rounding on him, eye flashin' as he snarled, *"South is not the enemy!"*

In-su flinched back, and all the other kids stopped playing, looking over uncertainly.

Hae was really hopin' Korea would regret snappin' right away like he always did, and remember you weren't supposed to shout at kids. But instead he moved in, stalking towards In-su.

"*South* isn't the one in control," he growled. "Rhee is, *America* is. The South of Korea is just as much your country as I am. It is Syngman Rhee and his traitors that deny half of our country and spread slander against it, *not* us."

Korea stopped in front of In-su, loomin' over him, his voice going cold as he demanded, "Are you a traitor?"

In-su cringed back, shaking. "N-No, K- Comrade Korea."

Korea's eye narrowed to a slit. "Then why would you want to see half of our country destroyed?"

A voice murmured in Hae's 'ear,' "Maybe the Little Tiger wants to intervene?"

She'd been frozen in dismay, but jumped into action now, darting away from Mao Zhilong to latch onto Korea's arm, hoping he wouldn't toss her off when people were watching.

He didn't, though he went rigid, muscles quivering under her grip as his head jerked over to look at her, eye flaring.

She held tighter to him, but looked at In-su. "Obviously Korea doesn't actually think you're a traitor!"

Her voice sounded way too bright for the tense riverbank.

"He just..." She faltered, unable to say 'Gets way too defensive about a guy that kidnapped us and cut out his eye.'

"-simply can't condone dangerous thinking," Hwang cut in, hustling over to stand on Korea's other side, slightly between him and In-su. "From the moment Korea was Divided, the enemy has been painting our Korea as a bloodthirsty dictator in order to justify their attacks over the 38th Parallel and the notion of declaring Rhee's republic, citing-"

"Sayin'," Hae corrected, still clingin' to Korea.

"-saying that it would be too dangerous to let our Korea and theirs Reunify. They wished to turn half of our country against the other,

and that is part of what ultimately led to this war," Hwang explained in a rush. "While we've always refrained from slandering the South himself because we are aware that he's- blameless in this entire situation."

Hae didn't think the kids noticed the li'l falter in her brother's voice before 'blameless.' But Korea did. His teeth ground above her, his quivering getting worse.

"And we know it would create unnecessary division between our people. America and the Syngman Rhee clique treat our Korea himself as the enemy, and spread their propaganda to paint anyone who supports him as a Communist, which is any patriotic Korean, regardless of their political leaning, and this has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths." Hwang shoved his glasses up. "So you can understand why when hearing one of our own spread similar rhetoric- sentiments-"

"Ideas."

"Ideas, Korea might get-"

He stopped, frazzled, and Hae could hear the gears in his churnin' as he tried to think of a word that wouldn't just make Korea madder.

"Alarmed," Hae tried desperately.

"Yes, alarmed," Hwang snapped his fingers. "But he knows you didn't truly mean anything by it."

He gave Korea a pleading look over his thin shoulder, and Hae heard his teeth grind louder.

"I- I really didn't." In-su's eyes glimmered. "I'm sorry, Comrade Korea. I didn't m-mean to make you upset."

The anger left Korea's face, and he looked stricken all of a sudden. He yanked his arm free from Hae, eye flicking over all of them like they were enemy soldiers instead of kids, backing away as he tried to corner himself, even though the riverbank was too open.

"...I have to go," he said, voice tight, then turned around and marched away, jerky and stiff, disappearing into the chosonjips, even though the hospital he had to get to was almost straight down the river.

Hae gave Hwang a worried look in the silence he left.

Korea almost never snapped at their people, unless they were politicians that messed up, and even then it was more criticism. She'd *especially* never heard him go off on a kid like that. And the way he'd been backing away...

It'd been okay for him to get like that at Hoengsong, after the Fourth Phase Offensive failed. They'd been alone, aside from Mao Zhilong, and him being a foreigner made it make more sense. But to look at their people that way, like they were about to attack him...

"Sorry Korea had to take off like that," Hae said loudly, turning to smile at the children. "He has to go to the hospital to meet the other kids that got hurt, and he can't be late."

Some of the younger ones looked confused, and the older ones looked nervous. In-su was putting on a brave face, but his bottom lip was wobblin'.

"Is... Comrade Korea mad at me?" he asked quietly.

"Nope," Hae chirped. "He's just..." He wasn't here, so it should be okay to say this. She couldn't let the kids think he was mean or didn't like them. "Seein' y'all hurtin' makes him upset. And that makes him more upset about other stuff than he should be."

That was part of it, anyway. The part Korea wouldn't hit her upside the head with a boot for saying (just with his hand).

"It's not you he's mad at," she assured him, and all of them. "And he ain't disappointed either."

She'd messed up her 'isn't,' but Hwang didn't correct her, staring after Korea with his brows curved in. He looked at her, and she nodded, joggin' off as he kept trying to make the kids feel better.

"Comrade North Hwanghae." The boy that liked asking questions shot his hand up. "Ah heard the South made Comrade Korea lose his eye. Is that true?"

"That's a rumour," Hae heard Hwang say, not really a lie. "It's... a little more complicated than that."

It wasn't. But Hae didn't turn back, running through the alleys between the chosonjips, the air nice an' cool for a moment before she was back on the hot street.

Like she'd thought, Korea had just gone one over so they couldn't watch him walk to the hospital. She called his name, but he didn't stop, walking faster. Hae puffed her cheeks, stretching her legs, even though it hurt.

"Korea!" She tried to latch on to his arm, but they were mostly alone on the street, so he shoved her away.

"Go away, South Hwanghae."

Hae didn't bring up the way he'd shouted at In-su, 'cuz she could see he already regretted it, and was pricklin' with embarrassment. He'd just snap at her.

"Do ya want me to go to the hospital with you?" she asked instead, trying to sound confident.

She knew that was where the real wounded kids were. They didn't just have injuries that looked bad or made it hard to walk right. They were the ones that had barely survived, who'd only just burned longer than the napalm. The ones that couldn't walk, or talk, or blink, that would terrify the other kids just to look at.

It would be scary, and make her furious and sad to see what the Yankee had done to their kids. But Hae didn't want to let Korea go alone, not when he was already so upset by a few welts.

"Ah could help."

Korea halted, twitching towards her. Somethin' flashed across his eye before it hardened, and he drew himself up so he was as taller

than her as he could be.

"I do not need 'help,'" he said, all cold as he glared at her. "Go back and do what you came here to do."

Hae blinked, confused, as he sped off again.

"Can ah tell In-su you say sorry for bein' mean to him?" she asked before he could get away, keeping her voice low in case anyone was behind the open windows in the chosonjips.

Korea just jerked his head in a nod, then disappeared down another alley, putting himself another street over so she couldn't see him anymore.

Hae pouted. She knew Korea liked doing things himself, but when he first turned to her when she offered, he'd looked... He didn't get scared, not really. But he'd looked a li'l... panicked?

She frowned after him, then turned to plod back to the river, wishing SH was here to drag him back so he could apologize himself, and show the kids he really wasn't mean.

Mao Zhilong was showing them some of the stuff in his sleeves when she got back, pulling all the weird things he had in there out. One went reelin' back as he let him sniff a li'l blue and white vial he had, snorting like he'd just sniffed chemical fertilizer (Hae liked the smell of regular fertilizer, but that stuff was nasty). Off to the side, Hwang and Ryong-jin were in a 'I'm sorry, no I'm so sorry' match.

In-su was still sulking, staring glumly at the ground, not even looking up when Mao Zhilong showed off his throwin' knives.

Hae skipped back with a big smile on her face. "Korea says he's real sorry," she announced. "And that when the war's over, he'll let you try drivin' a tank to make up for it."

In-su's head shot up. "Ya mean it?"

"Ayuh!" Korea had told her it was okay to apologize for him, so it was probably okay to offer whatever she had to to make him feel better, too. And Jong-il had been allowed to get in a tank before, so

there was a... precedent! for letting kids try them out.

Hae was proud with her word choice, and In-su was thrilled with his apology.

"Did ya hear that?!" he cried to his friends. "Comrade Korea's gonna let me drive a tank!"

They all erupted with jealousy and excitement, and Hae hoped that was enough to make 'em forget Korea's outburst. She remembered every time he'd ever snapped at or scolded her, but that was 'cuz she remembered everything he said ever. Hopefully these kids would just remember the good stuff.

Hwang's eyebrows dipped. *'Is he alright?'*

Hae hesitated, then smiled.

He would be. Once they won the war and kids weren't dyin' nomore. Anymore. And he... got the Southern One back.

Hae shook her head, clapping her hands. "Let's play a game, comrades!"

She ran around with the kids for awhile, chasin' 'em like she was chasing chickens around the yard (hope for the bliss of the dead for Cucky), and showing them her guns and Party membership card (though she didn't let them touch it). It didn't really matter what they were doing, so long as they had fun, and they knew their provinces and Korea cared about them. She made sure they knew Gyeonggi did, too, and that he'd be here if he wasn't trapped down in the south.

She hoped he was okay. She knew their guerrillas in the enemies' rear had been getting more active as more people turned against Rhee, so all her southern cousins were probably still being bombed occasionally. But GG and Gang would be getting the worst of it, since they were on the front. Those distant rumbles and blasts she could still hear over the children's shrieks of laughter once and awhile were all hitting Gyeonggi.

And she could feel her own burns cracking under the bandages.

Some more kids showed up, a few from the orphanage and ones from town drawn over by the sounds of playing, and overjoyed to see two of their Provincehumans. Hae was happy to entertain all of them until they all collapsed, dirty and sweaty, to lie on the sunny riverbank or splash in the water again.

In-su skidded up to Hwang, fallin' to his knees at his feet. "Hyung, can ya tell us some war stories?"

Hwang looked thrilled. "Of course. To start, how about I recount the time I was trekking through the northern mountains and saw a bear..."

Hae let him tell his bear story to all the interested kids, wanderin' a few paces away to drink from her canteen, keeping an eye on the children to make sure they drank from the jar of clean water one of the militiamen had brought before leaving, instead of the stream. It didn't matter if the Yanks probably wouldn't drop their germs close to a place with so many foreign correspondents- they could just as easily put them in the mountain rivers to get carried down here. These kids had been through too much to get sick now.

As she clipped her canteen back on her belt, she looked across the water. The li'l girl and boy were still over there, her drawing with her head down again, and him staring at the other kids, looking all wistful.

"Are they okay?" she asked.

Jung-hi had left to take the laundry back to the orphanage to dry, leaving Ryong-jin. She looked over at the two, her lips turning down.

"That's Hye-mi and Chul-sam," she said sadly. "Hye-mi is... a little more damaged than most of the kids in the orphanage. It makes her shy. They're both from Sariwon, so they tend to stick together."

Hae watched Mao Zhilong finally lose a game of go and stop obliteratin' children at it, standing and stretching before he padded over to the crossing stones, stepping lightly over them. She decided to follow, hopping across to join him.

"What are you drawing there, meimei?" she heard him ask.

Hye-mi startled, but didn't look up. She combed her fingers through her black hair, spreading it out. It wasn't in stubby braids or the adorable bob most girls had. It was long and messy, sweeping over from the other side of her head to drape over her shoulder, covering the side of her face on the side Hae came up on. She held it in place there.

One of the small hands wrapped around the strands was swollen and shiny, with only a couple thick, mangled fingernails on it. The fingers didn't bend all the way.

Chul-sam greeted them, then nudged her other shoulder, whispering, "Hye-mi, it's rude not to answer."

Hye-mi shrank down, holding her hair tighter.

Mao Zhilong tipped his head, looking at what she'd drawn in the dirt. Hae looked, too.

It was a girl with her hair in a high-banged bob that showed off her round face and large eyes. She had two cheeks like li'l round apples above a tiny smile that showed a dimple on one side. It looked good for just being drawn with a stick, and the li'l girl seemed real happy.

"Is that you?" she asked Hye-mi.

The girl tensed at her voice. Her foot peeked out from her skirts like she might erase the drawing, before it retreated.

As Chul-sam nudged her again, she said, "That'sh... It *was* me."

Her voice was small and hoarse, all burnt out and wheezing. Kang had told Hae all about napalm so she knew to avoid it at all costs, and what to do if she or one of their comrades got hit, so she knew it was 'cuz the burning jelly had sucked all the oxygen out of her lungs, and left them and her throat scorched. There was a slur to it, too, way worse than Gyeong's lisp, like she was talking with her mouth full, turnin' all her 's' sounds to mush.

Hae almost complimented her by calling the drawing cute, then remembered what Ryong-jin had said, and bit her tongue.

"Hm." Mao Zhilong squinted down at the portrait. "Well drawn, meimei."

He reached out, scuffin' his boot over it, turning it back to flat dirt.

"Hey," Hae protested at the same time the girl did, looking up.

The province's stomach clenched, her legs going numb.

Hye-mi's face was almost the same as the drawing's on one side, with a big brown eye that glared up at Mao Zhilong, a little shell ear, and half of a pair of rosebud lips with the hint of that dimple at the corner, hidden by her frown.

The other side was just flesh, all red and brown and lumpy. It was like her brow had melted, running down her face like wax to puddle around her neck. Her little snub nose was half-missing, not mangled like the rest of her skin, but like it had been removed, leaving a gaping hole where one nostril was supposed to be. Her hair had shifted when she turned her head, and Hae could see that her ear was melted, too, melded with the rest of her neck, where the damage continued down into the high collar of her child-sized choson-ot.

And her right eye was completely gone. Her brow and upper lids had merged with one of her apple cheeks, leaving a rippled plane of skin. Only a little dark slit was left at the inner corner where it hadn't sealed up completely, and Hae could tell that the inside was empty. It gave her that same sick, tingly feeling that Korea's missing socket had, back before they gave him his eyepatch, her body telling her she was looking at a part of a person she shouldn't be.

Hae tried not to react, but Hye-mi must have seen something in her face, or just realized she could see the burns, 'cuz she quickly ducked her head, slapping her bad hand over them again as she used the other to tug her hair back into place. As she did, Hae saw that the left side of her scalp was bald, covered with more of that lumpy flesh that wouldn't let hair grow up through it.

A cotton pad held in place with medical tape covered her cheek, hiding the other half of her lips. It made her slur worse as she pressed it to her face.

"Why did you do that?" she asked Mao Zhilong. She'd just seemed indignant when he first brushed away her drawing, but now she sounded like she was about to cry.

Hae tore her eyes away to squint at the Chinese guy. He smiled under his mask, sitting next to Hye-mi on the low stone bank. She turned her head away more, ducking into her other shoulder.

"Art isn't any less precious just because it was temporary," he said, leanin' back on his hands. "All beauty fades eventually. Besides, you were going to wipe it away yourself, weren't you?"

Hye-mi glanced back at the dirt, then hid her face again.

Hae glared at Mao Zhilong, silently threatening to tell Korea he was bullying kids. He just tipped his head back to the bright blue sky.

"Do you like art?" she asked Hye-mi, keeping herself upbeat as she squatted in front of her.

"Hye-mi's great at art!" Chul-sam said, leaning over his friend. "She used to help make posters for the Children's Union, and she even won an award in school for her painting of Jongbang Mountain in spring!"

"Ushed to be," Hye-mi muttered. "I can't paint anymore."

Her burnt hand twitched around her hair, but still didn't close.

"You seem to be doing just fine with your left hand," Mao Zhilong said, nodding to where her drawin' had been.

"The left hand's bad." This one did clench, pulling at her hair. "So anything I make with it'sh bad, too."

"Aiya, superstition, meimei?" Mao Zhilong *'tsk'*ed. "I thought your Comrade Korea was raising smarter youth than that."

"Mama said it." She turned her head like she was about to glare at him, then ducked again. "She wasn't dumb."

"Not dumb," Hae agreed. "Just taught wrong stuff."

A lot of the things her brother called 'peasant superstitions' were just good sense, like not cuttin' your nails at night. Spirits and stuff weren't real, so mice wouldn't steal your identity, but they *would* come to nibble the cuttings, and then you'd have mice in your house. And telling someone they'd shake their luck away by shaking their legs was just so kids would be scared into sitting still. Hae knew that 'cuz Chungnam had used to use that on her (until she realized they had no wealth to shake away, and also remembered that South Chungcheong called superstitious people a word Hae was too nice to repeat). And whistling at night wouldn't attract ghosts, but it *could* call over a tiger or a wild dog that wasn't as friendly as Ppang had been.

But some superstitions were just silly, like the left-handed one. Sure it was a li'l inconvenient now that they'd switched to writing left to right, but they'd used to write right to left, and vertically, not to mention most people couldn't write at all, so she thought being left-handed would've been just fine before. The left hand was supposed to be dirty, but since it was the right hand that always got used, Hae thought it made more sense to consider that one gross. And *neither* of them would be gross if you just washed your hands. She'd asked Hwang about it, but he'd just said people in the majority always ganged up on people in the minority. She thought that was stupid (and also not true- feudalism and capitalism were all about the minority oppressin' the majority).

So since she was in charge of helping break their peasants of some of the useless superstitions, like convincing them not to waste their food on the dead during Chuseok and other holidays, part of that had been trying to teach them that being left-handed wasn't evil. It just made it even harder to learn how to write if they were using their off hands, and it was already hard enough. Once they learned the basics, *then* they could start learnin' how to use their right, if they really wanted to.

"Your left hand is the same as your right hand," Hae told Hye-mi,

showing her hers, then realizing that wasn't true. "And *your* left hand is even better than your right hand. So if that's the best you have, you should use it."

"Mm." Hye-mi looked down at her left hand, splaying her fingers, then curling them into her hair again. "I guesh."

Hae looked at Mao Zhilong, wonderin' if he was going to say something inspirational, or if he'd only come over here to ruin her drawing. It seemed to be that one, 'cuz he was just lazily watching In-su terrorize the rest of the children with water.

"Why aren't you playin' with the other kids?" Hae asked the two here.

Chul-sam pouted. "I want to. But Hye-mi doesn't, and I'm not leaving her alone. Even if we missed Comrade Korea 'cuz of it."

"I *told* you you could go say hi," Hye-mi muttered, shoulders hunching.

The boy shook his shaved head. "Then you'd be the only one that didn't meet him, and you'd be all left out."

"Why din't you want to meet Korea?" Hae asked, hopin' she wasn't the kid of a reactionary they'd executed or anything like that.

Hye-mi hunched, muttering something under her breath.

"What?"

The girl didn't answer, but Mao Zhilong did. "She said 'Because I'm ugly.'"

Hye-mi flinched like he'd hit her, but didn't deny it.

"You're not ugly," Hae protested. All burnt up, sure, but that din't mean she was ugly. And the other half wasn't burnt at all.

"Liars get their mouths washed," Hye-mi said into her knees, pulling them up.

"Ah ain't lyin'!"

"You are," she said stubbornly. "All the other kids make fun of me for how I look."

"No they don't," Chul-sam denied. "No one's ever said anything like that. They just don't like looking at you 'cuz it makes them feel bad."

"How eloquent, didi," Mao Zhilong hummed.

Chul-sam probably didn't know what that word meant. "It's 'cuz you're hurt, not 'cuz you're ugly. Hye-mi isn't ugly."

"You have to say that," she mumbled. "We have the same hometown."

The boy looked frustrated enough that Hae thought they'd had this talk before.

"Why would everyone else think you're ugly?" she asked Hye-mi. "They're all burned, too."

"Not like me."

Hae thought some of them were *worse* than her. At least she had both her feet, and her fingers were all still separate.

And she was alive.

"Ah don't think you're that bad," she offered. "You're missin' an eye, but there's nothin wrong with that. Korea's missin' one too."

'Oops.' She'd done it again. Hopefully Hwang had already told everyone earlier so this one wasn't her fault.

"It'sh not 'just' an eye." Hye-mi's good hand squeezed, then she reached up, picking at her medical tape. When the cotton pad came loose she raised her head, just a li'l, and Hae put more effort into smiling.

Part of the girl's cheek was gone. Her lips stretched wider than

they should, showing off some of her lower teeth and all of her upper ones, and her pale gums, like she was grinnin' with only one side of her mouth, but far too wide. Hae could see where her teeth ended. The skin around the place where the corner of her lips should be was smoother than the rest, and had a thick, wormy scar fencing it in.

"The doctors put new shkin on me," Hye-mi said, her tongue flashin' pink through her white teeth as she spoke. "But they ran out. And none of the stitches they used on my eye can get it to close, so they want me to go back so they can shtaple it."

Her good eye brimmed with tears, and she hid her face again, holding the bandage back to her cheek, pressing it in like she could fill the hole in her flesh.

Hae guessed it wasn't like Korea's, where he could keep it open. Kang had wanted him to get it stitched if he wouldn't get a fake eye, but when he refused, decided it was fine to leave it so long as he kept it clean. But Hye-mi's socket only had that tiny hole exposed, so if bacteria got in, it'd be hard to get out.

"I'm ugly," the little girl sniffled. "They wanted to keep me in the hospital with all the other ugly kids, but they didn't have the room."

Mao Zhilong had leaned over to see her face, but sat back now. "Maybe if you didn't think the other children were ugly, you wouldn't think you were ugly either."

"But I am," she croaked, and Chul-sam fluttered his hands, lookin' distressed. "And they're going to put metal in my face and make me even uglier. I'm never gonna be able to get married or get a job because everyone's gonna think I'm a freak, becaushe I *am."*

"No you ain't," Hae said, and Mao Zhilong agreed, "You don't look so freakish to me, meimei."

"You're shaying that, but you're ugly, too, aren't you?" Hye-mi tearily accused. "That's why you're wearing that mask."

"Actually, I'm wearing this mask because I'm stunningly attractive,

and if I wasn't, the women in this town would jump me," the Chinese guy corrected. "And gege's chastity is very important to him."

Hae didn't think you were supposed to talk about chastity with kids, but she also thought they didn't know what chastity even meant. Neither did she, if anyone asked.

Hye-mi shook her head. "You're lying. You're wearing it because you're a freak, too, and I'm gonna have to wear a mask for the rest of my life, just like you, even when it's hot out."

The idea seemed to upset her even more, and she tugged at the collar of her jeogori like it was chokin' her.

Mao Zhilong tipped his head at her, and Hae could see his narrow eyes flicking around the stream. He started to reach up for his face.

She leaped at him, bowlin' him over onto the bank, scrabbling up so she was half-sitting on his stomach, one hand over his face, keeping his mask *firmly in place* so Korea wouldn't get mad at him.

"Comrade Mao Zhilong keeps his mask on 'cuz he's an important Chinese officer and doesn't want the Yankees to take him out," Hae told Hye-mi, pretending she hadn't just done that. "But there are plenty of soldiers that do have scars and they don't wear masks."

Not all burns and stuff were bad enough to be discharged for, especially not permanently when they needed as many soldiers as they could get. And a regular soldier couldn't hide his identity all the time. She thought the girl would've had to at least see one of them here, especially with the injured veterans around.

"Ah met a man who was missin' an eye like you," she informed Hye-mi. "The reaction'ries lit him on fire. He was real upset, too, thinkin' everyone thought he looked like a freak. But he was the only one that thought that. And look- the other orphanage kids have scars. Even if they're not as bad as yours, they're still bad. But they're still havin' fun." She gestured to where the others were splashing around, a few more of the them shirtless now. "See? Even the town kids don't care."

"Because they're boys," Hye-mi said glumly, peeking at them. "And that guy was, too. Scars look cool on boys, so they don't care about them."

Hae thought about Dong-joon, dropping out of the Worker's Party and wearing that hood to the meeting, trying to hide his disfigured face from everyone. She didn't think that was true. But she also didn't think Hye-mi would listen, just like she wouldn't listen if she told her that not all of them were boys, and Su-jin didn't seem to have a problem scoopin' water back at Kwon-mo with her flipper-fingers when he soaked the hem of her skirt. The girl didn't seem like she wanted to be cheered up.

But obviously she did. Everyone wanted to feel better when they were sad. You just had to find the right way to do it.

"Hae, get off of Comrade Mao."

Hae looked back to see Hwang coming over, a big wet patch on his uniform where he'd gotten splashed. Story time was over for now, she guessed.

"Don't worry, I'm enjoying this," Mao Zhilong said from under Hae, muffled by her hand.

She slid off anyways, letting him sit up. She'd been chokin' herself with burnt-meat smell earlier, she didn't want to do the same to him.

He hadn't been at Sincheon. But he had been at Chipyong-ri.

Hye-mi had yanked her hair back over her face now that someone new was here. Chul-sam got up to greet Hwang, then sat back at her side right away.

Hwang raised an eyebrow at Hae, and she pouted a li'l. He nodded, keepin' quiet.

"Scars look cool on everyone," she told Hye-mi. "Ah've got tons'a scars, and so does Hwang, and Korea. The General has 'em too."

She didn't bother mentioning her own burns. They weren't

permanent, so they might just make her jealous.

"They don't look cool on *me.*"

Hae kept her smile up, but she frowned inside. She knew how Hye-mi felt. Her tooth had made her upset enough, thinking she wasn't cute anymore and that everyone would think she was a clueless li'l hick because of it, and no one would respect her. She'd been being way sillier than the girl, since a missin' tooth was nothing compared to the napalm burns, but she did know.

She'd already tried the method SH and Korea used to make her feel better, reminding her that tons of people had the same problem as her, and she'd never thought *they* were ugly or unrespectable (or even noticed). And her number two method of telling her she shared something with Korea hadn't worked, either. She didn't think asking Hye-mi if she thought Hae looked like a freak with all her burns would make her see a li'l sense, like it had with Dong-joon. She thought the girl might just say she did, which would hurt a bit, and she'd see that it hurt a bit, and then she'd think Hae hated her own burns and wanted to get rid of them (which she did, but not because they made her ugly), and that just brought them back to her bein' jealous that Hae's could heal and hers couldn't. So she couldn't do that.

And she couldn't tell her her burns represented the resilience of their country. She hadn't been targeted for helpin' their people or fighting the enemy- she'd just had a bomb dropped on her by some Yankee deathbird whose pilot probably wasn't even looking down. Hye-mi *was* resilient, all the kids were. She'd lost her family and survived being drenched in napalm, something even grown soldiers usually didn't.

But she was only maybe ten, and kids couldn't see big stuff like that all the time, even ones in the Children's Union. If Hye-mi went over to the river and looked in, Hae didn't think she'd see 'resilient' in her reflection, just hurt.

But she didn't give up, trying what Korea had said to make her cheer up for good about her tooth.

"Ah still think you're cute," she said, crouchin' in front of her so she could see part of her face, the good part of her lips crushed between her teeth. "Even if your scars aren't, you're still real pretty."

Chul-sam nodded so quick his head blurred. "I think so, too! Hye-mi's always been real pretty."

"I'm not!" Hye-mi burst out, shootin' up and stomping her foot on the ground. "I *was* pretty, but now I'm not anymore! Mama- always-said-" She took deep, gasping breaths between the words, her voice cracking like glass. "Mama always said I was pretty, but- I'm- *not*-anymore!"

Her good eye poured tears down her unscarred cheek, and she thumped back down onto the bank, startin' to sob into her hands.

Oh. This wasn't about her thinking she was ugly, not entirely. And Hae didn't think her not wanting to use her left hand was about superstition.

Chul-sam hung his head, clasping his li'l hands on his knees. He was just a kid, too. He didn't know how to cheer his friend up. Neither did any of the other kids that looked over at Hye-mi's crying, then away, their playing getting quieter.

Mao Zhilong stood up, taking Hye-mi's stick and walking away down the riverbank, like a barncat that came to check things out when you were counting grain sacks, then strutted away once you were strugglin' not to drop them.

Hae wished Korea was here, even though she knew he wouldn't know what to say now that the girl was sobbing. But he'd make her feel better, and then she would.

She looked at Hwang, helpless.

He made a sign to Ryong-jin, telling her everything was okay, then looked down at Hye-mi, hesitating before he took Mao Zhilong's place next to her.

"It sounds like you cared for your mother quite a bit," he said, adjustin' his glasses. "Would you like to tell us about her?"

The girl gasped raggedly into her hands, her sobs choking in her throat, and Chul-sam quickly reached over, placing a hand on her back and the other on her chest, pushing her up straight.

"Hye-mi, breathe like the doctor said," he urged. "In and out, real slow."

She struggled to, and Hae balanced on the tips of her toes, ready to take off and find a doctor, only returning to flat feet once the girl's breathing evened out a bit.

She thought she knew why it looked like part of her nose had been removed. It must have melted into her face. And with how bad her lungs were, she couldn't afford to be able to get air in only one nostril.

Hye-mi took slow, deep gulps of air until she was breathin' normal again. But she kept her face in her palms, her hair hanging over it.

"...My mama was... really kind," she sniffled after awhile. "Papa loved Hye-seong more, 'cuz he was the only boy, but mama always treated us the same. She'd always take me and Hye-yong with her to the market so we could look at stuff, and she'd brush our hair and sing to us before bed, a-and she got me my first inks when I asked, even though they cost a lot."

"She sounds like a good mother," Hwang said, gentle-like, and Hye-mi nodded shakily.

"She was. She took really good care of us, and made the best baeksuk in the world, and she was n-nice and funny and pr-pr-pretty." Hye-mi's eye filled with tears again, her breathin' getting ragged again. "So w-why did they *kill* her? We already l-lost papa and Hye-yong, so why did her and Hye-seong have to go, too? Why'd they have to leave me all alone, l-like this?"

She looked down at her hands, one balling up and the other spasming as it refused to close. Her tears pattered down on her tiny fist.

"You're not alone, Hye-mi," Chul-sam said, clutchin' it in his own

hands. "I told you you're my best friend now, and when my dad finds us, he'll take you in, I know it."

"All the other kids are missin' their folks, too," Hae told her. "That's why you got sent to the orphanage- so you won't be alone, and y'all can look out for each other."

Hwang nodded. "And your peers want to look out for you. Su-jin and Yun-gun are worrying about you over there."

Hye-mi raised her head, her burnt hand over her face as she looked across the river. The two kids waved, and she ducked down again.

"Why won't you let us help, Hye-mi?" Chul-sam asked, his li'l eyebrows all scrunched up. "We want to."

"I-" Hye-mi's lip quivered, her nailless fingers diggin' into her forehead.

"Your injuries bother you so much because they make you think of your mother, don't they?" Hwang asked softly.

Hae darted a look at him, then back at Hye-mi, worried. Talking about what happened to them could help adults, 'cuz they could get everything out and start forgettin', but kids might not even fully understand what happened themselves yet. Which didn't mean they shouldn't try, but she'd been thinking about working up to it, not asking so bluntly when they already knew the answer.

Hye-mi swallowed. "M-Mama said Hye-seong and Hye-yong looked like papa. But she always said I l-looked jusht like her. And I was gonna grow up to be pretty like her. B-But I don't look like her anymore. When the fire... I don't remember."

She put her hands over her ears, even though the melted one couldn't hear, drawing her knees up to hide her face instead.

"I don't remember. I just woke up, and she was there, and she was- she was all- She was staring at me for forever, until the guy came, and then I was in the hoshpital." Her words were getting more slurred with her tears, meltin' into each other. "I was really happy

when they finally took the bandages off and I got to go out, but- but then I looked in the water, and-"

Her shoulders shook as she whimpered, "I don't look like her anymore, but I *do.* N-Now- When I see my face, it's l-like- I don't want to forget what she looked like, but every time I see it, all I can see is her *staring,* and she didn't even- didn't even have-"

She slapped a hand back over her missing eye, the one still there squeezing shut, sendin' more tears pouring down her cheek.

"I don't want to see her that way," she whimpered. "I don't want to forget what she looked like before. I don't wanna forget my mama."

Hwang moved back, letting Hae sit next to the girl, wrappin' her in a big hug. She shook in her arms, all small and fragile, burying her face in her shoulder.

"But Hye-mi." Chul-sam looked confused. "None of us have ever met your mom. We're not forgetting what she looked like when we see you, 'cuz we don't know what she looked like at all."

"I kn-know." Her broken voice was muffled even more by Hae's uniform. "But it feels like- It's like if people see it-" The grip around Hae's ribs tightened. "I don't know, it'sh dumb."

"Just because you don't have the words for it, doesn't mean it's dumb," Hwang said. "Feelings are irrational. That doesn't mean they're inconsequential."

Hae smiled proudly at him over Hye-mi's head. He gave her a worried furrow back.

'But I don't know how to fix irrational things.'

Neither did Hae. She'd never been able to for Korea, to get him to eat or join their celebrations or cuddle with her when he was awake. Even SH had never been able to get him to dance with them, even when Hae thought he... didn't not want to. He was always punishing himself, even though he hadn't done anything he deserved to be punished for.

She guessed grown-ups got irrational feelin's about stuff, too. Even Korea.

Knowing that didn't help her with Hye-mi. Maybe all you could do for stuff like that was give the person a nice long hug and let them know they weren't alone. And at least *she* was lettin' her hug her for more than five seconds.

But she didn't want to leave without doing more. She just didn't know what.

A light hummin' came closer, and her eyes opened as Hye-mi was suddenly pulled out of her arms with a li'l yelp.

"I'll take this," Mao Zhilong said, holding her up in the air by the waist as he padded away again, Hye-mi squirmin' as she tried to cover her face.

"Oi!" Hae protested, scurrying after him with the others.

Now he was like the barncat that came darting over to steal the piece of chicken you dropped.

Mao Zhilong carried her over to where he'd been drawing in the dirt, placing her on her feet.

"I made you something, meimei," he said, grandly gesturing at the ground with his glove.

Hye-mi looked down, and her teary eye went wide. "Ish that...? That's me."

Hae gaped, just as shocked as her. Mao Zhilong had only been using a stick, all the lines were just grooves in the grey-brown earth, but somehow he'd made a drawing Hae wouldn't think twice about seein' next to one of SH's in a gallery.

It really was Hye-mi, but not like she'd drawn herself. She had her burns, ripply lines tracing the outlines of melted skin, dirt pushed into waves to give it the texture it had in real life. But she looked happy amyway, with a big grin on her face that stretched the good side of her mouth almost as wide as the scarred part, showing off all

her teeth without the dressing or her hair to get in the way. Her round cheek was pushed up so much it turned her eye into a crescent, almost hidin' it completely.

Hae really didn't think she was ugly. The burns weren't nice to look at, but they didn't make her hideous. But even though she already didn't think she was ugly, somehow Mao Zhilong's portrait made the girl look...

"You made me look pretty again." Hye-mi sounded awed as she raised her hand to her face, forgetting to hide it as she touched the tips of her fingers to the scarred skin where her eye should be. "How'd you do that?"

"You haven't stopped being pretty, meimei," Mao Zhilong told her. "You just stopped seeing it."

He unbuttoned his sleeve and leaned over, using the long fabric to sweep away the portrait. Hye-mi reached out a hand like she wanted to stop him, then let it fall to her side.

"You erased it," she said, voice wavering.

Mao Zhilong was unbothered. "En. But you remember what it looked like, don't you?"

She nodded, fist over her heart, and he smiled.

"Art has that effect. Feelings, beauty, memories, they all fade. But great art is unforgettable. It captures whatever was poured into its creation." He sounded softer as he said, "The closest a human can get to immortality is to be painted by someone that loves them."

Hye-mi looked down at the stick he pressed into her left hand. Mao Zhilong smiled down at her.

"So keep working on your art, meimei. Immortalize your mama. That way if you ever start to forget what she looked like, or how it felt when she brushed your hair, you can look at it, and it will all come back to you."

"I..." Hye-mi wiped her firearm across her eyes. "I will. I'll- I'll

make an amazing picture of her, and then I'll show it to everyone so they'll know how pretty she was, too."

Her little fingers closed around the stick, and Mao Zhilong let go, smiling.

"I can't wait to see it, Hye-mi," Chul-sam chirped, and she gave him a wobbly smile.

"And if you ever forget how pretty you are again, or if anyone too blind to see it comes along-" Mao Zhilong put a finger under her chin, lifting her face to smile down at her. "Just know gege thinks you're the most beautiful girl he's ever met."

Hye-mi's eye widened before her wobbly lip lost the fight and her face crumpled in, fat tears startin' to roll down her cheeks again as she started to bawl.

Hae hovered in distress before realizing she was crying less like she'd been before, and more like Jin-suk had at the mineral spring.

"Ayuh." She glomped on to the girl. "Hye-mi's super pretty!"

"The prettiest," Hwang agreed quickly.

"I think Hye-mi's pretty, too!"

"Chul-sam, stop *saying* that," she mumbled through her tears. "It's embarrashing when you do it."

"Eh? Why?"

Hae giggled, givin' her another squeeze when her tears finally stopped.

"Do ya think you want to play with the other kids now?" she asked, pulling back.

Hye-mi hesitated, looking at the far shore where her friends were running around. "But... I haven't made my painting yet. What if...?"

"The best way to lose happy memories is to dwell on unhappy

thoughts," Mao Zhilong said. "Go, meimei, have fun. I promise you won't forget her."

When she shuffled her feet, he added, "And if you go play now, I promise that if by the time you're twenty-five no man truly wants you, gege will marry you."

Chul-sam frowned at that, but Hye-mi looked up at him hopefully. "Really?"

"Really." Mao Zhilong lay a hand over his heart. "I promise."

Hye-mi glanced at the other shore, tightening her hold on her stick, then nodded determinedly. "Okay."

She took a step towards the crossin' stones, then stopped. Her hand lifted a li'l, like she might hide her face, but Chul-sam grabbed it.

"Here, I'll hold your hand, Hye-mi."

"Embarrashing," the girl mumbled, but let him pull her across the stream, helping her over the rocks so she wouldn't trip on her skirt.

The kids on the other side all stopped what they were doing as she reached them, staring at her. Hye-mi lowered her scarred face, clutching at her chima with her free hand.

"U-Um-"

"Hye-mi!" Su-jin trundled over on her short legs, taking her arm. "Come play yutnori with us!"

"She doesn't wanna play kid games," In-su protested. "She wants to sword fight. See? She's already got a big stick."

Hae grinned, relieved as the kids fought over who would get to play with Hye-mi, until Su-jin won, and her and Chul-sam joined her an' a couple of the others to play a stick game that looked a li'l less like yutnori and a li'l more like kids that had seen their parents play real yutnori once or twice, and were now trying to recreate it.

Hwang sighed with relief, rubbing his chest. "I'm grateful that succeeded."

"En. Another job well done I'd say, comrades," Mao Zhilong's voice said from directly between them.

Hwang jumped a bit, and so did Hae.

"Yes," her brother said, fixin' his glasses. "Thank you for the assistance, comrade. I'll confess, I'm not sure we could have cheered her up without you."

"We could'a," Hae denied, 'cuz Korea wouldn't want them to say they'd needed a foreigner to help.

"It would've been more challenging," Hwang compromised.

"Luckily for you, I'm irresistible to women of all ages," Mao Zhilong preened.

Hae pursed her lips. She didn't think it was his offer to marry Hye-mi that really helped.

"Korea won't let you actually marry her, y'know," she said, hands on her hips. "It doesn't matter if it's fifteen years from now."

"The bold make promises they don't know if they can keep," Mao Zhilong said airily, slippin' between them. "The wise make promises they know they won't have to."

He lifted his scarf to wink at her, then crossed the stream to keep winning children's games against children.

Hae puffed out her cheeks, even though she was actually really happy with how he'd handled the girl. She just thought Korea would maybe be a li'l nicer to him if he acted more like that and less like a barncat. Maybe.

"I hope she'll be alright," Hwang fretted, watching Hye-mi as she tossed yut sticks at the ground, the other kids squealin' as they came up good. "Recovery isn't a straightforward road, especially not with what she must have been through."

"She'll be just fine," Hae assured him confidently. "She's got Chul-sam an' Su-jin an' Ryong-jin an' Jung-hi an' everyone else. And she's got us. When Chul-sam's dad gets found, they'll be headin' back to Sariwon, so we can keep an eye on 'em."

"And if he isn't?" Hwang asked, keeping his voice real low.

The thunder rumbled in the east, and Hae's skin burned from the thunder she couldn't hear.

"He will," she said. "And even if he doesn't, we'll still look out for them. Once we win the war, we'll be able to come to Kaesong whenever we want."

"Mm." Hwang took his glasses off, looking down at his boots as he polished them. "Once we win."

Hae's stomach knotted, but she kept smiling as she grabbed on to him, crushin' his ribs for the second time today.

"Oof," her brother grunted. "May I ask what that was for?"

"'Cuz Hwang's getting' better at bein' sensitive," she said into his chest. "You din't stick your foot in your mouth even once."

He'd even been able to ask about her mom without sounding like he was asking about how big the harvest would be or if a factory was close to fulfillin' the economic plan, like he was only asking 'cuz he wanted to add more stuff to what he knew.

Hae nuzzled into his sun-warmed side. "Ah'm proud'a you, oppa."

Hwang coughed. "Yes, well... I'm proud of you, too. I know this isn't quite the same ordeal as returning to Sincheon was, but... I'm proud of you for that, too."

Hae beamed, feeling all warm and fuzzy. "Does that mean you'll call me noona?"

"Absolutely not."

"Danggit."

As they went back to spending time with the kids, Hae looked down the river towards the green curve of Janam Hill, where Korea had gone.

She wished Mao Zhilong could use some of his cheer-up power on him. Maybe if he really did it, she'd be jealous that a foreigner managed to make her country feel a li'l better when she couldn't. But she knew he couldn't. And... she didn't care how it happened, so long as Korea felt better. She wanted them all to feel better. She wanted Hye-mi to be able to wear her hair short again, and for Chul-sam's dad to come home. She wanted the kids in her province to be able to play like the kids in Kaesong, and for folks in the market to be able to shop without lookin' up at the sky, waiting for the deathbirds to come, and she wanted people to have enough to eat again.

But it wouldn't happen until they won the war. Korea wouldn't cheer up until then, either. Even if once he did...

Well, Hae cared about him being happy more than almost anything in the world. So that would be enough for her.

Hae chapters are always long because she needs to go rambling. It would not be a Hae chapter without a ramble or three.

China is the type to beat children at games a few times in a row before purposely losing so they can get the thrill of a win and feel even more accomplished. He's giving them their 'underdog comes from behind' moment to enhance their narratives. But North refuses to lose. Not even to a kid. He will obliterate them at games, then tell them to get better. Sometimes SH feels like being his PR is harder than literally running light industry and an entire province. America is the same way, but he plies them with candy afterwards. Meanwhile CCCP will lose to a child every time.

Also Hae number one supporter of East Asian ugly bob hairstyle for little girls. 'Aw, so cute!' she says of the tiny walking mushrooms. Her opinion of the left hand would also

change if she knew South was originally left-handed. She'd think 'Well... maybe bein' left-handed is a *li'l* evil.'

While South Chungcheong hates superstitious people, she does also hate left-handed people. It's not magically 'bad' to her, she just considers it poor etiquette (she's supposed to be left-handed, but she refused).

A Divide That Doesn't Ache

Hae and Hwang (and Mao Zhilong) spent the rest of the day playing with the Kaesong kids, telling them war stories that weren't too scary for them, listening to 'em ramble about their families and how they'd ended up in the city, or what it was like growing up there for the ones born in it, and playing whatever games they wanted.

She kept an eye on Hye-mi the whole time. The girl looked like she got a li'l overwhelmed once and awhile, breaking off from the other kids to go sit on the shore by herself, but Chul-sam brought her back every time. And even though Hae was worried about the town kids that showed up teasing her or saying something insensitive about her burns, none of them did. She guessed they'd been playing with the other injured children too much to be too scared by them, though a few of the younger ones gawked at her missing eye until In-su chased them off.

More of their comrades from the orphanage came by with dinner, serving juk stuffed full'a vegetables from a big pot, alongside rice and kimchi. Hae and Hwang turned their bowls down, 'cuz unlike kids, they could wait a few more hours to eat, and they couldn't take from their supplies.

"Oh!" Hae suddenly remembered something, and rummaged around in her bag, triumphantly pulling the pear she'd bought earlier out.

She'd been doing such a good job at forgettin' it was there, she'd almost forgotten she'd got it for the kids at all.

"Ah have a pear for... everyone." She frowned, realizing there were too many kids and not enough pear.

"I believe I can help with your supply issue." Mao Zhilong took a peach out of his long sleeve.

"Where did you get those?" Hae demanded as he removed a couple more.

Peaches weren't tiny, she should be able to see 'em weighing down his sleeves. And she'd been on top of him earlier and hadn't felt anything.

"Don't worry, I'm not taking from your people," he said, spinnin' a fruit on the tip of his gloved finger. "I received them from my comrades."

He clearly wasn't as smart as Korea and SH said, 'cuz he hadn't understood her question.

Hae pouted, but took the peach he offered her, callin' to the kids, "Everyone who wants some fruit, come get some!"

They all wanted it, obviously, 'cuz fruits were the best food ever. Her and Hwang cut them up, handing the pieces out. Some of the kids had came and went, so there were only around twenty now. Three peaches and a pear were enough for everyone to get a slice, even if it was tiny.

"I wish I got to eat a *whole* pear," a town boy lisped, licking sticky juice from his hand, his piece already gone.

"A li'l pear shared with all your comrades tastes better than a whole pear alone," Hae told him, passin' Mao Zhilong his paring knife back (and realizing he'd made her and Hwang do all the work).

"I believe Confucius said that," he said, hiding the blade in his sleeve again.

"No he din't," Hae protested. "Ah just did."

She'd learned that herself. In the hole, on the few days Eyebrows got to feed her alone, she'd got three bowls of soup or rice a day. But even her most well-fed hole days were nothing compared to the ones where she ate only a handful of berries or nothin' at all with her family.

"You inherited your curse of literalism from your Countryhuman, didn't you?" Mao Zhilong asked.

"Curses aren't real."

He sighed.

The sun started to slide down in the sky, golden light pouring over the roofs of Kaesong and glimmerin' on the shallow stream. Some of the town kids left as their parents called them from a few streets over, or came to pick them up. Full of juk an' fruit, the others lounged on the shore while Ryong-jin and Jung-hi (who Hae had successfully convinced to let her cut her hair to her shoulders, hehe) cleaned up.

Eventually Hae noticed that Korea had come back. He was standing under the chosonjip eaves again, but back in the alley, just watchin' them.

He was probably trying to be broody an' mysterious, but Hae ruined it by taking Hye-mi and pushing her over to him. He twitched like he was going to leave again, but stayed put.

"Korea," she chirped, stopping in front of him with her hands on Hye-mi's shoulders, holding her still 'cuz she was trying to run away, too. "This is Hye-mi. Ah just cut her hair for her. Doesn't she look cute?"

The girl hadn't let her actually cut it, still wanting to hide her face. And Hae knew she couldn't push her on that, like Korea hadn't pushed her to return to Sincheon. She could cut her own hair when she was ready.

But she'd had trimmed it a li'l, styling it so it wouldn't look so messy when she used it to cover her burns.

Hye-mi looked up at Korea, trembling a bit.

He looked at her melted face and slit eye, and said, "Appearances mean nothing. All of Korea's children are beloved, no matter what they look like."

Hae pouted at him over the girl's head, and he sighed.

"But yes. You look cute."

His province beamed. "See, Hye-mi? Korea thinks you look cute, too! That means you are."

Hye-mi's left cheek turned red, and she made a sound like "Eek!" before runnin' away with her face in her hands.

"That means she's happy," Hae said confidently.

Korea watched her go, not happy. "What happened to her?"

"Ah'll tell you on the drive later." She didn't want to gossip where the girl could see, even if it wasn't really gossip.

His eye came back to her, narrowing. "Is your province being bombed?"

Hae put her hand over her burning arm, looking down as she nodded. She hadn't wanted him to know until he dropped them off at Haeju, but if he was asking, she had to tell.

"But ah'm okay, and so's Hwang," she tried to reassure him. "And ah don't think we'll have to worry about 'em tomorrow. That typhoon's comin' in."

The thick grey clouds were still distant, way away over the West Sea the storm had been makin' its way across. But the heat felt heavier, pressing down on her the way it did when it was about to break. And once it did, that meant hopefully no ships firing on their west coast for the day, and maybe even no planes.

But Korea didn't look relieved. He just nodded.

"Korea, do you want to come over and talk to the kids?" she tried. "They really want to see you again."

"No."

Switching tactics, she said, "Hwang says you should. You snapped

at In-su earlier, so he says that might be what their impression of you is now, which isn't good. Ah mean, ah'm sure they wouldn't hate you or anythin'," she quickly clarified. "But kids don't really get things like adults do, so-"

"No," he repeated. "And don't tell anyone else that I'm over here. That's an order."

Hae deflated, but obeyed, heading back to watch the magic tricks Mao Zhilong was showing the children, who were all sitting around with big eyes. And even though she was worried about Korea, she couldn't help but be sucked into watching him make coins disappear and reappear behind their ears, and flowers show up in his palms like they'd grown there.

"How are you doin' that?" the curious boy- Ge-hyok- asked, marvellin' at the go stone the man caught out of midair, even though he hadn't tossed one up.

Mao Zhilong spread his empty fingers. "Magic."

"Magic isn't real."

"Isn't it?" the Chinese man asked, closing his palm. "Check in your sleeve."

The boy reached in, eyes widening as he pulled out the same black stone he'd been holding.

"That's a trick!" he cried. "You still have the other one."

Mao Zhilong opened his hand, showin' that it was empty, smiling as the others gasped.

"If you think it's just sleight of hand, why don't you figure out how I did it?" he teased.

Ge-hyok furrowed his brow, starin' at the stone like it was one of Hwang's math problems as the other kids crowded in, giving suggestions on how it worked.

"I, too, would like to know how you accomplish your feats,"

Hwang said, eyeing Mao Zhilong's uniform. "Tiny pockets sewn into the inside of your sleeves? But while that would make sense for some of the smaller items you carry, I don't see how that would've worked for those peaches earlier."

"Disbelievers all around," Mao Zhilong sighed, shifting so he was sitting with his legs stretched out. "Even if they were just tricks, a magician never reveals his secrets." He considered this. "Unless you were to ply him with red-braised pork belly."

"I'm afraid we're currently low on that," Hwang said dryly.

"Then my methods will remain a mystery."

That disappointed Hae. She knew magic wasn't real, but she had no idea how he kept all that stuff in his sleeves, or how he made some of it appear outside 'em.

"I could teach you some of my other party tricks," Mao Zhilong offered. "Have you ever wanted to try sword swallowing?"

He pulled one of his throwin' knives from nowhere, swinging it around by the red tassel.

That interested Hae, but Hwang coughed and said, "I'm afraid I'll have to pass on that. But while we have a moment, perhaps you could clear up another mystery that's been on my mind?"

"No promises."

"What happened to the Republic of China?"

Hae perked up. Korea had reminded them a few months ago to tell him about anything Mao Zhilong said about his past, and to ask about it if they could (Hae had tried, but he was *really* good at makin' her forget what they were talking about). He'd *definitely* want to know that.

She looked over at the alleyway. It looked like he was watching them, but she didn't think he could hear.

"I've only ever heard rumours about his fate," Hwang continued,

keeping his voice low so no one could eavesdrop. "With Manchukuo's disappearance it's easy enough to posit that his handlers fled with him in secret, only for him to perish once the Soviets arrived and that part of your country was liberated, but there's so many conflicting stories about the Republic of China, and nothing credible about what befell him. Did he dissolve in obscurity, or did you truly execute him?"

"According to my Nationalists, he's alive and well in Taiwan," Mao Zhilong said, examining his nails (even though he was wearin' gloves).

"Everyone knows they simply slapped a new flag on the Taiwanese Provincehuman," Hwang replied. "Your revolution was entirely successful. There isn't any way another Chinese Countryhuman could survive."

Mao Zhilong spun his knife around his finger again. "I am the only Chinese Countryhuman."

"So he did perish?"

"And I've always *been* the only Chinese Countryhuman."

"That isn't true." Hwang sounded a li'l frustrated. "There were several during your civil war."

"Puppets and pretenders," Mao Zhilong dismissed. "No more worthy of the mantle of China than the Republic."

Hwang pursed his lips. "I've heard there's a possibility that he killed himself a few years before the war, and that's what helped plunge your country into chaos. Can you at least confirm or deny that?"

"Aiya, an interview? And I'm not wearing my best suit." He was still spinning the knife 'round and 'round. "How am I supposed to know whether or not some lazy little cousin killed himself? You'll recall I don't exactly get along well with the people who claim to support him."

"Not entirely true," Hwang countered. "I've heard that many of

your Nationalists supported you during the war, and even believed you were one of them."

"You believe everything you hear? And I thought you were supposed to be your Countryhuman's intelligent province."

"Hwang *is* intelligent," Hae chimed in, eyes trackin' the knifepoint as it flashed by.

"Then you would think he was smart enough not to put any stock in rumours," Mao Zhilong replied. "After all, *I* heard rumours that the Korean Countryhuman supported his own Nationalists over your Communists, or even that he approved of Japan."

Hwang's brow crinkled. "Those who heard about the South being in the possession of the Provisional Government likely, or saw that news article featuring him and Japan, but not ours after. Regardless, those did have a seed of truth."

"Most don't sprout."

Hwang frowned at him for a second, then asked, "Do you actually not know?"

Ohh. Maybe Mao Zhilong *didn't* know, and that was why he was being all dodgy, so he wouldn't have to admit it, like Korea sometimes did.

"If you ask me, there never was a 'Republic of China,'" Mao Zhilong said idly. "Only a crumbling nation and a bunch of old fools that wanted everything in the world but change."

"There had to be a Republic of China," Hwang denied. "Every land with people on it has a representation. Even the soviets in your country that wished to represent it. Ah, while we're on the subject, I've been meaning to ask- which 'China' were you? The Jiangxi Soviet?"

Hae blinked as the spinning knife in Mao Zhilong's hand abruptly stopped, now pointed an inch from Hwang's face, held in the Chinese country's hand.

"The People's." Mao Zhilong still sounded friendly, but the eyes Hae saw under his scarf didn't look it.

Hwang must have seen, too, 'cuz he quickly said, "Of course. My apologies for prying into your internal affairs."

The knife disappeared down Mao Zhilong's sleeve again.

"No apologies necessary," he said, waving his hand like he didn't care. "There's nothing wrong with curiosity. I just don't like answering questions on an empty stomach. Maybe if you treat me to some pork belly after this war is over, I'll tell you what you want to know."

Hwang's eyes lit up. "Truly?"

Mao Zhilong's eyes squinted up. "I promise."

"Can ah come?" Hae asked, droolin' at the thought of pork belly.

"Sorry, Little Tiger, I only do my interviews one on one. You would have to treat me to your own meal."

"Ah don't think Korea would like that." She couldn't see him letting a foreign country eat at one of their restaurants. CCCP always brought his own food.

"That's a shame," Mao Zhilong sighed. "And here I was thinking it could be in exchange for all those candies I've given you. Since you were so worried about me bribing you before."

Wait! If Hae took him out to dinner, that could make up for the first candy he'd given her. That way it wasn't a bribe, it was just two people tradin' each other something. Or... would that be *her* bribing Mao Zhilong?

No, it couldn't be, 'cuz she didn't want anything from him. She'd just be paying him back for the candy, and then she wouldn't have been bribed anymore, and she could actually like him!

"Okay," she happily agreed. "Ah'll ask Korea."

But she stopped her legs before they could stand up.

They'd agreed not to talk about being hungry around him anymore, and if she brought up takin' Mao Zhilong out, he might think it was because she was thinking about food. She'd ask once the war was over, and their food situation was back to normal.

'Not normal- better than ever.' Meat three times a day, like Korea had promised.

"What kind'a food do you like?" Hae asked Mao Zhilong. She'd never seen him eat anything but the rice rations, fried potato powder, and the delicious soup Korea had made, plus some of the canned things CCCP had given him, too. Oh! And the meal at his birthday party last year.

"Surprise me," he said, and Hae might have thought there was something cat-like in the satisfied curve of his mouth, but he was wearing the mask, and she was already dreamin' about fragrant jokbal and roasted goldongbap and pyeonsu bursting with pork and vegetables an'-

She sucked all her saliva back after Mao Zhilong wandered off to flirt with Jung-hi and Ryong-jin, and Hwang exhaled, pinchin' where his nose should be.

"Are ya feelin' alright?" she asked.

He'd pulled out the short course draft to look over, and startled a bit at her voice. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"'Cuz you stayed up all last night to work, and you usually only do that if you're worried about somethin'." The shadows under his eyes had faded since morning, but they were still a li'l bruised.

"Not true," he denied. "You know I like to finish projects as expediently as possible. Quickly."

"Ah knew that one. You use it a lot," Hae said, then shook her head. "Ayuh, but that's when you can finish the project. We're collaboratin' with the rest of our comrades for the winter courses, and we're still waitin' on more surveys an' stuff so we know what

needs to be taught. You can't finish it, but you were still lookin' at it when ah went to sleep last night. And you're lookin' now. That means you're worried."

"Proving once again you have far clearer eyes than me," Hwang sighed. "I'm fine. I was simply... trying not to mull over yesterday."

Hae nodded, still not pryin'. "Ah'm here for you, Hwang. Even if ah don't know what for."

He smiled tiredly. "Thank you, Hae. And I'm here for you."

She wiggled happily at that. "So you're really okay? Ah mean, not okay. But not worried?"

"It was just that," he assured her. "And..." He gestured at his body, and the pain that had been ripplin' through both of them for hours.

Hae nodded in understanding. "Good. You don't need to be worried about the war or anythin'. Ah told you Korea says we're still goin' to win, so we just got to keep our heads up until then."

She smiled at him, tryin' to make him feel better. He gave her a tiny smile back, reaching over to hold her shoulder, gazing down at the short-term course pages shivering in his other hand.

Their heads jerked over as a loud cry split the air, and one of the kids started to bawl. Jumping up, Hwang stuffed his papers back in his pack, and Hae hurried over to the riverside, where one of the younger kids was sitting in the dirt, wailing with his head thrown back.

"What's wrong?" Hae asked, squattin' down next to him.

"J-Ji-won s-splashed me," he sobbed, tugging on his wet shirt. "I told him not to, but he did anyway! I just got dry and now I'm all wet again, and I'm gonna have to s-*sleep* in 'em."

"Don't be such a crybaby, Dong-il," the other boy scolded, sloshing over from the river, shaking himself like a dog as he jumped out. "You got like, a drop on you."

Dong-il stopped crying for a second, looking down at his soakin' wet shirt, then back up at Ji-won, before bursting into tears again.

"That's a bit more than a drop," Hwang said politely. "I don't think it can be denied that splashing him was intentional."

Ji-won wilted like a plant in the sun at being chided by an adult.

Hae didn't want him to feel ganged-up on, so she told him, "Don't worry, no one's mad at you."

"I am!" Dong-il cried tearily. "I *hate* you!"

"Oi," Hae scolded him. "No you don't. Good kids don't tell comrades they hate them. What if somethin' happened to Ji-won tomorrow? Wouldn't you be upset you told him that?"

Dong-il looked down, sniffling, and she looked over at the other boy.

"And good kids also don't splash their comrades when they don't want to get wet. Wouldn't *you* be upset if somethin' happened to Dong-il, and the last thing you did was make him sad?"

He hung his head.

"Exactly." Hae crossed her arms over her knees. "You never know what could happen. We've all got to stick together an' get along."

She was glad the last thing she'd said to Gang before he got stolen was thanking him for taking care of her, and that she loved him. And that she'd told all her other southern cousins to fight hard and that she'd see them again soon. Except for Chungnam, but she wasn't supposed to think about that.

"And this is a trivial matter," Hwang said, pushing up his glasses. "Comrades Ri Jung-hi and Oh Ryong-jin did your laundry earlier, and it's had plenty of time to dry by now. You'll be able to wear dry clothes to sleep, Dong-il."

"Oh," he sniffed, lookin' embarrassed as he plucked at the dark water stains on his shirt.

"But that doesn't mean he overreacted," Hae added. "It's not fun when someone does somethin' to you you don't want 'em to do."

She knew that real well, even if getting splashed with a li'l water really wasn't that bad.

Ji-won rubbed his arm, all sheepish, while Dong-il fidgeted.

Hae looked at Hwang to tell him *'Let 'em say it on their own,'* but he'd looked at her at the same time, sayin' the same thing. Both their eyes squinched.

"...I'm sorry, Dong-il," Ji-won muttered after a moment. "I shouldn't have splashed you."

Dong-il wiped his eyes. "It's okay," he mumbled back. "I'm sorry, too. I don't actually hate you."

"Will you still play with me tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I just didn't want to get wet again today."

Ji-won's face lit up, and Hwang said, "If you still want to play in the water, you could go play with Myong-ho. He's a little older, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

Ji-won looked over to where the other boy was digging in the silt for loaches. But first he came over, holding a burnt hand out to Dong-il.

"Do you want to come, too? I won't splash you again."

The boy eyed him warily. "Promise?"

"Promise."

He brightened, chirpin', "Okay!" as he let the taller boy pull him up.

Hwang raised a brow at Hae. She pouted. He raised his other brow.

It was *so* unfair she couldn't do that.

Not reluctantly at all, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the milk candy Mao Zhilong had given her.

"Take this," she told the boys. "And make sure you share it."

Their eyes went even wider than they had at the fruit, promising they would as they snatched it and ran away, gigglin' with excitement.

Hae popped up, relieved it'd just been a tiny issue. She hated when kids cried. Well, she hated when anyone cried, but she *really* hated when kids cried.

"It's good they can still smile," she chirped, looking around at the rest of the kids. "All of 'em."

"Yes," Hwang said, his eyes all soft as he looked at her. "It is."

Even with all the burns and how scrawny they were, they could still run around and play like kids should. 'Merica and the Southern One hadn't been able to take that from them, not even from Hye-mi.

But she couldn't forget that some children couldn't. There was an entire hospital in this city alone full of kids that could never be kids again. And that had to make her furious.

Hae breathed in, then grinned up at her brother.

"Hae an' Hwang victorious again," she sing-songed to him, bumpin' his shoulder.

"Indeed." He nudged her back. "But it's 'Hwang and Hae.'"

"Nope!"

"That is quite literally the name of our province."

Hae pouted up at him until he sighed.

"Hae and Hwang are victorious again," he conceded.

Hae grinned, looking over at Korea by instinct. He was still there, lurkin' as the golden light grew richer and the shadows around him got deeper. Unlike her, it really was hard to tell where he was looking sometimes. But right now she could tell he was watching them.

She knew all of her Countryhuman's expressions better than she knew her own, all the tiny li'l movements he used to talk to them silently, that other language she hadn't even realized she'd been learning alongside Korean. The way the groove between his eyebrows would deepen like a field furrow bein' gone over with a tiller, or his eye would subtly widen or tense at the corners. His twitchy jaw and how his thin lips would curve slightly at one edge like they were being tugged by invisible string, usually down, but sometimes, with a rarity that made it even more elating to Hae when it happened, up. She could picture his face perfectly even with her eyes closed, and had often when she'd been in Sincheon or locked up in the POW camp, and in the hospital as she felt the life draining out of her. She knew every combination of his features he could make, even if it had taken until Liberation to see that final one.

Except for tears. She'd never seen those, and knew she never would.

But even if she knew how all his expressions looked, she didn't always know what they meant when he didn't want her to. That would make her sad, if she didn't think no one did, maybe not even the General. And she didn't want to think about the person that might. Korea was always thinkin' and feelin', so even if he looked at something one way, it might be because he was thinking about something else. Hae knew he felt a lot of things all mixed up together, so sometimes it was hard to pick out which of those feelings were on his face.

But she could tell which one it was right now.

"Hwang." She looked over at her brother. "Ah think we should tell Korea we want to be our own provinces."

"We already-"

"Now."

He blinked in shock. "Right now? But we haven't finished the short-term course outline."

She knew that was part of the reason he'd been staying up so late to work on it. He was worried like her, maybe even more, 'cuz she at least knew Korea made the right decision ninety percent of the time.

"Right now," she confirmed.

"B-But- Right here? With the children, after he visited- Hae, I don't think-"

"No more waitin'!" Mind made up, Hae seized her brother's hand, pulling him with her as she forged across the riverbank, past where the kids were still trying to figure out Mao Zhilong's magic tricks.

"Good hunting, Little Tiger," he called, not looking up, like he'd heard everythin' they said, even though he'd been a good ten metres away.

Hae ignored him, focused on her goal with single-minded determination now that she'd decided it was time, marching right up to Korea, only letting go of Hwang to plant her hands on her hips. Her Countryhuman eyed her.

"What?" he asked, all tense.

"Korea," she announced, puffin' her chest up and making sure she was using her imperative speech. "We want you to make us our own provinces."

His shoulders relaxed a bit, but he just stared at her, like he was waiting for her to say more.

Hae... hadn't really planned anything more to say. She'd kind'a just been hopin' he'd say 'yes' right away, and then she could throw herself at him.

"Um..." She wiggled her shoulders, but then put them back again,

lifting her chin.

"Ah know you said by mergin', we'd just be becomin' who we were supposed to be. But..." She reached over to take her brother's hand again, and met her country's eye. "Ah don't want to be Hwanghae. Even if I'm supposed ta be. Ah just want to be Hae."

Hae, who her cousins saved the last bite of their meals for, whose back SH always washed, who their people looked up to and loved, and who he let sleep in his bed. The Hae he'd let hug him for longer than five seconds without fighting one day. Her people's Comrade General, her country's province, and her brother's sister. Her Korea's South Hwanghae.

Korea stared into her for a long moment, as her pulse galloped like a colt and Hwang squeezed her hand in his.

Then his eye flickered, and he broke contact.

"Fine."

Hae's heart leapt, but Hwang, unable to hold himself back anymore, burst out, "Korea, please reconsider. We've already been cemented in our people's minds as North and South Hwanghae, to combine us now might alienate us from them. Not that I think merging us would be inherently alienating, of course, I just mean for us since our people are well-acquainted with the both of us, and Hae has had sensitive stories shared with her by women that might not appreciate a man knowing, if we even become a- Anyway, I also I have a rapport with many religious figures in our province that she simply doesn't have, and when you consider that Hwanghae Christians have been a major reactionary base-"

"North Hwanghae."

"-I think keeping me as is to serve as an in with them, and keeping Hae as she is since she's so close to our peasantry would be wise. Post-war rebuilding will be delicate as is. We've spent years entwining our roots with those of our people, to change their representatives now could weaken them, and waylay our efforts. Of course, we wouldn't actually be changing, but those who know us

personally might not feel that way. Ah, but I'm sure that wouldn't be the case for-"

"North Hwanghae."

"Anyway, I think we're simply too useful as two people to combine into one when you consider how much we're both capable of getting done, Hae with her fieldwork and me with my writing and incul- teaching. We're much too-"

"HWANG." Hae let go of his hand to grab his shoulders. "He said yes!"

Her brother blinked at her. "What?"

"Korea said we can be our own provinces!"

Hwang looked over at Korea, who nodded, expressionless.

"Just like that?" he asked, sounding disappointed for some reason.

"I made the decision before the war," Korea said. "I've already spoken to the General about it."

Hae tipped her head. "But ah asked you just before the war, and you said you'd think about it."

"I already had."

Hwang's mouth opened as he blinked rapidly at him. "And you didn't think to *tell* us? You would've saved us some stress!"

"You shouldn't have been stressed about unifying in the first place," Korea answered flatly. "And I didn't need to. Your new administrative zones were going to be set up by the next year anyway." He grimaced a li'l. "And now it will be when the war is over."

"Next year!" Hae threw her fist in the air, heart soarin' as she realized it would be so soon.

Korea's expression didn't change. "And South Hwanghae annoyed

me by pestering."

"And you're sure it's that easy?" Hwang asked, rummaging in his pocket, pulling out a paper covered in his chicken scratch draft handwriting. "I wrote a persuasive essay to convince you."

"I don't need it," Korea said bluntly.

Hwang looked hopefully between him and the essay. "...May I read it to you anyway?"

"No."

He sagged.

"Hwang, who cares about the essay?!" Hae cried, shakin' him violently back an' forth. "We get to be our own provinces!"

He paused, then the eyes behind his glasses lit up, like he finally realized what they'd been saying.

Jeez, for such a smart guy, her brother could be a li'l dense sometimes.

"We get to be our own provinces," he repeated, amazed, and Hae nodded so hard they were both vibrating as it sank in for her, too.

A li'l laugh of amazement left Hwang's lips, and Hae beamed, laughin' with him as she yanked him into a hug, and even though she was crushin' his ribs again, he didn't protest, just hugged her back, pressing her into him like he was trying to merge with her even now that they'd been told they didn't have to.

But Hae knew there was no danger of that now, so she hugged him back just as tight, tighter, anchorin' herself to his bony shoulder blades.

He was never going to slip away from her now. She'd never be left huggin' herself and pretending she was hugging the piece of him inside her. He would never have to do that either, or wake up alone in the dark in the root cellar he was staying in, with no one to ask if he was okay.

"We get to be siblin's forever now." Hae's words were muffled by her brother's chest, but his were clear.

"And we get to be ourselves."

All Hae could see was uniform, but she could feel Korea's eye on them.

"We still would'a been ourselves," she mumbled "We just would've been each other, too."

She just didn't want to be.

"Enough with the theatrics," Korea grumbled from next to them. "People are watching."

Hae pulled away from Hwang, only to launch herself at him next.

"Thank ya, Korea! Thankyathankyathankyathank-!"

"Get off before I change my mind!" he barked, shoving her away.

Hae went, grinnin'. "Thank ya!"

"Truly, Korea." Hwang placed one hand on her shoulder and the other on his chest. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," their Countryhuman muttered, tugging his collar up. "It's just the pragmatic decision. I've already considered everything you said, and splitting Hwanghae into smaller zones will make economic planning easier." His eye flicked away. "And the use-value of the both of you is too high to risk degrading."

Hae smiled so wide it hurt as she threw herself at him again. His scent had been swallowed up by the burnt-meat smell, but that didn't stop her from burying her face in his chest to listen to his heart. It was her arms wrapped around him, and always would be. And it always had to be his heart pounding.

He didn't respond to the words she spoke into him, but he never did, so that was okay. She didn't need a response to know he felt the same.

He struggled, but couldn't push her off right away. She got a full five seconds before he managed to.

"Off!" he hissed, bristlin' as he looked over at the others. "You got what you wanted, now stop embarrassing yourselves and get out of here."

But Hae didn't go right away. Instead she clasped her hands at her waist and took a deep breath, tasting the country air, the slight tang of chemicals and smoke that lingered in it, and the smell of burning flesh that wafted from her bandages. The laughter of the children, bright and clear despite their burns, rang over the shore.

"Korea, when you draw up the border... can ah have Sincheon?"

Hwang looked at her in surprise. "Are you sure-?"

"Ayuh." Hae moved her hands up to her heart. "It's mine. Ah want to keep it."

Ra Hye-in, Kim Moon-sik, Choe Kwang-seok, Un Ji-ha, Jung Jae-soon and Min Pong-su, Oh Hyang-gol and his missing li'l girl, Dan Yeon-hwa, Yang Jeong-nyeo and Ko Kuil-hwa and their children, and all the rest, dead and alive. Their stories were all hers, all their grief and rage and pain an' love. *They* were all hers. All South Hwanghae's.

And South Hwanghae wanted to be theirs. She wanted to make them happy again, to make Sincheon a place where people could laugh and kids could play without fear, even if they could never forget what had been done to them.

She knew that look in Korea's eye, too. The way the corners softened just a li'l, not enough for most people to notice. But she did.

"Yes," he said, a li'l less flat as he braced his hands behind his back. "You can have Sincheon."

Hae solemnly dipped her head. "Thank you, Korea."

He dipped his back, before returning to sounding gruff.

"Now go. You're drawing eyes."

Hae shot up, salutin'. "Ayuh, Comrade General!"

She took a few steps away, then looked back at him.

"What?" he demanded.

She couldn't ask him. She already knew what he'd say, anyway. Korea had got to make the right decision with her and Hwang. But that didn't mean he could magically start making all right decisions. Magic wasn't real, and some of the wrong decisions were still necessary, and probably always would be.

She guessed some of them weren't even really decisions at all.

So instead she said, "You won't regret this, Korea. Ah'll be the best South Hwanghae ever for you!"

"You're the *only* South Hwanghae," he called as she skipped away.

And he was the only Korea. He always would be. He'd always be hers, no matter what.

So she'd be satisfied that he was right ninety-nine percent of the time, and that even if she couldn't tell what all of his expressions meant, she would always be confident about the most important one, the one he'd been looking at her an' Hwang with as they helped the kids. Even if there was a shadow over it, even if she thought he would've broken her hug sooner if he could've...

Hae knew what love looked like.

—

Thrumming with triumphant elation at their future division (and slight disappointment that he'd wasted paper on his essay draft), Hwang went to follow his sister.

But he hesitated. He'd seen that look on her face. She hadn't been speaking their facial language, but Hae had truly never been the subtle sort.

That question she'd asked him at Songnim burned in his mind. She may not be thinking of the possibilities the rest of them had discussed at the secret votes, but he still was.

He knew it was dangerous to ask at all, especially when Korea had just returned from the hospital, and when he already knew the answer. But...

They didn't know what could happen. But he *did* know what would happen to Korea if he ever got in a situation like he and his cousins had discussed. It may be safer if he at least planted the idea. Maybe he *should* think about it.

And he wanted to know. Call it intellectual curiosity.

He drew in a deep breath, then asked, "Korea. Do you ever think about... not Reunifying?"

His Countryhuman's reply came frigid. "No. Our country cannot remain Divided."

That wasn't what he'd meant. But judging by Korea's lack of outrage at being asked, Hwang knew he was aware of that, just as he had been when Hae asked him the same thing.

He dipped his head. "Of course. And... thank you again, Korea. I know..." He cleared his throat, pushing his glasses higher. "Thank you."

He felt lighter than he had in months. It felt good to know with certainty that one day he would be able to tell Hae about Choi Jung-nam, that they could sit down with Choi Yoshi and toast to his memory, and he would never have to dread the day he had to reintroduce himself to his former student, or when there would be an empty space on his futon while he typed at his typewriter in silence.

His Countryhuman didn't answer, turning away.

It still felt like a small betrayal, feeling this happy that he and his sister would never have to unify. But he was glad for it, and glad that Korea hadn't let his own situation influence his decision when

they were entirely different.

For North and South Hwanghae, at least, the only change that came to who they were would be from their own efforts. There would never come a day when there was one less cushion around their family table.

Even if Korea could never imagine 'himself' sitting at it.

What if I told you this mini-arc just became four chapters.

Also Hwang still had the draft for his persuasive essay because while he finished his first draft immediately after him and Hae agreed to ask North to be their own provinces, he wanted to keep perfecting it right up until the last moment. The plan was to write the final draft the day before they told him. But he didn't want to waste paper, so he was just editing the draft on one piece. Which means even if North had let him read it, he wouldn't have been able to.

In the hole, Hae's guards actually had orders to feed her three times a day, but most of them grew tired of that quickly, and some of them actively enjoyed starving her as we know. You know, super loyal to Japan-sama, they'll do anything he tells them to. But only if it's killing people or exercising their authority, not if it's consistently feeding a little girl trapped in a root cellar. Eyebrows always fed her three meals a day, and wasn't aware some of the others were starving her when he first got the job, until he realized Hae was way too weak. He protested to his superior, who assured him they would tell Japan. He didn't. When he pushed back against Big Nose specifically, he made it clear that continuing to do so would end with him being released from the position. And it was not the sort of job you were released gently from, or your family. So In the future, Eyebrows could only make sure she was fed during the weeks he was there, and if whoever was on watch with him told him not to feed her, he didn't argue out of fear for his family. He'd have to wait until they were resting, and just try to make more than usual, which is a big part of the guilt that grew up inside him, especially after his daughter was

born

Meant To Be

North watched Hae and Hwang settle in with the kids again as China showed off his sleight of hand. They sat next to him, grabbing at his sleeves after he pulled a live frog out of one, the female Hwanghae exclaiming loudly as she tried to shove her entire head into it to find out where the creature came from, giggling as she was batted away.

He shouldn't have decided to divide them. He should have forced them together, should have-

But he couldn't take the decision back now. His General would just talk him out of it if he tried. And he... It just made sense. Hwanghae needed to be cut into smaller administrative zones, just like South Hamgyong would be. There wasn't any point in unifying them just to sever them again. He didn't want to risk leaving his provinces with the same ache he had, worse than the one he'd used to share with them. It would get in the way of their work.

And he refused to let one of them fade away.

He grit his teeth. *'Fucking North Hwanghae.'*

It wasn't like he was blind to the way they looked at him when he mentioned his brother, or what they had been trying to do at their criticism session after he won them back. And he would have to be deaf not to hear the constant harping about the southern army being South's army when it *wasn't.* He had expected one of them to get stupid enough to bring it up directly to his face, but he'd thought it would be North Hamgyong.

He knew some of his provinces didn't like his brother right now. But that didn't give North Hwanghae any right to suggest jeopardizing the future of their country when they didn't know what would happen if-

Korea was meant to be one, he knew they all knew that. Their

country had been a unified state for over a thousand years, and not a single one of his provinces, north or south, would accept anything other than the total restoration of that, he *knew* it.

So why did they think they had any right to imply that the Korean Countryhumans shouldn't be one? Why did they think they had any right to slander half of their country behind his back, or threaten him, or want to see him dead like In-su did when *South was half of their country?* Just because he had Commanded them, just because he'd kept them in the POW camp? He hadn't had any say in that, America had *made* him. The foreign country was the one that made him send South Hamgyong after North Hamgyong, *he* was the one that ran the camps and taunted them in their imprisonment. South had let Kangwon out to visit, given him yakgwa, he'd let North Pyongan go in the woods and brought South Pyongan her brother's hat, and he'd given Hae a scarf to keep her warm and food to share with their people. Outside of what America had made him do to them, he had been nothing but kind.

'He had to Command me?'

Didn't he? Yes, he could have just pretended to use the Commands over the radio and avoided imprisoning the provinces in the first place, but South wasn't brave enough to try that. And if he hadn't, America would have punished him for it. It didn't matter if it would have impacted his claim that he was here on a 'police action' when he would just lie to the world about it like he lied about everything else. And South wouldn't come forward to tell the truth because he was a coward that didn't want to get hurt again, like he always had been.

'Can we please not do that again?'

South Hamgyong had no right to be pissed that his brother had used the Commands on her. He was her country, he had the *right,* just like North did. He just... He saw no use for it.

And South hadn't meant for her to end up wounded. He hadn't been there during their guerrilla days, he hadn't known that North Hamgyong was capable of shooting his own sister because he knew *his* brother would never be able to hurt *him.* And he hadn't

Commanded her to hurt the comrades that got in her way, he probably just hadn't thought about what 'stopping them' would lead to. South... didn't think about things like that.

Fingers gripping his jaw. 'So let them.'

It wasn't an excuse, he knew that. Even if South had to Command them, he still shouldn't have. He really... North had *really* thought he wouldn't. After twenty-six years with his will stripped away and held in Japan's hands, he hadn't thought his brother could ever even *think* about doing it to their own provinces, and far more thoroughly. At least with Japan, they had had the choice of disobeying, even if South never had.

It *wasn't* an excuse, but it was his business. He would talk to South after- after the war was over, he would make sure he knew why what he had done was wrong. He would ask him why he had. But that was *his* job, he was *North's* brother. And he was the other half of the provinces' country, and they had no right to want him not to be just because he had done things the other half of it never would have. *He wasn't North.*

But he would be. And North would be him. The Hwanghaes had the luxury to deny becoming who they were meant to be, but Korea didn't. And he didn't want it. He just wanted to be Reunified, to be one, to be- He just wanted their country to be whole again, the way they were meant to be. And he wanted his brother back, and he wanted their provinces to love him because he deserved it. He knew they would like him more if they just gave him a chance. *He* was the one that had wanted to meet them so badly, he was the one that wanted them to be able to attend banquets and court dances together, to be a family. North had never wanted any of that. He just wanted them all to be free.

He was the one that had failed them, *he* was the one they should hate. If he had just won two years ago like he said he would, America never would have had the chance to force South to do those things. If he had even just knocked South out and dragged him back across the Raktong, damn what he wanted, this never would have happened. His brother could gripe about it, but North would just remind him that a lump on the head was nothing

compared to having your ruined eye scooped out of its fucking socket. America would have just used it to keep the war going, but it was *still going anyway*. At least South would be safe, and the provinces wouldn't have it out for him like they did now.

And they didn't even know the full extent of what he had done.

North's jaw creaked, his hackles raising.

Was that what China had been telling them as they sat over there whispering and sneaking glances at him? Had he been telling them about that message, about Seoul? Was that why Hwang had dared to ask him that now? Was the foreigner trying to turn them against the other half of their country even more, to finish what America had started? Did he think it was safer having a neighbour he knew, or was he worried that becoming Korea would take North's weakness away and make him a more difficult enemy if they ever stopped walking the same path? Or was he trying to turn his provinces against him because if they knew what South had done to their people, but that North still-

Everyone was looking at him, the eyes of the children on the riverbank and the washerwomen across it fixed on him, along with the provinces' and China's, gazes burning with accusation.

They knew. They knew what South had done, China had told them and now they hated his brother, too, hated him even more. They wanted to hurt him, to take him away from North, and they couldn't understand why none of them should ever want that.

'Because he's the other half of your country!' North wanted to scream at them. *'He's the other half of your country and it's* ***not his fault!****'*

But his jaw was locked shut as the agony of Hwanghae pounded through his body. Hae's mouth had split open when she smiled, blood dotting the bandages on her cheeks, and he could feel his own splitting now, bursting open on his sides and soaking his drabs black. The disfigured children watched him with the same pity his province had earlier, thinking he was weak, that he couldn't handle a fucking hospital visit to kids he had been supposed to save or another damn bombing, watching the blood spread and knowing

that he couldn't keep them-

"If I didn't know better, I'd say *you* were the one who clawed out your own eye."

North's neck snapped over so fast it cracked, his nails raking his face as he yanked his hand out from under his eyepatch, going for his hip.

"Ah ah," China *'tsk'*ed, stepping into the alley with him. The Korean somehow hadn't noticed him approaching head on, even though he had been looking. "Don't make me reset the 'days since I've had a gun pointed at me by a comrade' counter."

North balled his fist, heart pounding as he shot a look back at the children. They were saying goodbye to the ones from town as the final few trickled away. None of them were looking.

But he knew they had been. Even if they didn't know about South, they had been watching him, judging him for his outburst earlier, waiting on another, because he was an idiot who couldn't just-

'Ssi-bal.'

"I look forward to attending United Nations meetings with you in the future," China said, not leaving, even though North was making it very clear with his face that he didn't want to talk. "I assume you'll stand in the shadows and watch everyone menacingly there, too. It will make for nice set dressing."

"I'm not being menacing," North muttered, subtly checking his uniform. He hadn't bled through after all. "I'm just standing here."

"Those children would really like to spend more time with their Countryhuman," China told him, like Hae had. "But they're worried you're still angry. On account of the menacing stance."

North looked away.

He shouldn't have lost his temper. But how could he not when that boy said he would kill South for him, like that was something he would ever want? How many other children felt the same way?

How many of them heard 'southern soldiers' or 'southern government' and thought that meant *South?* How many of his soldiers did, or their guerrillas behind enemy lines? What if one of them thought South was complicit, and that North would want them to remove him? They would risk their lives and end up killed for something he could never want.

And they might hurt his brother before they did, like Hwang wanted to take him away from North just because he had locked his sister up.

If they blamed South, if they hated him, then what if after they Reunified, they-

"We're walking them back to the orphanage soon," North muttered. "They can talk to me then."

That wasn't any excuse for what he had done. In-su was a child who hadn't even understood what he was saying. He had almost brought an injured orphan boy to tears because he still couldn't get control of himself.

'Your emotions aren't the curse you see them as.'

They felt like it, more often than not.

The last group of town kids edged towards them, and North stepped aside to let them pass through the alleyway. They hustled over, stopping in front of him to bow with utter solemnity.

His skin prickled, but he forced his hackles to smooth. It was just a parting bow. They would give the same one to their teachers or grandparents.

"Get home safe," he ordered them. "Don't stay out too late."

One of the boys popped up, eyes glowing like sparks as he grinned.

"We won't, Comrade Korea!"

The group scurried off down the alleyway, giggling excitedly and

glancing back, all their hard-fought-for dignity gone.

They could have left through any of the dozens of alleys between this stretch of chosonjips. They'd clearly only chosen this one to pass by him.

"Scurrilous little creatures, aren't they?" China remarked. "How was your hospital visit, by the way?"

North's teeth ached as he saw the barrage of hospital beds again, skin in shades of ash-white and burnt black, melted and crackling like his, but not capable of healing. Tiny malformed limbs fused to sides that fought to rise and fall as tiny mouths gasped for air in faces that wouldn't move. And eyes, so many eyes, never to open, never to shut, never to see. Either filled with so much agony that he'd had to stop himself from reaching for their pillows or with that light that was almost worse. The way they had lit up as his flag appeared in their rooms, like he could do anything to fix them, and the way they must have dimmed when he walked out, and they remained ruined.

"Bad," he answered China, quieter than he'd meant to.

"I would've been happy to come with you."

North's jaw feathered, though his comrade didn't say it in the same way Hae had. It wouldn't have mattered as much if he did. It would be annoying for a different reason.

"They are Korea's children. It was Korea's duty."

"It should be every country's duty to look after all the children of the world," China answered, watching In-su and the others yawn sleepily as Hae and Hwang herded them up for their minders.

For a moment, the eyes the fading light revealed under his scarf looked sad. North's fist flexed, wondering if he was feeling that small hand gripping his, too.

"I trust you got my present at least," his comrade said, slightly lighter.

"Yes." North's pockets were empty now, almost all of the milk candies that had been slipped in there at some point without him noticing handed out. Many of the children hadn't been capable of chewing the solid candy, but the ones that were had been overjoyed to receive it.

He opened his mouth, then looked away.

"The kids were thankful for it."

China smiled. "I'm glad."

North exhaled, then made his way over to the orphans. They all turned to look at him, just as wide-eyed as earlier. But he knew they still had to be wary about him snapping again.

"Comrade Korea, look what Big Brother gave me!"

North blinked as a frog was thrust in his face by one of the girls. Its bulbous yellow eyes stared at him, glistening sides swelling in indignation at the stubby fingers wrapped tightly around them. He blinked. It blinked back.

"You can't keep that."

"But he's my friend!" the girl- Su-jin- protested, stroking the animal's rubbery head.

"And you can play with him tomorrow," Hae cut in. "But he's got a family to go home to. You don't want his mom an' dad to miss him, do you?"

Su-jin looked down at the frog, her face falling. "No," she said quietly, trundling over to the river to set it down gently on the edge. "Bye-bye, Mister Frog. Give your parents a big hug."

North cast a look back at China, who pretended he didn't see it.

"Come on," he said to the children. "Comrades North and South Hwanghae and I will accompany you all back to the orphanage."

He tried not to see the expressions that bloomed on his provinces'

faces as he said their names. They shouldn't be happy to know they would be becoming official. He didn't understand how they could be.

"I'll get there first!" In-su announced, taking off immediately.

"No, I will!" a boy yelled, charging after him.

"Children, don't run! Stay together!" Oh Ryong-jin called as she hustled after them, her skirt held up in her hands.

North shook his head, going to follow them.

"Um, Comrade Korea." A shy voice stopped him, and he looked down to see the boy from earlier, Myong-ho.

His jaw tightened.

"Did you see my brother?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes," North answered after a moment.

"Did you tell him I miss him?"

"Yes." He hadn't heard it. The doctors said he would never be able to.

"And is he...?" Myong-ho trailed off, unable to finish.

North couldn't lie. He couldn't give him hope that his brother would be who he had been ever again when he knew he couldn't.

Instead he said, "When Min-ho gets out of the hospital, you're going to need to look out for him."

Myong-ho's bottom lip trembled, but he nodded seriously. "I will. We always look out for each other."

Pain lanced through North, followed by more of the bombs. Wordlessly, he led the younger brother after the others.

The nearby orphanage was a cluster of chosonjips behind a stone wall, a family estate seized from landlords when the Agrarian

Reform came to Kaesong, repurposed to keep Korea's children safe. The original building was also still in use, but the city had too many orphans for it to serve alone.

The windows were all dark, except for a candle flickering from one.

The children stumbled through the gates on tired legs, yawns engulfing their faces. It wasn't that late yet, and the sun was still lingering beyond the western hills, but for young kids that had spent the day playing, it was time for bed. The excitement at seeing their Provincehumans and Countryhuman that had been buzzing in them all day was wearing off, leaving them to crash. North was more than familiar with that from all the villages they had visited, both before and after Liberation.

Hae carried in a young boy on her back, even though North knew it had to be aggravating her burns.

What had that pause been earlier, when he had asked if Hwanghae was being bombed? Had she been going to lie, to try and hide it from him? Did she think he couldn't handle it, that he needed her to fucking shelter him, like Hwang had done by not telling him what was happening with her in Sincheon?

The idea made his chest tighten with that hot, uncomfortable feeling, and his stomach churn.

It was good that she was finally becoming less blindly obedient, he tried to remind himself. He was proud that she had been able to stand in front of him and demand they be made their own provinces, instead of just accepting his vague answer of 'I'll think about it' without pushing. But between her stunt with Kangwon in the hospital, keeping that cat, and that pause...

Hae was the one province he could trust not to lie to him. She had her loopholes, but if he pressed, she would always cave. She knew he could handle whatever she had to say, she told him everything because she *knew* he was strong enough to deal with it. If she started lying to him now...

North tore his eye away as she woke the boy up, setting him on his feet.

She hadn't lied. She had told him, that was all that mattered. She still believed in him.

"Comrades," he said to the children when they were all inside the walls. "I came here today to make sure you were all recovering well from what the enemy, what *America,* has done to you."

He couldn't help the inflection, or noticing thay In-su flinched at it.

"And I'm glad to see that you are," he continued, hiding the shame in his voice as he scanned them, burnt faces and marred flesh, but bright, clear eyes. "It heartens me to see that the enemy has failed to make you live in fear."

He made sure to look the girl Hae had presented him with in the face as he said it, catching her eye from behind the curtain of black hair.

"You are all resilient, brave, and bright," he said. "Everything that Korean sons and daughters should be. The children of a country are its future. And after today, I am very hopeful for ours."

His thoughts went to the children in the south, left homeless by the culling of their parents, or buried with them, the living ones forced to scrape by, surrounded by foreign invaders and Rhee's butcher police. He tried to rein them in.

"And I promise," he said, keeping his voice firm, not letting it fill with the anger the children might not understand wasn't directed at them. "I will avenge your families."

North wasn't going to let whatever 'United Nations' committee that would be watching Korea like a hawk after the ceasefire stop him from punishing those that deserved to be punished. Any of the southern soldiers or police that had slaughtered his people would pay the price for it, whether they had done it with their own hands or issued the order. And as for the Yankees...

If America was going to keep refusing to sign, then North would gladly keep making his men bleed for it.

"It won't bring them back," he said, watching some of the young faces fall, like they'd been holding on to some ember of hope that it would, that all they needed to see their parents again was the blood of those who had taken them from them. "But it will bring peace, and it will keep it. You will not grow up under the shadow of war forever."

Not like their parents, born under the Occupation and living under its darkness for most or all of their lives. Some of these children were so young that they likely couldn't remember the time before the bombs had fallen clearly, and thousands had been born in the two years since America had invaded that knew nothing but war.

It was unacceptable. But he wouldn't let their futures carry the same stain. He couldn't.

"One day the children of Korea will be able to live carefree lives again. I promise."

He could see Hae's grin off to the side, glowing like an early star.

'Next year.'

He didn't know if she believed that, or if she was mocking him.

He let all the children, both those that had been at the river and those here, gather around him to sleepily say goodbye, while he reminded them to behave for their caregivers and focus on growing up well. As they were escorted into the dormitories, his thoughts wandered to the children he had sent out of the country.

The Socialist Bloc countries had remained professional in their official correspondences to him on Liberation Day, but SH had found their personal ones in the chest and given them to him the day after. North still refused to read the letters, but he couldn't ignore those from the other Countryhumans. Those whose lands he'd sent his orphans to had assured him they were doing well, and settling in fine. Poland had even said he visited them personally.

North didn't like that. He didn't want foreign countries anywhere near his youth, especially not when ones like Romania and Hungary were still in the process of being re-educated by their people after what they had done.

But it had been... relieving to know they were well. That at least some of Korea's children were able to wake up and go to sleep under peaceful skies.

Even if it should have been *all* of them, under their own skies.

He shook his head, calling, "Wait," before the last child could go in for the night.

In-su looked back uncertainly, and North gestured him over.

"Korea-"

"Go," he ordered the other three. "I'll be out in a minute."

His provinces hesitated, then left. North stared at China until he sighed and followed them.

In-su padded across the cobbles of the courtyard, stopping in front of him with his head slightly lowered, like he thought he was about to be scolded again.

North grit his teeth. After a moment, he said, "I am sorry."

The boy glanced up, startled. "What? I mean pardon?"

"I shouldn't have snapped at you," he made himself say. "I'm sorry."

In-su looked over at Oh Ryong-jin standing off next to a small vegetable patch, almost like he was expecting her to reprimand him for making their Countryhuman apologize to him, then back at him.

"Um." He fidgeted with the stick he'd brought with him. "Comrade Hwang said the South is your brother."

North's jaw feathered. "He is."

"Then... I'm sorry, too," he said, lifting his head. "I shouldn't have said that to ya. I always get- got upset when people picked on In-chol, so I know why ya got mad."

'Don't fucking excuse it.'

But he couldn't argue with a child about why he didn't deserve grace. And he hadn't been mad about the threat because South was his brother. He'd been mad because he was half of In-su's country. Just like any patriotic Korean, regardless of political leanings, supported North, they should support him, too. It wasn't about South being his brother, it was about him being half of Korea.

"It's fine," North said. "You will make a fine soldier someday, Rim In-su."

The boy's face twitched, unable to stifle his smile. "I will! I'll grow up, and I'll get revenge for In-chol and everyone. And, um, the South, too."

North hoped he never got the chance. He hoped he would only ever wear the uniform in peacetime, guarding their borders and skies to make sure no one else needed revenge.

It was *his* job to get justice for their families now.

North glanced around, eye skirting away from Oh Ryong-jin as he reached into his pocket, holding something out for the boy.

"Here," he said, trying not to flinch as the short fingers brushed his. "Take this. Don't brag to the other children."

In-su gaped at the one candy he hadn't left with the hospital staff. "Milk candy from Comrade Korea? *And* a tank ride?"

North blinked. "What?"

But the boy was already sprinting for the dormitories, definitely about to brag to the other children.

"Thank ya, Comrade Korea!" he called. "Bye! Kill lots of traitors and Yankees!"

The door slammed.

North blew out a breath, not letting his shoulders relax.

Grit crunched under Oh Ryong-jin's rubber shoes as she came over.

"I'm sorry about him," she murmured, bowing her head. "We've been following the guidance about making sure the children know they aren't to blame the South or our brothers and sisters down there, and most of them understand that. But..."

She reached up, tucking a stray hair behind her ear as she gazed at the dark dormitory. "You know we're from Seoul. In-su's family all died when it burned. He was the only survivor."

North's eye closed.

"So it's a little more-"

"When?" he cut in.

"Pardon?"

"Which time that Seoul burned?"

It had burned when they first Liberated it, and the American planes swept in to destroy Yongsan District and everything Rhee's clique had left behind, and it had burned constantly after, worse when North retreated, and America had tried to leave nothing for the KPA to take with them. It had burned for almost every single day they held it.

And it had burned in 1951, before North's army had ever even reached it.

"Last winter," Oh Ryong-jin replied. "When it was freed for the second time."

His throat swelled shut.

"In-su's father was too stubborn to evacuate," she said sadly. "They were at home when... Well."

Well.

"I was heading for the mountains after my husband..." Her mouth twisted, her head tipping in a helpless little shrug. "Sold me out. I found him wandering around, covered in burns. I figured it was better to die trying to get him to safety instead of hiding and waiting for the frost or Rhee's hunters to get me."

North's larynx clenched, working almost painfully until he got the words out. "You made the right choice."

"Mm." She smiled. "In-su is very hardy. But he also takes Syngman Rhee and his crooks more personally. I should've been doing a better job at making sure he knows who the real enemy is."

North looked away as she bowed in apology, promising she would do a better job at educating him.

"But he really is a good kid," she said fondly, glancing over at the muffled voices coming from the children's room.

"I can tell," North managed.

He bid her and the other minders goodnight, then stood in front of the gate, alone and numb.

People had died when Seoul burned. He had known that. America had only issued the evacuation order less than a full day before bombing it, and his troops and vehicles had clogged the roads out. North had found the bodies in the hills, huddled together and crammed into crevices, and the ones in the city, lying broken under shattered rubble. Whether from frost or fire, his people had died.

But it had been one thing to haul an old man with ash in his hair out from the cobbled-together shack he'd been living in the ruins of Yongsan while his granddaughter wailed over him, and silently curse America and his butchers for what they had done, and promise her he would avenge him. It was another to hear what had happened to In-su's family, and know that he wasn't the only one to curse.

America had given the instructions. His pilots had carried them

out.

But South had given the order.

Was it fair to tell In-su that he wasn't the enemy? Was it fair to look him or that daughter or any of those whose loved ones had perished in the blitz in the eyes and tell them that it was wrong to view the man who had given the order to burn their homes as the enemy, that they were traitors for even thinking it?

But South *wasn't* the enemy, he was being manipulated, threatened, he had to have been. America wouldn't have told the full truth in that letter, he must have-

Yet North's mind kept crashing up against that wall- '잘못했어.' The thing he'd clung to so desperately had become an obstruction that stabbed needles into his brain.

South wouldn't have risked leaving that message unless he felt truly guilty. And he wouldn't have felt truly guilty unless he had a reason to. North had broken him of that during their years in the shack, so that he wouldn't be devoured by guilt after another escape attempt had failed because he was too slow or too weak. All those failures had been *his* fault, and his brother had to know that.

And he had to know that now. He hadn't said 'jalmothaesso' the night he cut out his eye, when he told him he was sorry about the Communists murdered in Suncheon and Jeju and so many other places, but 'it had to be done.' He had used 'mian,' because he hadn't had a hand in it, and he knew it wasn't his fault. Just like he'd used 'mian' at the Raktong, apologizing for his eye. He hadn't felt truly guilty, because America had made him do it. Even if he should have *known* that if he just told North what he had been sent to do, his brother would have taken him back to Pyongyang and kept him safe, and they could have joined together to speak out against Rhee and his 'republic,' like he had said. He should have known he would keep him safe.

South had given the order. Even if America had planted the seed, he knew his brother had played a big enough part of his own volition for it to drive him to hide that note.

North's brother had burned Seoul. He had killed the Rim family and hundreds more like them. He had made thousands of their people homeless, and killed them.

And for the first time, North wondered if they would forgive him for that.

The idea that they wouldn't hadn't even been an option to him- of course they would, South was their country. They would forgive him, just like he had. They would understand that Korea would never do something like that unless he had to, and that he was sorry.

But his provinces hadn't forgiven him. And what was sorry to a boy who would never see his brother again? What was sorry to a woman sobbing over the mangled body of the last person she had left in the world? What was sorry to the refugees driven into the hills in the dead of winter to starve and freeze among the mass graves? What was 'sorry' to the seventy thousand and counting on Jeju Island, or in Suncheon or Yeosu or Busan, or scattered across the hills of Taejon, those hundreds of thousands of Communists and 'Communists' who had been exterminated, cut open, imprisoned, made to dig their own graves only for one of their own Countryhumans to say it 'had to be done?'

South hadn't known. He hadn't known that blowing up the Hangang bridge would kill hundreds, or that their people were being massacred. But he *should* have. And he shouldn't have gone back to America, shouldn't have Commanded their provinces, shouldn't have stood in the middle of Busan while it was announced that Rhee had won again, like he supported him, like he was *glad.* He shouldn't have...

North reached under his eyepatch, running his fingertip along his sagging lower lid, the bandages rough against the delicate skin.

He had forgiven South. He had to- he was the other half of their country. He was his brother. But if he told their people that...

"Korea!" Hae's voice echoed from outside the gate. "It's gettin' dark out!"

Hwang hushed her, but added, "If you want to get updates from Comrade Nam Il before we go, we should get moving."

He did. And had to get back to Pyongyang tonight to look over more letters from his people for problems to solve, then take Kangwon and Chagang to the front tomorrow.

North exhaled, then slid open the gate, grumbling, "Be less noisy."

"Oops," Hae exaggeratedly whispered. "Sorry Korea."

"Are you sure?" China asked, smiling. "It might be even harder for someone to follow me."

North hunched under his embarrassment. "I still don't know what you're talking about."

"M*hmmmmmmm."*

"Korea." Hae tried to snag his sleeve as they crossed the open ground back to the city proper. He shook her off, skin prickling. Undeterred, she asked, "Did you apologize to In-su?"

"None of your business."

She nodded, satisfied. "Good. He really din't mean to upset you."

'That's the damn problem.'

"En, when I said the secret to being good with kids was to treat them like dogs, I didn't mean the yelling part," China said.

North's eye flicked to him, then he muttered to his provinces, "Don't tell South Hamgyong about this."

Hwang lifted a knowing brow. "Because she'll use it as more proof that you're hopeless with children?"

North didn't answer.

"Don't worry, Korea, ah'll never tell," Hae chirped. "On purpose. Do ya want to hear about all the kids?"

Her and Hwang launched into talking about the children- what they were like, what they thought they would be good at when they were older, what supplies and improvements the orphanage could use, how skilled Ge-hyok was at go, and how Hye-mi had a future in art. They left out her injuries and anything unpleasant, but North would accept that here. Peasants were coming in from the fields with the soldiers that had been helping them, and people were cooking in their homes, the smell of steamed grains and vegetables drifting from kitchen windows and open-air stoves. They didn't need to hear about the maimed children they already saw most days.

North let his provinces talk, their voices overlapping as they spoke over one another and suggested better words for each other, South Hwanghae's sickeningly sugary, squeaky rural drawl and North Hwanghae's thinner, more refined cadence, one of them making animated expressions as she skipped along, and the other talking more with his hands, almost hitting North as he swept one sideways, excited by how the children had enjoyed his story about that bear.

It was good he wouldn't be unifying them. If they were one...

Hwanghae would never shut up. North didn't think he would ever get a moment of silence again.

He couldn't help but look at them as the sun set, and darkness settled over Kaesong.

Hwang didn't have that irritating look on his face anymore, and he wasn't glancing at him more than he should. And the constant looks Hae threw his way, like she was checking he was still there, didn't hide anything under her enthusiasm.

China hadn't told them about South. In this moment, he could believe he wouldn't. Anything he could gain wouldn't be worth it to sow division between North and his provinces now, as America's steel production recovered and the talks held on by a thread. The final draft had been entirely settled on the 6th- the armistice was now finalized, but they still had to deal with the Americans' refusal to free their POWs. He wouldn't add a spanner on this side of the

works as well. North should be sure that his provinces wouldn't let their dislike of South get in the way of peace and Reunification, but...

He glanced at them again, at Hae, who had never looked at him with anything but... adoration, even when he was criticizing her or screaming at her for feeding that dog, and Hwang, whose eyes had held that traitorous hope earlier.

North had forgiven his brother for what he had done to him, and their people. He had to. But their provinces *hadn't* forgiven him for what he had done to them, and some of their people hadn't forgiven him for what had happened to them under his watch. If they knew what all he had truly done, if they knew that North forgave him for all of it...

Would they forgive *him?*

'On summer days in Kaesong, I used to watch the Korean children swimming. In any group, at least half were covered with napalm burns. Ears which were shapeless blobs melted into the rest of the face, arms and legs with great rubbery, raised weals on them, and one boy who seemed to have stepped out of Hugo's L'Homme qui Rit with a fixed, terrible smile in a distorted mouth which would never close. And these were the ones which could run about and swim. There were tens of thousands of others under the rubble of schools and homes which could never again run about. There were cases in the hospital which were too terrible to turn loose among other children, faces which were dead, horrible masks, eyes that were gone, staring, red eyes between eyelids that would never close, eyes hidden by eyelids that would never open, and where one could not distinguish where upper and lower lids met, limbs on which the flesh had been fused into the rest of the body, hands and feet that were twisted, useless claws, flesh that had been cooked and boiled- mute testimony to American 'humanitarianism.' After all, these children would only grow up to be Communists.'
-Wilfred Burchett, 'This Monstrous War'

Americans say North Koreans are raised to hate them. Maybe they should consider why telling the truth about what they have done to them could make someone do that.

Holding Back The Flood

"Uncle!"

As soon as the rest of the 2nd Division of the Second Corps dispersed, a female soldier with short roan hair headed for Kangwon. Chagang knew who she was before his cousin said her name.

"Comrade Choe Kang-ok." He let her embrace him in the rainy mountain village. "It's good to see you again."

The soldier grinned. "You too, uncle. And Comrade Chagang and Uncle Korea."

She turned to Korea, half-lifting her arms. He tensed. Kangwon stepped half in between them, subtly stopping her.

"Don't call me that," Korea ordered. He looked annoyed. Chagang didn't know if he was.

Choe Kang-ok grinned. "If you say so, uncle."

Their Countryhuman huffed.

"How are you doing?" Kangwon asked, eyes scanning her. They had heavy shadows under them, the same shadows she had.

The woman smiled at him. "I'm doing great. Even if I'd rather be back on the line."

The Second Corps had been shifted off of the front to reconstitute itself from the chipping away it had taken from the American 25th Division over the past months. The 'National Defense Army' divisions in the eastern sector posed no threat to the First and Third, so they were in reserve now. They could easily be mobilized to reinforce the other corps, or moved to replace the coastal defenders if their fresher divisions were needed at the front.

They would be. All their intelligence indicated the Americans were planning an offensive. Van Fleet was overtly asking permission to push into the north in force, and while Mark Clark had denied him so far, he didn't seem to have as much caution as his predecessor, and would likely soon give in to the desire to be the commander to conquer Korea for his Countryhuman. If they didn't accept America's demand to surrender their prisoners of war, he would try. And the Korean People's Army needed to be ready.

"Don't begrudge a break," Kangwon advised. "They're what keeps you healthy enough to stay fighting."

He looked at Korea. Pointedly.

He sounded more nonchalant than he felt. Chagang couldn't see his colours, but he knew that. His cousin couldn't say he was relieved his old comrade's daughter was no longer in active combat with Korea here, but he had been fretting about her for months, asking Chagang about the situation on the eastern front whenever he took his blood. And for the casualty reports.

"I know," Choe Kang-ok said. "And we've been fighting the Yanks and their puppets for awhile. If the war ended tomorrow, I'd feel like I avenged Abeoji at least a little."

Kangwon's eyes dipped. Korea's jaw feathered. Chagang's temples strained, an invisible pressure demanding to be let in.

"I knew Choe Bong-nam," Kangwon told his daughter. "The best way you can avenge him now is to help drive our country forward."

The soldier saluted, her face solemn. "I will. We'll win this war, and I'll help build the country my father always dreamed of."

Korea's teeth were grinding. Chagang's eyes slitted.

"We're leaving now," their Countryhuman said, nothing of what he must be feeling in his voice.

"Are you all heading to the front?" Choe Kang-ok asked, wiping warm rain from her face.

"Just Korea and Chagang," Kangwon supplied. "I'm staying here for our injured comrades, and to do check-ups for the villagers."

And because Korea didn't want him so close to the front. He didn't want Chagang either. The province had only been able to convince him to postpone his deployment to Kanggye by saying he wanted updated information from the ground.

Korea was still letting the vow he had made to him stifle his usefulness, when it was supposed to do the opposite. Chagang would not allow that.

"Anything I can help with?" Choe Kang-ok asked Kangwon. "My unit deploys for anti-aircraft watch later, but I can get free for now. *If* a high-ranking uncle gave me permission."

She batted her eyes. Kangwon looked at Korea, then nodded at her.

"Sure, I could use a hand."

"We'll be back either late in two days or early in three," Korea said, already striding away. "Depending on if this cloud cover holds."

A typhoon had hit the west coast, sending low, grey clouds the colour of sorrow over the Peninsula, and finally cooling off the summer heat. Heavy rain had been soaking 'their' Jeep's canvas for the entire drive to Kangwon province. It meant they hadn't had to wait for the cover of night to leave, and could head to the combat zone in the daylight.

"Drive careful," Kangwon said.

Chagang's head was pounding so hard, his eyes narrowed to almost nothing, that he almost didn't catch his cousin's look.

'Keep him safe.'

He forced himself to blink in agreement.

Neither of them liked that Korea had wanted to visit the front on his own. He had even insisted that China stay in Pyongyang.

Acquiescing to bringing Chagang with him couldn't be taken as assurance that he wouldn't do anything rash. They had all been with him in Kimhwa after all.

He had promised not to undertake missions on his own anymore. Chagang believed him. But he also knew how strong Korea's emotions could surge, and what that could lead to.

"Take care, uncle!" Choe Kang-ok called.

Korea paused, rain plinking off his epaulets. Chagang watched his shoulders hunch under them.

"Comrade Choe Kang-ok," he said, turning back for a moment. "Stay safe."

She grinned, and gave a small, cocky salute. "No promises."

Behind his back, Korea's bandaged fingers sunk into his wrists. Chagang's head throbbed as he followed him back to the Jeep.

Their soldiers waved to them from the doorways of the village houses they were staying in, and from under canvas canopies. Korea had already spent an hour inspecting the men and women, praising them for their efforts, as well as congratulating them on another Liberation Day past. Now they wished them well as they left.

"Watch out for Yankees, Comrade Korea!"

"Tell our comrades in the Third and First to keep workin' hard!"

"Happy late Liberation Day!"

They all appeared worn, with ragged uniforms and haggard faces after being pounded with artillery and air strikes, and repelling enemy probes for months on end. But their tired smiles were bright.

Chagang yearned to see if the air around them was filled with red and shades of gold. But he couldn't. He couldn't let the colours in anymore.

He had been coping with repressing them in times of crisis, on the

battlefield and during air raids, and on not letting them overwhelm him during his daily tasks of war room planning, assisting refugees, and helping factories operate around the blackouts. But then Korea had returned from his mission in the south with that terrible raging storm of furious red and ashen sorrow, filled with roiling clouds of sickly discomfort and unease, and murky green dread that had kept growing deeper and more eye-aching, flashing with lightning strikes of ochre and chartreuse, flaxen mahogany that kept squeezing its way out, and an unnervingly strong purple-grey. Chagang had hoped it would dissipate after China recovered and he stopped avoiding him, but it had not. The guilt and shame had faded slightly, but that was all. The storm had only been growing stronger when he had finally managed to cut it off.

Something had happened down south. Something worse than China getting shot. But Korea hadn't said anything, and would not.

It had gotten to be too much. Waking up choked by the black smoke billowing off of North Hamgyong like a house fire, and all the pain his other male cousins were filling the room with, before SH burst in to wake them up with her crackling aura of rage and inky blue-black that drew the same colour from her brother and pierced straight through Chagang's eyelids like hot needles. Sitting with his cousins and the Liaos, unable to taste his rations past the clouds of flax-mahogany and discomfort, and those around the Hamgyongs that hurt him somewhere deeper than his head. And that was if Korea hadn't slept at the bunker. If he had, then it was all Chagang could do to keep his eyes open and his jaw moving. If he hadn't, then reaching the muster point was like being flash-banged, his head torn open by that localized storm. The province would rather stand on the deck of a sampan in the middle of the typhoon ravaging their coast. At least he could try and escape it.

He spent most days at Korea's side in the war room, his head being split open by the dread that only grew heavier each time they were told another day had passed with America refusing to sign, and the anger that had already filled his mouth with its metallic tang before his expedition. Chagang couldn't usually taste the colours. But Korea's had started to taste like blood.

He couldn't leave his side if he did not have to. If his

Countryhuman was walking the streets when an air raid could happen, Chagang had to be there. Hae had told them about the one on July 11th, and how Korea had tried to head off on his own in the middle of it, and risked himself to save her. The same thing he had done to Chagang, shielding him with his body on that first test atom bomb run. He still needed someone to restrain him, until his body accepted the same thing that his mind had, that as their Countryhuman, it was *him* that mattered. So he had to remain by his side, in the devastating radius of that emotional typhoon.

It was all just too much. His cousins' pain and grief, the constant clinging sorrow that clung to Kangwon ever since he had lost his brother, and the exhaustion that cloaked him as he took his blood, Korea's raging maelstrom, the ever-present fog of dread and olive and grey and discomfort of hunger that almost everyone around him was carrying, from military officers to recruits to refugees and civilians, and their politicians. He couldn't take it anymore. They filled his head and blotted his thinking. He had found himself having to be called twice before he heard again. That couldn't happen. Korea needed his support now more than ever. He needed him to be a pillar.

And Chagang didn't want to see the negative emotions anymore. There were too many. They made him feel sicker than his sympathetic fever did, especially the Hamgyongs' and Korea's. He didn't want to see his family thrust those blue-black spears at each other, or the grief and hurt that shrouded the city after another air strike, or that pall of murky green around his Countryhuman when he couldn't do anything about them.

They hurt too much.

So he had to shut them all away. He could not let only the positive ones in. Not when the war had tinged most of them with grey or olive, even at their happiest. And like a battle line, if the enemy was allowed to breach at one point, it could cause the entire formation to crumble.

So he was blocking them all out now. He had finally managed to do it. He had just needed to picture the shield that he wanted to be for Korea, and hold it up in his mind. He refused to let Hae's cloud

of pink past it to soothe him even when they were alone. He refused to let the General's gentle golden glow of hope comfort him. And he refused to see what he knew their soldiers were looking at Korea with now.

He had only let his diligence slacken on Liberation Day. If he hadn't let down his mental walls at Korea's speech, he was sure their people's flood of love and wild hope would have burst a blood vessel in his brain.

And he had needed to see it. Even if Korea couldn't be, Chagang needed to be reassured by the creamy gold and bursts of azure-indigo. It was necessary for believing in victory.

He had also tentatively tried to look at his cousins when they received the letters from CCCP. He had thought it would be safe. That there would be only bright emotions that didn't hurt. And there had been, on them.

But Korea had only grown darker. Twisted tendrils of ochre, chartreuse, and ash had been lashing at the words in his hands, trying to tear them to pieces.

Chagang did not want to see that. He would have liked to see the colours coming from the strangers around the world as they penned their letters, but he did not want to see the blue twined in with the red of frustration start to darken like ink had been spilled in it. He didn't want to know if the chartreuse wouldn't be strong enough to strangle it next time.

So he held his shield up against all the colours coming from their soldiers as he climbed into the Jeep with Korea. His Countryhuman started the engine, and they drove up the narrow mountain road.

The Kumgang Mountains looked dull. Even the emeralds and viridians of the pines still clinging to the stark rocks above. The lack of emotional colours drained the real colour from everything, like their absence had somehow made the world darker.

'Unpleasant.'

Chagang could feel Korea's aura wanting to pierce his skull. He sat beside him like a fire trapped in a cage, yearning to burn away the steel around it. The province kept his eyes on the muddy path, trying to keep the shield he had built up.

His guards didn't help. Kim Chul-sop and Kye Byung-cheol were clinging to the sides of the Jeep to survey the rolling mountain ridges. The men had used to be reconnaissance officers in the KPRA, and were always shrouded in clouds of wary green-yellow and anxious olive. Chagang was sure Korea had chosen the two most alert and paranoid bodyguards for him to make sure he wouldn't be taken.

They were also in love. This was not Chagang's business. It had just used to relieve his headache slightly.

But the red and gold hid when they were at work. When they were guarding their province, there were only the drab, tense colours as they stood watch for enemies. They pushed at his temples now, sensing the weakness in his defenses caused by the force of Korea's feelings. Chagang's eyes strained with the effort of keeping them out, but he kept them forward.

This was going to be another long ride.

And it was. Two hours to the front, made longer by the washed-out road they had to stop to help repair. It was late afternoon when they arrived at the farthest eastern point of the battleline, south of Kosong and north of Oemyon-ri, one of the villages marked 'destroyed' on their war room maps. The First Corps was headquartered in the mountain mass west of Nam River, but Korea wanted to visit the entire line, so they would be starting east and moving west.

Korea cut the engines in a narrow ravine where a few supply trucks were parked. Before he got out, he turned to Chagang.

"Chagang," he said seriously. "I appreciate that you know how to keep your mouth shut. Continue to do that."

His province dipped his head, pleased. He couldn't have talked on

the ride if he wanted to. But he also didn't want to. They had already gone over the reports he had missed while in Kaesong.

He followed Korea from the Jeep, his guards keeping watch as they used the tarp the men overseeing the vehicles gave them to cover it.

The land was more level here, mostly decimated forests and low hills. Their 6th Division was holding on to the last of the major heights before Kam Lake. It gave them a good view of the flatter no-man's land between them and the territory held by Rhee's 5th.

As they climbed the hill, the sound of artillery firing became louder. Korea lifted his head, like the extra centimeter could help him see over the crest.

"I do not think we have to worry about probes today," Chagang said. "It's too wet."

The weather hadn't just grounded the planes that would usually be dropping bombs over this section of the front. Ground operations would be halted, too, leaving just artillery barrages to worry about. He was glad. It meant it was safer for Korea to be here.

His Countryhuman made a noise of agreement. The lines on his face didn't smooth.

"Comrade Korea, Comrade Chagang!" a voice hailed from the top of the height, and an NCO came hustling down, snapping into a salute in front of them.

"Unit Commander-"

"Han Eun-gol," Korea interrupted. "I remember." He eyed the embroidered bars on his epaulets. "You're in charge of your unit now?"

The man had lit up as he remembered his name. Now he dimmed.

"Comrade Ko died in an air strike, and Comrade Kim went a month ago," he reported quietly. "I was the one left with the most experience."

Korea nodded stiffly. "You'll do well."

Han Eun-gol cleared his throat, saying more professionally, "My apologies no one was here to greet you, we weren't notified of your arrival."

"At ease," Korea said. "This is an informal visit, and we're moving clandestinely."

"Understood. Are you here to survey the situation?"

"In part," Korea replied. "We're also here to congratulate you on Liberation Day."

Chagang had never been good with expressions that weren't his family's. But he thought Han Eun-gol looked surprised.

"Oh," he said. "Of course. I should've expected that. I just thought- You visited on Foundation Day last year."

He sounded pleased, the way Hwang did when he was trying to act professional, but Chagang could see emerald and gold excitement fizzling around him. But blocking out Korea's colours suddenly became more painful.

"There were concerns with me travelling the front last Liberation Day, due to the delicate state the peace talks were in," he told the soldier, though Chagang knew that wasn't true. "I had to postpone my visit. It won't happen again."

"It's okay if it has to," Han Eun-gol said quickly. "We still receive the broadcasts. And Comrade Korea's safety comes before all else."

Chagang tried not to narrow his eyes as the pressure in his skull increased.

"Would you like me to muster the other unit commanders?" the soldier asked.

"No need." Korea walked past him. Chagang followed.

"Ah, Comrade Generals, I don't think you should head up the

height," Han Eun-gol quickly said, hastening after them. "It isn't safe."

"I'm here to visit *all* my soldiers."

Korea sounded tense. So Chagang fought past the straining in his head to say, "It raises morale for them to see us."

"That's certainly true," Han Eun-gol conceded. "But please be careful. I'll go ahead to let them know you're coming." He hustled off, calling back, "And watch your footing- it's slippery!"

Chagang and Korea were already covered in mud from assisting their soldiers in fixing the road. Falling face-first into it wouldn't change much. But seeing them do that could be demoralizing.

Unless you were South Pyongan. Then it was the opposite.

"Stay low," Korea ordered him as they worked their way up the muddy, barren slopes. "We don't want to draw an assault."

Chagang nodded, keeping an eye on his Countryhuman as he climbed. His chest was rising purposefully slow. The path up the hill wasn't steep. He shouldn't be labouring for breath.

He knew the fog of exhaustion around him wouldn't have gone away since he had forced the colours back. And he also knew he wasn't eating any better. Though he had never been able to tell that by his aura.

He had always thought it was strange. Korea hadn't eaten well even in those months after Chagang had been formed and before the war. But he never had that dense, grey-yellow clawing at him. He had thought maybe it was because the General made him take meals in private.

But he knew he wasn't eating now. And while that muddled, impenetrable hunger around his cousins only grew stronger, even now that they were eating most of their rations again, and his own hollow stomach shrank in, Korea remained free of it. He carried the thin wisps of empathetic hunger, but not the thicker cloak of his own. It wasn't like the pain that welled out of him before being

choked off. It just wasn't there.

That meant he either didn't feel it strongly enough to be seen, or he didn't feel it at all. Neither one made sense to Chagang. Not when he could see his legs shaking slightly as they reached the top of the height. And not when he hadn't eaten after he returned last night, or before they left this morning. Chagang had, but he was still starving. Kangwon was, too. He didn't need to see the colours to know that.

So how could Korea not be?

His Countryhuman turned sharply to look at him. "What?"

Chagang's eyes flicked past him. Korea followed his gaze.

From this height, they could see out to the East Sea. The slate grey waters, the pale strip of sand, and the few spindly trees that remained from the forests that had once bordered it. A large blackened spot, like a patch of despair, marred the shore, lined with rubble that could have been flotsam swept in from sea. The only trace left of the fishing village of Songdojin-ri that had once stood there was a few ramshackle houses.

He shouldn't have drawn Korea's attention to it. A lance of hot agony shot through his skull as he stopped to gaze out at it, making him close his eyes.

But their Countryhuman had been getting more aggressive about staring lately. Even looking at him for a few seconds on the way here had gotten Kangwon snapped at in front of all four of their guards.

After a moment, Korea wordlessly continued on.

Chagang stumbled slightly as he followed. He turned his head away from him to try and keep his footing even.

He couldn't see it with the bulk of the hill in the way, but he knew another ruined town flanked it. Taegang-ri. None of the villages near the front had been allowed to stay standing. Their maps were an endless list of place names with *'DESTROYED'* written under

them. Choe Yong-gon had learned not to add a new one until Korea left the room.

"Comrades!" Han Eun-gol appeared from the ground, moving close to it as he beckoned them over.

Chagang hadn't realized he was so near. Not being able to see people's colours was inconvenient. He needed to become more vigilant naturally.

He and Korea darted across the open terrain to slide into a large foxhole. Kim Chul-sop followed, but Kye Byung-cheol said, "I'll keep watch outside."

His other bodyguard couldn't say it, so Chagang ordered, "Be careful. Stay close."

"Yes, Comrade General." He saluted, and his silhouette disappeared from the mouth of the hole.

Kim Chul-sop's face didn't change. Chagang knew any concern he might have felt would be hidden even if he could see.

He also knew both of the men would choose his life over their lover's. They were professionals that wouldn't have accepted the assignment if they couldn't. It wasn't something he enjoyed thinking about. He had thought about asking Korea to assign someone else to him, but he couldn't explain why, and he knew his Countryhuman would demand to know. He would just have to make sure he never put the men in a position where they had to choose.

Another reason he had to get better at holding back the emotions.

"Comrade Generals," one of their soldiers greeted them, and the five men in the foxhole stood on their knees to salute. The roof was too low to stand.

"Get in, get in." An older man with cropped hair beckoned them away from the entrance. "Kim, put down your jacket so our Comrade Country and Province don't have to sit on the dirt with us."

"No need," Korea said shortly, stopping the other soldier from disrobing. "We're just as used to battlefield living as you are."

He was getting even more impatient about being out of combat. Not a good thing.

"How are you all faring?" Korea asked after getting their names and ranks, squatting on his haunches.

"Minimal losses when they've repulsed our probes, Comrade Korea," Han Eun-gol answered. "They tried to take a foothill a couple days ago, but we pushed them back."

"And how are *you* faring?"

"Damn good, Comrade Korea," a soldier said with a rakish grin, one of his comrades hissing at him to watch his mouth.

"Morale's been flagging a little," Han Eun-gol admitted, shamefully. "But you and General Kim Il-sung's broadcasts on Liberation Day brought it back." He patted his damp uniform. "This rain's done wonders, too. Never thought I'd say that."

Rain often dimmed people's moods to a soft grey, especially soldiers. But the war had made it the opposite. They were able to get a rest day today because of it. Not to mention all the times it had aided their army on the retreat.

Chagang wanted to see if there really was a faint gleam of relieved teal or emerald around their comrades, or if Han Eun-gol was just trying to reassure their Countryhuman. It would be useful to know.

But he could already feel the strain at being in this small space with seven other people's emotions, one of them being Korea. He knew if he dropped his concentration for a second, he wouldn't be able to get it back again.

"Did your Liberation Day rations arrive on time?" Korea asked, even though they had received the report that said they had.

The soldiers confirmed it.

"Is there anything else you could use?"

"Not unless you can get ammunition here sooner," Han Eun-gol replied. "Our main problem is supply chain issues, but we're aware that's usually out of Supreme Command's hands."

Korea opened his mouth, but the youngest-looking soldier, Sip Il, cut him off.

"Wait, it's not completely." He leaned forward, palms flat on the damp soil. "The locals showed Division Headquarters a footpath through the mountains that we could expand to a cart track with a little road work. If we did, we could still keep at least some supplies flowing when the trucks get pinned down. But we're low on manpower, and Command says they don't have the resources to send anyone."

"Don't complain to your Countryhuman, boy," the oldest soldier scolded, smacking him lightly on the back of the head.

"No, we need complaints," Korea said. "It's how we know there are problems to fix."

Sip Il pushed his hat brim away from his eyes. "Do you think you could put in a word for us then? I think it'd be stupid to ignore it."

"I will," Korea assured. "The food situation at the front weighs heavily on Supreme Command and I. Anything we can do to lighten our soldiers' burdens should be done immediately, no matter the cost."

"We could mobilize Second Corps recruits," Chagang suggested. "It could serve as part of their training to teach them the Korean People's Army works for the people. And there are refugees in the hills that would volunteer."

Korea's jaw feathered. The extra rations would work as lures for the locals driven from their homes. But it also required getting more supplies to this part of the front.

"As soon as I return to Pyongyang, I will speak to our comrades," he told the soldiers. "We will get something worked out."

Sip Il grinned, looking pleased, even as his older comrade glowered at him.

Korea was shifting on his haunches. For a moment, Chagang thought he looked tense again.

There was a particularly loud artillery barrage from outside, followed by an explosion, and a resounding cheer from down the height. Korea's head darted towards it, staring, eye blown wide like they were under immediate attack.

To distract the soldiers, Chagang mustered the strength to ask the question Kangwon had told him to.

"Have there been any germ incidents lately?"

"None here, Comrade Chagang," one of the men reported. "But we've been keeping an eye out and following procedure."

Good. Most of the incidents at the front had been in the beginning months, before shifting to the rear. The American Command had either decided to reduce the chance of the their own troops getting sick, or wanted to avoid areas where war correspondents were present after attention had been called to their terrorism, while still crippling their supply lines, as had happened in Pupyong earlier this year. Chagang also didn't expect the artillery shells containing insects to be used in an area held by the 'NDA.' They had been proven to be weak and prone to defection in every major offensive carried out. America wouldn't trust them with his army's classified operations. Not when some of the American pilots they had captured hadn't even known what they were dropping.

Kangwon would be relieved. Hopefully the Second Corps wouldn't face any danger from the biological warfare now that they were off the front.

Korea had recovered from his alarm, turning back around.

"Keep up the good work, comrades," he ordered. "I'm sorry we can't stay longer, but we need to visit more of the front today."

"It's enough to see you at all," Sip Il said enthusiastically.

Korea twitched slightly. "I want my soldiers to know that Korea isn't blind to their efforts. I read every single report that comes across my desk. I know how hard you're all fighting to L- keep the north free."

His emotions ballooned out, crushing Chagang into the wall. But his gaze was serious as he strafed the men with it.

"Korea is very proud of you all."

Chagang inhaled, forcing his tongue to move. "Your provinces are, too."

Their soldiers ducked their heads.

The oldest one put his fist over his heart. "I've been fighting for Korea all my life. I'll keep fighting until either we're free, or I'm dead."

Korea should have reassured him they would be free before he perished. Instead he said, "Korea will remember all of its martyrs, Kim Gun-seok."

And since they could only believe in victory, Chagang added, "And we will win."

His Countryhuman gave him a narrow-eyed look he could not decipher. He tried to imagine what colour he would see tinging it, if he could. Yellow-green, maybe.

Kim Gun-seok smiled tremulously, and Han Eun-gol led them from the dug-out to visit their other positions.

They traversed the muddy hill, making their way across it by ducking from foxhole to sandbag barrier, staying out of sight of any scouts from across the desolate no-man's land, meeting with their soldiers.

They were worn and weary. It was clear even without their auras. They huddled in the holes silently, or manned the artillery with locked-jaw determination. Their faces only lifted when they saw Korea. He thought.

He was starting to realize he was worse at parsing facial expressions than he had believed. He couldn't tell if the eyebrows of the man they pulled out of the way of an artillery strike and into a dug-out were crinkled because of what had just happened, or because he had felt how light Korea was when he was on top of him. He couldn't tell if the little smile some of them gave their Countryhuman when he wasn't looking was fond or sad. Or if some of them just had naturally upturned lips. And he had no way to tell if they were lying when they said they knew the war would be over soon.

He had been leaning too heavily on his ability, enough that not using it had become a liability. It put him at a disadvantage when he couldn't tell if someone was shrouded in the ochre guilt or hate of treasonous thoughts, or if morale was low enough that they needed to intervene.

But he couldn't use it again. He had to stop letting the colours get in the way, and become capable of doing those things on his own, without them. He had to strive to be a better soldier for Korea, one that wasn't distracted by the emotions. His country and his Countryhuman needed him to be.

Korea told their comrades that he was proud of them at every position- tucked into dug-outs, firing at the enemy, erecting new defenses, or cooking the dinner rations over a fire. Chagang hoped the praise made their soldiers as violet as when he received it.

The sun had dipped below the horizon when they were done, and finally began the trek back to the Jeep. More of their comrades were waiting for them, a ragged bunch of soldiers hidden by the rocks and rain that had started to slow down, drizzling now instead of pounding.

"We wanted to thank you for coming, Comrade Korea," Han Eun-gol said, doffing his cap. "You can't know how much it means to us."

It was dark. Chagang allowed his eyes to half-slit.

"It's thanks to soldiers like you that we are able to celebrate Liberation Day at all," Korean replied, no trace of the emotions

trying to break through his province's shield in his voice. "And it is thanks to you that one day we will be able to celebrate the end of this war."

"Do you really think it will be by next year?" one of the men asked.

Chagang's head throbbed. Even without being able to see Korea's colours, that metallic taste filled his throat.

"One year or a hundred," Korea said firmly. "I know that that the Korean People's Army will keep fighting."

"Yes, Comrade General."

The soldiers saluted, and Chagang had to fight not to duck his head at whatever was trying to push through from them. The air was heavy, either with love or fear. He turned away quickly, before he could crack.

Korea stared long and hard at their comrades, then nodded, getting into the Jeep.

Han Eun-gol caught Chagang before he could join him.

"Comrade." He kept his voice low, covered by the sound of rain playing music on the rocks and leaf litter. "I'm sorry if what I say is overstepping, but..."

His deep brown eyes, the colour of comfort, lingered over Chagang's shoulder.

"Take care of Comrade Korea. He's..." The man's jaw worked for a moment before he finished, "He looked healthier last year. Remind him not to get so wrapped up in worrying about the war that he forgets to eat."

Chagang would, if he thought it would help.

"I will take care of him," he promised.

It was what a province was for. It was his purpose.

"Good." Han Eun-gol gave a tight-lipped smile, clapping him on the broad shoulder, his eyes still fixed on Korea.

There was no need to see olive crackling around him. He was clearly still anxious.

Chagang got in the passenger seat, Kye Byung-cheol hopping in after him, relaxing Kim Chul-sop.

"Two soldiers snuck away," he reported, slinging an arm over the back of the bench. "But they weren't deserting their posts, only moseying down to the creek to scrounge up a fish. We should still head to the next position quick to outrun any intel leaks."

"Did you reprimand them?" Chagang asked.

"Yep, gave them a right tongue-lashing." His comrade shook his fist menacingly.

"So I assume the poor boys are cowering with their tails between their legs now," Kim Chul-sop said dryly.

"You know it, comrade."

Good. Soldiers could not be loose in their discipline. Even if they weren't holding positions, they could not wander away. It could lead to being taken out by a covert enemy squad or sniper, or captured.

Korea started the engine, driving across the rocky terrain for the next point in the line of defense. Chagang was relieved to be away from the press of their soldiers' emotions, even if he knew the relief was only temporary. Their army was only holding the east in force, which meant their tour would stop west of Mundung-ri. But that was still dozens of positions and thousands of comrades to visit.

After some time, Korea asked in a low voice, "What did he say to you?"

Chagang looked at him, blinking.

"What did he say?" he demanded, louder. "When Han Eun-gol

pulled you aside, what did he say?"

Korea wouldn't like to hear it. But he had asked directly.

"He told me to take care of you."

Agony. Immediate and intense. His shield splintered and Korea's storm surged through the cracks, stabbed into Chagang's eyes, electrocuting the delicate nerves behind them and tearing into his brain.

He slammed his eyes closed before it could shatter completely, teeth locked together as a high-pitched whine filled his skull. He barely noticed Korea slamming on the break and seizing him by the collar.

"Look at me," he growled. *"Look at me."*

Chagang's jaw creaked as he bit down, mustering all his mental strength to reinforce his shield, using it to push back the colours. They seeped under his lashes, muddy and terrible, and he didn't want to *see* them.

Then the night was dark again, and his eyelids could slowly pry open a crack, met with the white of Korea's feverishly glinting eye.

"I do not need 'taking care of,'" he snarled, low and cold. "I am your Countryhuman. It is *my* job to take care of *you."*

That thick metal taste clogged the back of Chagang's throat, but he summoned every ounce of willpower he had to say, "Korea, I told you- as your province, I am expendable. It is my duty to make sure you live."

"If it comes down to it, you will give your life for mine," Korea hissed, knuckles tightening in his uniform. "That does *not* mean I need protecting before then. *I* protect *you. I* keep *you* safe and *I do not need taking care of. Do you understand?"*

Chagang pressed his hand to his head, braced against his temple like it could help keep the storm out. "I did not say it. Comrade Pak did."

Korea's jaw bulged with the pressure of his biting down as he glared into Chagang's eyes. Then his widened, flicking down.

"Ssi-bal."

His province put his hand over his face, feeling the wet warmth seeping out of his nares.

He agreed. Ssi-bal. It was difficult to get blood out of your nasal passages when you didn't have a nose.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Korea demanded, shoving him away.

"Headache," Chagang managed, tipping his head back so the blood would pour down his throat instead of block his breathing.

"I thought you weren't having those anymore. *Tch,* never mind." Korea turned back to the wheel, throttling it instead of his province. "Kangwon gives you a full check-up before you head back to Pyongyang."

"I'll be fine. They are getting better."

His head always hurt now, but it was a steady pain. Instead of spiking when he was blasted with sharp emotions or had to push strong ones back, it maintained a dull ache. There was no relief, but the plateau was more manageable, and wouldn't get in the way. He could enjoy meals with his cousins and help their people without being overwhelmed.

It was just Korea's emotions that did this to him now. They railed at his senses, demanding to be let in, tearing at the edges of his shield as they strove to be seen. Trying to block them out only made them fight harder, driving this bayonet through his head.

It wasn't Korea's fault. He didn't know Chagang had this ability or that his emotional state was doing this to him. He would be mortified if he did. But it also meant he couldn't even attempt to spare him.

That was fine. It was worth it. The blood in his throat and the physical pain were better than having to see those awful colours. It

hurt less.

His Countryhuman hunched over the wheel, wordlessly moving the Jeep forward again, simmering with tension. Chagang's guards sat in the back, heads turned opposite ways out the sides, watching for enemies as they drove through the dark hills. Their faces were stoic, but he knew they had heard what Korea said to him.

It was not like him to discuss something like that in front of their people. And it also wasn't like him to become comfortable with their bodyguards and stop monitoring himself. Chagang knew it wasn't that. It worried him.

Because those daggers of colour that had penetrated his shield had just reinforced that he could not handle being swamped by all the dark things his family and people felt anymore, not if he wanted to keep believing what he had to. Among all the fire and smoke of anger and grief that Korea had stabbed into him, there had also been yellow.

Violent, sickly yellow.

Chagang inherited North Pyongan's honesty, but instead of being fine with white lies if they protect people, his form of sparing someone's emotions is just not saying anything. If you ask him directly, he will answer, regardless of how that answer could make you feel. Never ask him if you think the clothes you're wearing make you look fat if you suspect they do.

Hae, wearing make-up: How do ah look?
Chagang: ...You're wearing make-up.
Hae: Ayuh, but does it look good??
Chagang: ...No.

South Pyongan has tried to tell him that it's really okay to lie sometimes (like when he did the dishes for her), but he just looks at her and blinks like he doesn't understand. She's decided he's under some kind of curse.

I found an American anecdote about the war where the soldier

was given leave for the day, so he decided to go fishing. While he was, he begged feathers from a civilian with a pheasant to use as a lure, then was shot at by a sniper. He shot back and murdered him. And he said the thump he made as he fell from his perch made him vow to never kill a magpie again. Something very evil about that. Killing someone, and it making you sick, but instead of vowing to never kill another human, just deciding not to take potshots at animals, and then going on to describe it as a nice day. Not to mention he was an American soldier, supplied free rations by his army, choosing to take a Korean fish for fun, and begging for resources from a civilian. Then he just gets to continue his day and have a nice, relaxing fishing break, while someone's son is never going to get to fish again, or go home at all. The American soldier's name gets to live on, but who was the Korean one? If he was behind enemy lines, did his family ever find out what happened to him?

What Will Be

Kangwon spent all day at the Second Corps' field headquarters seeing soldiers for check-ups and minor ailments, freeing up the medics to work on the injuries still healing from their time on the front, or the air strikes. Choe Kang-ok helped him, diligently washing bandages and boiling water, chatting happily about her deployment in between patients.

He was glad to see the war hadn't dulled her spirit, and even more glad she hadn't been killed. And now, barring her artillery division being needed if America tried his luck again, she should be off the front for awhile, maybe even until the war was over. Unless she got sent to coastal defense.

Kangwon remembered the constant deafening blasts and shaking earth of Wonsan, chunks of dirt and flesh going flying as another destroyer found its mark, and hoped she'd be off for good.

Maybe a little selfish, considering *someone* had to defend the coasts, and she'd be more than happy to. But...

He'd lost Bong-nam. He didn't want to lose his daughter, too.

Eventually a voice Kangwon recognized started calling her name, and the woman jumped off the stool in the medical tent, slamming back the rest of the boiled water in her cup.

"There's muster," she said, wiping her mouth on her sleeve in a familiar cheeky gesture that made his heart squeeze. "I'm off to keep our skies safe."

"You stay safe, too," Kangwon advised. "Make sure you eat all your rations, and never drink unboiled water. And if you ever feel sick at all, tell the medics right away."

She smiled. "You and Comrade Korea worry too much. You're starting to sound like real uncles."

"And make sure you marry into a rich family."

Choe Kang-ok clicked her tongue in mock disapproval. "Encouraging me to marry a landlord? I'm not sure Abeoji would approve."

"You're right," Kangwon conceded. "Make sure you marry into a patriotic family."

The woman turned for the tent flap, then darted back.

"Just in case you're gone by the time we get back," she said, embracing him.

Kangwon's burns throbbed under her grip, but he hugged back, patting her. For a moment, he closed his eyes, remembering that last embrace with Bong-nam, as they clapped each other on the back, and his comrade watched him set off with a broad grin on his freckled face.

"Be safe," he said again as they pulled away.

"I'll try," she said this time, more seriously. "But if it comes down to it, you know I can't do any less than he did."

Kangwon's heart constricted. "I know. Fight hard, comrade."

His friend's daughter saluted, then slid out of the tent as Ryang Myeong-ae called for her again.

The province exhaled, slumping down onto the stool she'd left.

He wished he could tell himself she'd be okay, that she'd survived this long on the front without anything happening that nothing would now that she was in reserve.

But he knew it didn't work like that. Even if she wasn't out on the coast, all it took was one bomb or one rogue bacteria, and being dozens of ri away from combat wouldn't mean anything. Even if she survived the war, there could always be another, and she'd end up like Beom Dong-gil or Son Du-soon, or the countless other comrades that'd survived the war against Japan just to die in this one.

Or like her father, cut down by traitors because he couldn't stand to sit back and stay safe while their country was still in chains.

Kangwon shook his head, running his hand down his bandaged face, then stood.

No point in dwelling on what could be. Choe Kang-ok was alive for now, and hopefully she'd stay that way. The rain was still pouring down outside, so her anti-aircraft duty should be uneventful, at least for today.

And Kangwon still had work to do.

For the next day and a half, he shuttled around the Second Corps, tending to their soldiers and seeing patients from the hills and the nearby villages that were still standing.

This counted for his post-Liberation Day tour of his province, which was why Korea had let him come. Once he was done at the front, Chagang would get sent to Kanggye, and he'd head up to Wonsan again with their Countryhuman.

It was going to be rough, he knew that. But he could take it. He'd been feeling a little better lately, thanks to the germ warfare incidents slowing down. Everyone that could be vaccinated was, and the hygiene measures were well-practiced, so there weren't new cases pouring in the hospital doors, and he didn't have to travel across the country as much. And with almost everyone that'd been infected either recovered or... gone, he was mostly just dealing with the long-term effects from the diseases, like the heart complications that came with rheumatic fever, or the brain damage malaria could cause.

He couldn't cure those. He could only help manage them. But since he wasn't at risk of losing most of those patients, it was a little less emotionally taxing.

A little.

Kangwon had only had one patient with long-term complications in Bong-nam's village. A man named Kim Tu-gil with a case of

pneumonia after getting stuck out in the woods during a winter storm. He'd healed quickly, and well, and while Kangwon had felt like every patient he treated back then was at risk of dying, looking back, he'd honestly never been going to. It was mild.

But it had left a cough. Nothing serious, just a little shortness of breath that didn't affect his trapping. But every time Kangwon went near the village, or ran into him in the forest, those hacking gasps hammered into his heart like a nail. He'd been so sure that if he'd done something better, he could've spared the man from it.

He knew now he couldn't've. It was just one of those minor complications that a doctor had no control over. But that almost felt worse, the idea that no matter how good he got, no matter how many courses he took or textbooks he studied, there were some things he'd never be able to fix. It was unfair that he could do his best, and a patient could, too, fighting hard to heal, succeeding, but still being left with a scar. And it wasn't the sort of unfair thing he could make fair.

He was usually pretty good at not letting it bother him. But it got a little harder when he had to find the gentlest way to tell a little boy that hadn't been as lucky as Kim Do-bom that the fog in his brain the malaria had left was likely never going to go away.

It'd felt good to help the International Scientific Commission, at least. They'd arrived in Pyongyang on the 28th of July, and Kangwon had spent until August 5th discussing their findings at meetings while the bombs fell overhead, showing them the broken containers they'd found, and the insect specimens, along with their autopsy reports from Pak Yun-ho and some of the other victims. He'd taken them to talk to the captured airmen in the camps, too, though he hadn't gone in, since Korea didn't want there to be any chances for anyone to accuse him of threatening them. They all knew they'd be accused of it anyway, but he guessed it was better to keep a province out of it.

The Commission had returned to China on the 6th, laden with reports, photographs, and eyewitness testimony, as well as some of their own tests, even though conducting them with the air raids going on was a little difficult.

Would it convince anyone when the report came out sometime in September? Kangwon had to hope it would. He still had to. And those letters on Liberation Day had given him a little more of it.

It'd lifted a weight that had been hanging over him for awhile to hear that Jepp was alive, and thrilled him to hear from him, on top of the news about his wife being pregnant. He'd been hoping he might find a letter from Adolfo, too, but he guessed he was still enlisted, so couldn't exactly do that. Maybe one day when the war was over, he could write him.

But there had been letters from Puerto Rico, and all over the world, from people like Adolfo, that saw a bit of their country in Korea. Oppressed peoples that saw themselves in the Koreans, and ones from the oppressing nations, letting them know that they saw that what was being done to them was wrong.

There were so many people out there that cared about them, believed them when they told them about the horrors and injustices their people had faced. Maybe the report would make them loud enough that their governments had to listen, had to *do* something about it.

'Maybe.'

Examination done, Kangwon set aside those thoughts and leaned back, removing the strap that held his stethoscope in place. He gently pulled the blouse of the young woman on the cot he was kneeling in front of back down over her stomach, then looked up at her.

"You're right," he said, keeping his voice even. "You're pregnant."

He usually would've given the expecting mother a congratulatory smile. But he kept his expression as neutral as his voice, waiting to see her reaction.

It was a good thing he did. Ri Song-hwa's face fell, her hand taking the stethoscope's place over her slightly rounded stomach.

Kangwon moved to get the next piece of news out so he wouldn't

be hitting her again after she'd just recovered.

"And I think it's twins."

Her gaunt face paled, eyes closing. *'Twins,'* she mouthed.

Kangwon was confident in his diagnosis, but he still offered, "I can check again, if you want. Or get a female comrade for a second opinion."

"No," she said after a second, trying to keep her voice measured. "I-I knew. I keep having taemong, and it's always two tiger cubs. I just... I guess I wanted to be sure."

Taemong. Conception dreams. Kangwon didn't believe in omens or gifted dreams (because if they were real, that opened up a lot of possibilities about other superstitions that he'd rather not think about), but he did believe that the body usually knew what was going on inside it before the conscious did.

"Was this a planned pregnancy?" he asked, sitting back on his haunches. He already knew the answer.

"We were trying," Ri Song-hwa murmured. "But then the war came... We decided to wait. I was being careful, but before my husband left for the army-"

She looked away, cheeks flushing in embarrassment, even as her eyes stayed dark.

"Accidents happen," Kangwon comforted her. "You can't go back, so focus on how you're going to move forward."

Her bony hands knotted in her lap, her eyes sliding down. She was silent.

After giving her some time, he asked gently, "Do you not want to have children?"

"It's... It's not that," she said quietly. "I've always wanted to be a mother. But... In the taemong, I'm always in the mountains, walking on a narrow path. And I can hear those-" Her hand fluttered up at

the peaked canvas roof of the medical tent. "And I'm trying to get away, but then these tiger cubs come bounding down the path, and I'm trapped. And they're just these tiny little things, but they jump on me, and they bite me, and their teeth are so *sharp..."*

She trailed off, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

Taemong were important to mothers, so Kangwon didn't try telling her that was just her mind expressing her subconscious anxieties.

"I think the dreams are trying to tell you to eat more," he said instead. "You've only been eating for one, and if you kept doing that, then having twins could be like you're being chewed on."

Despite her being several months along, her stomach was almost concave, dipping in under her ribs. The bump in her stomach was more like she'd eaten a good meal, instead of there being a persimmon-sized fetus inside her.

"Either that, or you're going to have a couple little warriors," he added, trying to lighten her a little.

Ri Song-hwa didn't smile, her eyes downcasting to her stomach.

When she didn't say anything, Kangwon quietly added, "But if you're that worried, there are still other options."

Her fingers tented against her shirt, looking away like she was ashamed at the thought even crossing her mind.

"There's nothing wrong with getting an abortion if you really feel like you can't handle being a mother right now." Kangwon remained laidback as he said, "But please consider it carefully."

He didn't like having to do this, but he told her, "If you decide to keep them, the State will support you. You'll get extra rations, a member of the Mobile Medical Corps visiting you at your home, and free medical care."

The bonuses for triplets were even better. A woman who'd given birth to them after having her breasts cut off during the American occupation had a personal doctor assigned to her, and received a

commemorative ring and a dagger for self-defense from the Premier. But right now, every care that could be afforded was being given to every mother.

"If you want to raise them, you won't be raising them alone," Kangwon assured Ri Song-hwa. "You'll have support every step of the way."

He tried to keep his tone even, uncoercive. He wasn't trying to coerce her, and he didn't like having to look at things from this more clinical angle, but the truth was that their birth rate had plummeted due to the war, and their population had taken a serious hit, especially the male portion. It would take years to recover, even after the war eventually ended, so he couldn't afford to offer someone who could give birth to twins an abortion with no other alternatives, especially if you subscribed to the superstition that tiger taemong meant sons.

If it was someone in Jin-suk's position, he wouldn't've said anything. But Ri Song-hwa was pregnant with her husband's children, and if it hadn't been for the war, likely would've already had them.

"I just..." Ri Song-hwa shook her head, hazel eyes brimming with tears. "How am I supposed to bring children into *this?"*

The downpour had ended the first night Kangwon was here. Outside the tent, they could hear bombs falling in the distance, far-away explosions that were still too close.

"It's so hard," she whispered hoarsely. "Every day, even with the dependent rations. There's no power, not enough food, I don't even have a real roof over my head-"

She dashed the back of her hand across her eyes, taking a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't mean to complain. I know the Party is doing everything it can-"

"It's alright," Kangwon soothed her. "I'm your doctor right now, not

your Provincehuman. And I know the local organs have had trouble getting the mandatory housing set up."

The Central Committee of the Worker's Party could order the ri Party cells and People's Committees to build the houses, but they couldn't make the materials materialize in their hands. They didn't have them.

"It should be fixed before winter."

"It's just so *hard,"* Ri Song-hwa repeated, voice cracking. "Even just taking care of myself. Bring a baby into this, bringing *twins*- I don't want my children being raised hiding in air raid shelters and caves, and going to sleep hungry. And what if the Yankees come back? What if-?"

She cradled her stomach protectively, likely thinking about the stories of pregnant women having them cut open, or their babies torn from their arms. Things that should've sounded like the horror stories South Pyongan tried to freak Kangwon out with around the campfire, but had very much happened, even in his province, where the Second Corps had kept part of it free.

"The Americans won't come back," Kangwon assured her. "Our army won't let them. They're negotiating with us because they know they have no chance at another ground invasion."

Ri Song-hwa didn't look convinced. He didn't blame her.

"It's just..." Her eyes closed. "They're so *tiny.* In my dream, they're so small, the cubs. And they're biting me and it *hurts,* but all I can think about is getting them away before the planes come. But I- I never can."

She looked down at her hands, spreading the thin fingers in her lap.

"What if I keep them, but I can't keep them safe?" she asked hoarsely. "What if I lose them anyway?"

"What if you don't?" Kangwon returned. "What if your husband gets to come home to you and two healthy sons?"

Ri Song-hwa let out a shaky breath, and he climbed to his feet.

"It's up to you," he told her. "It's your choice. But you'll have to make it soon. You said your husband left for the army three months ago, and my examination confirmed you're around thirteen weeks. You're exiting your first trimester, and an abortion will be harder on your body after it."

Some doctors might have a problem performing one at all soon, even Kangwon, though more out of concern for Ri Song-hwa herself. Yun Jin-suk had been a special- and hopefully one-time-case.

The woman stayed quiet, carefully stroking her stomach, and Kangwon turned away, using a small notepad on the flimsy folding table to write a note.

"Here." He held it out to her. "Comrade Korea will be heading back to Pyongyang in a couple days. I'll get him to send someone from the Mobile Medical Corps to see you, either to perform an abortion, or give you a check-up, whatever you decide. But if you do decide to keep them, give this to your local ri Party chairman. It'll let her know to make sure you get taken care of, set up with the extra rations and everything."

Ri Song-hwa hesitated, then reached up to take it, looking down at the short letter, and his lazy signature scrawled at the bottom.

"Thank you," she murmured, accepting the arm her province gave her to help her stand.

"It's no problem," he told her. "No matter what you choose, Kangwon province'll be looking out for you."

He couldn't visit his province as much as his cousins could visit theirs, since he was tied down with medical duties. So he had to help his people where he could.

He stopped the woman before she could leave. "But Comrade Ri- if even a part of you wants to keep these children, wants to try, then I think you should."

Ri Song-hwa looked down at her stomach, the bulge hidden under the loose folds of her white blouse. Her hand ghosted across it, and she gave a small nod.

Kangwon watched her go, and was left alone with a surge of exhaustion. He leaned back, balancing himself against the cot with a hand, breathing out.

That was one of the worst parts, not just about being a doctor. The 'could have beens.' What a boy could've been if the fever hadn't damaged his brain beyond repair, what a soldier could've been if she hadn't lost her limb, then her life, what a father could've been if he hadn't been crippled, what a friend could've been if he hadn't been executed for fighting for his country. He knew if Ri Song-hwa got the abortion, she'd always regret the 'could have been,' like all mothers that lost their children, even if it would be better for her. It would be worse if her husband never made it back.

The war had made her too afraid to choose something that she'd wanted for years before it, just like it had made thousands of others too afraid. And it had cut off millions of 'could have beens.'

Kangwon forcibly stitched that mental wound closed. He couldn't be thinking thoughts like that around their soldiers. He'd save them for venting to North Pyongan over his next blood harvest after Foundation Day.

He tried to focus more on the good things the war had brought. Their relationship with China and his people was going to be coloured by it forever, in a good way, and Korea had made a close personal comrade (he thought; maybe). His cousins were being forced to resolve some of their issues from the pressure (SH and North Hamgyong excepted), and tons of people had made connections they wouldn't have without it- soldiers from Kangwon shedding blood with comrades from Chagang that probably wouldn't've met otherwise, refugees from the south that made family out of the people that took them in, PVA soldiers practically adopted by the villagers they were stationed with. And thinking of his recent check-up with Oh Tae-min and Hyun Han-jin, he was pretty sure some people had been given the chance for things that a normal life never would've allowed.

None of it made up for all the death and destruction it had wrought. But he had to focus on the good things if he wanted to keep himself from breaking down again. The important part wasn't that a doctor couldn't save a patient's limb, but that he had saved their life. And it wasn't whether or not the world would believe the ISC- it was that those scientists had cared enough to investigate in the first place, to risk their lives, and that Kangwon and his comrades had foiled America's plan to use the germs to cut their country further in half.

And it was important that no matter what Ri Song-hwa chose, her province would take care of her.

He put his hand on his shoulder, working it to slightly to loosen the muscle up, wincing as his skin crackled. He could feel the bombs pounding the coast, and the ones being dropped from the planes on their closer ridges. They'd brought the napalm back, trying to wipe out the villages around the Second Corps' suspected location to make sure their people couldn't aid them.

He hoped Korea was feeling... Okay, he knew he wasn't feeling okay. At all. But he hoped his burns weren't infected. He still hadn't let him see them, and Kim Yong-hwan had told him (with a lot of tongue clicking and hissing) that he was refusing to see her, too. He'd have to ask China to sneak a peek the next time he could.

Hey, if his Countryhuman wasn't going to let him give him a check-up after he'd said he wasn't going to cut him off, Kangwon was allowed to resort to unscrupulous methods.

His head jerked over at the sudden commotion outside, and at the words 'air strike,' he burst out of the tent.

The mountain village was bustling, soldiers milling around, guns in hand, no enemy to be seen, but holding on to the weapons anyways, needing some sort of security.

"MOVE!" someone bellowed, and Kangwon's pulse skipped as he realized who it was.

Ryang Myeong-ae muscled through the crowd, hauling a stretcher

with Pak Gyuri, beelining for one of the medical tents as fast as they could. The nurses swarmed, taking it from them, faces steely as they disappeared inside with it.

The province's eyes darted around the camp, chest constricting as he couldn't find the person he was looking for.

"Get off of me!" Pak Gyuri screamed, trying to force her way through the medics. "She's my friend, I'm going with her! Comrade Freckles!"

Kangwon's heart sank at the nickname. *'No. No no no.'*

He shoved through the crowd, soldiers murmuring as they watched the skies, their alarm dying down as they realized the threat was past. They were used to this.

But his heart only picked up, beating louder as he broke free from the crowd in front of the other tent.

"Who is it?" he demanded, nails itching.

Pak Gyuri swung towards him with a half-crazed look, blood pouring from several cuts on her face, sheeting down from her busted lip, one hand clamped over the bloodstained arm of her uniform.

"I didn't even see her," she babbled, eyes dazed with pain and what looked like a concussion. "I had it, I had the damn shot, but that crazy fucking *bitch* pushed me down the mountain. *Freckles!"* she screamed, lunging forward.

Ryang Myeong-ae caught her around the waist, dragging her back. She tried to say something to Kangwon, but he didn't hear it, barging into the medical tent, freezing in dread-filled resignation as he saw what he'd expected to.

Laid out on the cot, grievous burns worse than his spreading up her head, uniform charred and blackened and indistinguishable from the skin it had burned into, was Choe Kang-ok.

The medics swarmed around her, trying to remove her

contaminated clothes. But the fibres were crusted into her wounds, her hat melted into her scalp.

"Freckles!" Someone slammed into him from behind, Pak Gyuri seizing hold of his arm with her good one. "Kang-ok!"

"Out!" one of the nurses snapped. "Only medical professionals in the damn tent!"

Medical professional. The words made it through the cotton dressings stuffed in his head.

Kangwon was a medical professional. He had a patient he needed to save.

"Comrade Pak, go get your arm treated," he said calmly, turning to her. It looked like she'd taken a slug from a jet's machine guns.

"That stupid cunt saved me!" the woman cried, eyes flashing with fury and grief. "I'm gonna kill her!"

"I'll take care of her," he promised, giving her a smile. "Okay? Go get stitched up, and she'll be okay."

Pak Gyuri looked past him at her friend's horribly burned body, despair filling her face.

"But-"

"Gyuri." Ryang Myeong-ae entered, taking her gently but firmly by the arm. "Get out of the doctors' way."

The woman sagged like all the fight had gone out of her, and wordlessly left the tent.

Ryang Myeong-ae looked at Kangwon, handsome face grim. "Save her, comrade. I can't lose another girl."

He nodded numbly, still smiling. "I will."

When it was just him and the medics, he took a deep breath.

"Alright," he said, turning. "We need to secure her airway in case her lungs were damaged by the napalm."

"Comrade Baek already went for the tube," one said, quickly working the incinerated hat free, using medical shears to cut through the hair melted into it, revealing more of her badly burned scalp.

"Good." Kangwon inhaled, trying to scan his patient with a doctor's eyes instead of a comrade's. "It looks like she's stopped burning, but we'll still need cold water if we want to reduce tissue damage and get her uniform off."

"We don't have cold water," one of the men stressed. "And if we take the time to sterilize the riverwater-"

"Let's take things one at a time," Kangwon said steadily. "We can't use dirty water on her. Go get some soldiers to boil a big pot."

The man sped off, and he asked, "Blood pressure?"

"Low," a nurse with two fingers to her wrist reported, tense. "Too low. I think she's going into shock. Get that IV in her."

"Comrade, we're going to need skin grafts," another said urgently, securing the intravenous in her non-burned arm.

Kangwon's fist clenched. "We don't have any." He'd checked their stores yesterday.

"Then she needs a real hospital. We'll need to contact Pyongyang. We need-"

Kangwon cut her off. "We can't get her there in time."

The two women exchanged a look that he knew the meaning of all too well. He'd given the same one to his brother and dozens of their nurses over elders with chest colds and soldiers with more shrapnel in their stomachs than organs.

The burns on Choe Kang-ok's face were nothing compared to the ones on her body, he could tell even with her uniform merged with

her skin. Raw red patches pulsed through the blackened fabric where her sides struggled to rise, watery blood soaking the cot under her. She was losing too many fluids, fluids that would just keep leaking out no matter how many IVs they gave her, unless her skin was repaired. Even as he watched, her breathing started to grow thinner as she sank into shock.

She was going to die.

"Get out."

The nurses blinked. "What-?"

"Get out," he repeated, more authoritatively. "Send a telegram to every position in the Third Corps, and tell them if Comrade Korea and Comrade Chagang are there, to send them back here right away. And give me your scalpel."

After a moment's hesitation, the two women rose, one of them passing him her aid kit. They left, giving him sorrowful gazes as they did.

Kangwon's heart beat in his ear slits, the cold grip of the scalpel clutched in his palm, frigid compared to the heat inside the tent.

He could still remember the weight of that bleeding boy in his arms as his mother handed him over, entrusting him to him, trusting that he would fix him, and the weight of his hand on his back as he set out from Busan.

'We freed our country, Doc. Now comes the hard part- making it fair.'

Kangwon moved, tearing off the bandages on his arm as he stood over Choe Kang-ok with the scalpel. He lifted his hand, then brought it down, slicing open his wrist, careful to hit the veins and not the artery.

Bright blood welled crimson against russet on his own burned skin, and he quickly pressed it to her lips, forcing her jaw open so it would get in her mouth, squeezing the sides of the wound to pour as much of it as he could into her.

There was no time for a transfusion, not when she was going into shock. And he needed her conscious, at least for a second. He couldn't try the sort of thing he wanted to without asking her first.

His heart leaped as her throat moved, swallowing his blood of her own accord, her pulse picking up just slightly as his own thundered.

He knew Korea would agree with what he wanted. He knew losing Bong-nam had hurt him just as much as it hurt Kangwon, and he couldn't bear the idea of losing their niece now.

'We'll win this war, and I'll help build the country my father always dreamed of.'

Reunifying their homeland, becoming a politician or an artist or a factory worker, living a happy life with his wife and the daughter whose life so much of it he'd been absent for, having enough to eat, enough medicine, enough time, peace. All of Bong-nam's 'could have beens' had died with him.

Kangwon refused to let his daughter's die, too.

Kangwon is about to demonstrate why he never took the Hippocratic Oath. Wish him good fortune.

The woman who was mutilated by American soldiers and later gave birth to triplets is a real person. I seriously can't remember her name, but I watched a short documentary on her. When it was made, her children were still alive. If I find it again, I'll add her name to this because I think she's very cool. I also like the practice of giving a knife to women that have triplets. I think it might have started with her, but don't take that as a fact unless I find the documentary.

Planning to make births free to encourage having children just shows how our government doesn't actually care about people's well-being, just pumping out workers. 'No one needs to avoid having kids just because of the hospital bill.' No one is avoiding having children *just* because of the hospital bill. It's the food costs, the cram school costs, the school supply costs, the extracurriculars, the price of a respectable high school and

university, and the burden of being a parent when both of you have to work full-time in order to live comfortably, and you have no time to even meet someone to be your partner because you're tired and isolated all the time, let alone raise a child. Making childbirth free is good, but it doesn't solve the problem. But capitalist nations refuse to use the solutions that would.

Also if you saw me publish this three times no you did not.

Not Enough

The road blurred in the afternoon sunlight, the red plains stretching out around the Jeep trembling like heat mirages as the hills between it and Pyongyang threatened to collapse onto the road.

North shook his head, hauling himself up in his seat, grimacing as his burns cracked. The back of his head throbbed.

Almost there. A few dozen more ri and he would be back at Jonsung Complex, able to sit in his office and look over more Liberation Day letters from his people to send the complaints to his provinces, instead of driving around the country. His body could finish replenishing what he had given away.

His thoughts tried to wander down that thorny path again, but he dragged them back, trying to find something else to worry at.

Complaints. Sip Il had been so eager to voice his.

North had passed it on after driving Kangwon and Chagang back to Pyongyang, and the mobilization to open the mountain trail would be going ahead. It wasn't a problem solved, but it would help alleviate some of the pressure on their supply lines. The young soldier's older comrade had the wrong attitude- the department that handled the suggestion had been being too bureaucratic, a classic case of an office worker not wanting to bother a superior with what they saw as a minor matter, so they dismissed it instead. And if North hadn't been told, it might have *stayed* dismissed, leaving their supply lines suboptimal, and fostering misdirected resentment towards Supreme Command.

He needed to hear the complaints, needed to know what their government could do better, what *he* could do better. He wanted his people to trust that they wouldn't be reprimanded for having criticisms, and that they would be listened to. It was why they held the mass meetings, and why he had public criticism sessions.

But he couldn't stop thinking that the correspondences on the last holiday hadn't been so bold. Had so much really changed in a year? It didn't feel like it. The battle line had barely moved, they were still stuck in a stalemate, mired in negotiations. North hadn't managed to win them victory yet, so his people's trust for him shouldn't have increased. And the only other option was-

He shook his head, skin crackling and vision smearing.

Sip Il had been right to bring it up. He was a good example of a younger soldier being comfortable enough around his Countryhuman that he could openly say not handling the matter would be stupid.

And North *had* handled it. No matter why the boy had been bold enough to speak, he had either been proven right or reassured.

His entire body throbbed in time with his heartbeat, too fast and light. He could feel it in that deep gash, a painless but unsettling sensation, like something was burrowing in the flesh, and under the bandage on the back of his skull. He shifted uncomfortably, and something in his pocket crinkled, making him grimace.

That stupid little letter he'd been handed by the General after he realized he wasn't going to be able to convince his Countryhuman to stay and rest with their provinces. It had came with the next batch from CCCP, selected personally for him by the Soviet, and was stamped with an axe-wielding lion on a shield, the coat of arms of Norway.

It was in Norwegian, which North couldn't read at all and never wanted to, but CCCP had provided a translation. He had skimmed it, enough to understand the gist.

It was from a man that had been at the airport when Kangwon and Gangwon were captured. He had watched the entire thing happen, the walk of shame Kangwon had described, the altercation, and his brother being pulled away from him, screaming.

He said he considered himself a Socialist, and had been outspoken against the war in Korea, but when he'd been watching Korea's

provinces be illegally detained, he had only stood and watched. He said it had been keeping him up at night, and he was petitioning his government to withdraw their token force from Korea, and demand an inquiry into Gangwon's return to the south.

He said he was sorry, and to tell Kangwon that.

North hadn't decided if he would. He knew he shouldn't. His province still had too much faith in foreigners, even if he had finally admitted they couldn't trust them. But he really didn't-

There was nothing safe to think about, and nothing to do but think. North *hated* driving.

He shifted, unable to get comfortable, sinking his fangs into his lip as pain pulsed up his hips.

The planes were out in force today. He had seen them flying north earlier, and he could feel it now. Yesterday had been the Hwanghae Peninsula and the area around Chorweon. He'd been able to see the former from his place on the front, and the thick black clouds over Sibyon-ri and Yeoncheon to the east.

But this was fresh. He knew it, even if he could no longer tell if his burns were getting worse. They were all third-degree now. When they ate down, they ate into dead skin. And they could no longer grow out. Every single patch of skin below his neck was gone, leaving no trace of the blue of his flag. All he could feel was an unending agony that throbbed in his bones, and all he could see was blood, char, and pus. It was why Chagang had had to get involved in Kangwon's mad experiment.

His hands clutched at the wheel, his boot pressing down harder on the gas.

He had to get back to Pyongyang, back to the hospital. He needed to make sure his provinces were awake, that-

His eye flew open, suddenly realizing there was a figure standing in the road, and he yanked the wheel hard to the side to avoid hitting them, the Jeep jackknifing into the culvert with its tires

screeching. The vehicle jerked forward like it was fighting back as he slammed the brake through the floor, choked to a stop before it could crush the namul growing just beyond the highway.

North almost went flying out the windshield, only stopped by his ribs slamming into the unyielding wheel before he was rocketed back into the seat, driving what little breath was left in his lungs out.

He sat for a moment, dazed, as he looked out at the shadowy particles dancing over the red earthen fields, filled with the urge to slump over sideways on the seat and go to sleep. The sun felt nicely warm on his face, an escape from the damp heat that had followed him ever since rainy season began.

Then he managed to get a full breath of air in, and jolted up, throwing himself from the Jeep and taking cover behind the hood, one hand pressed over his torso and the other gripping his pistol.

"Announce yourself!" he barked at the person over on the road.

"You know," a voice replied from too close. "As much as you say I'm a bad driver, that's two close calls I've seen you have now. Makes you think, doesn't it?"

North immediately lurched up, slamming his gun down on the flat hood.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" he hissed, incensed.

China arched a brow at him, already perched in the driver's seat. "Me? I'm not the one that just tried to crash their comrade's vehicle."

"Were you *trying* to kill me?!"

"I could ask the same thing," his comrade replied. "I made sure to step out the moment I was sure it was our Jeep coming, so I wouldn't make you test the braking system again. *You* were the one that chose not to stop." He sniffed, offended. "You even sped up. If I didn't know better, I would say you were planning on hitting me, but had a last minute change of heart."

North tried to remember what the road had looked like before he spotted him, but couldn't. He'd just appeared there, in a way that wouldn't be possible even for China. He would have had to see him emerge from one of the craters or from behind the old tree stumps that lined the base of the hills, but all he could remember was smears of brown and red, and her face, so familiar and so damaged.

"What was I supposed to do when someone in a mask throws themself in front of me?" he asked gruffly, holstering his Tokarev. "You could have moved when you saw I wasn't going to stop."

"And then you would have breezed right past me, and left me stranded out here all on my lonesome."

"What are you doing here anyway?" North demanded, looking around as he suddenly realized he'd just ran into China on foot over fifty ri outside of Pyongyang.

"I was getting lonely all by myself," the other man said, fauxly forlorn. "Our little butterfly lovers went off as usual, and my Tung'er abandoned me to follow your tall silent one. So I came to wait for you."

North had allowed himself a moment to hope he was concussed, but his head couldn't have came up with an answer as stupid as that. He really had been falling asleep at the wheel.

It was the blood loss, it had to be. It would be fixed after a half-night's sleep, once he returned from the coast again.

He didn't focus on it for now. "Chagang left for Kanggye?" he asked, keeping the urgency out of his voice.

"En," China said, spinning the hard plastic steering wheel with a finger. "Your little doctor is awake, too, waiting for your second attempt at a Wonsan trip, I believe."

He shouldn't have known they were asleep in the first place, but North wasn't surprised. And he was glad to hear his provinces had woken up from the recuperative comas he had ordered them into.

The other question lurked on his tongue, but he didn't ask it. He

didn't want to hear the answer from him. He didn't want to hear it at all.

"Interesting that I found you on the southern highway, though," his comrade said idly. "Your army is stationed in the east. I would've thought you'd return on the one you left on."

North looked away. He didn't question how China knew where he'd been. He had met with members of his Mobile Command, and his comrade knew everything they knew. The three days after while he had finished his tour had been enough time for their Countryhuman to hear.

"How are my comrades?" the other country asked.

Exhausted, battered, clinging to the line with their teeth and nails as they were bombarded by artillery and bombs. And he couldn't help but feel like there had been resentment in their eyes as he joined them in their holes, no matter how friendly they acted. Even if they had came here to help... his people, they *had* to resent that they were still helping.

"Working hard," he bluntly replied.

His jaw ached, waiting for China to bring up the letters he still hadn't read.

But he just nodded, satisfied. "I hope you visited them because you wanted to reward them for their efforts, and not because you were on a self-flagellation tour. You shouldn't be punishing yourself when your birthday is coming up."

"I don't punish myself," North muttered, looking away. "And the Day of the Foundation of the Republic isn't my birthday."

"Mmm."

He almost passed on that he'd told the Chinese soldiers their Countryhuman had written to say he was proud of them, but bit his tongue. The other country didn't need to know that.

"Get out of my seat," he said instead. "I need to get back to

Pyongyang."

"I was thinking you could take me down to the front," China said, swivelling in the seat as he came around the side. "Seeing as you snuck off to visit my comrades without me."

"You are going nowhere *near* the front." North swatted the leg he'd stuck out to stop him. "If America's pattern keeps up, he's going to be back at the table in a few days. I'm not giving him an excuse to stretch the recess out."

"We both know he doesn't need one. What's that, by the way?"

He reached for the Korean's head, who ducked away irritably.

"I thought you were doing a good job keeping your empathetic burns below your collar," the other nation said, even though North had nothing to do with where they spread.

His hand twitched, but he stopped it before it could touch the bandage on the back of his head.

"It isn't a burn," he muttered, hating that some of his people might think it was. He would need to wear his flatcap until it healed.

"Oh?" China smiled. "Slip and bump your head?"

North grimaced at him, but didn't tell him the truth. He'd had Kangwon tell him about the blood, but this... He would tell him if it worked. If it didn't...

His chest tightened, and as China stretched out his long leg to plant his foot on it, trying to keep him away from the Jeep, he angrily smacked it down.

"China, I don't have time for this. Get-"

He stiffened, biting down as a wave of pain rocked his body, burning under the skin. The cords on his neck strained with the force of keeping his jaw locked as he tried to ride it out.

It didn't fade, growing worse, and he jerked around, fisting his

hand on his thigh, digging into the bandages under his uniform, trying to draw feeling from the dead nerves to overwhelm that in the live ones.

"Ssi-bal," he growled, fighting to sound angry instead of strained. "When did you leave? Do you know which targets are being hit?"

China didn't answer, and he spun around to see him examining his nails.

"China," he said lowly. "What is being bombed?"

His comrade sighed, looking north. "Pyongyang."

North whirled in the same direction, but couldn't see anything past the Kosan Hills. More blasts burned in his skin.

"How bad?" he demanded.

"Bad enough that I biked all the way here to catch you before you could drive into it."

Ssi-bal. It would have taken almost two hours to bike from there, but the bombing hadn't ended.

North tensed as he thought of all the jets he had seen flying in from the aircraft carriers off the coast, soaring north. He had watched several veer off to strike Hwanghae, so assumed they were hitting multiple targets.

But it looked like another all-out raid on Pyongyang.

"I think it's safe to say his steel production has fully recovered," China said softly.

Of course. Because America could import as many materials as he wanted, his companies stripping them from Peru and the Philippines and a dozen other places, an unending stream of supplies along lines that weren't being bombed, or even harassed. Now that his workers were back on the factory conveyor belts, his weapons production was back to being unlimited.

Even if he had ran out entirely, North knew the Yankee would have been fine. There would have been countries lining up to ship more steel to him so he could use it to keep destroying Korea, content to line their pockets at the expense of his people.

"Move," North ordered, storming the Jeep. "We need to get back there."

China didn't budge from the seat. "I actually came to make sure you'd stay away. I don't think you should be there right now."

North saw a flash of Hae's face as she offered to come to the hospital with him, and heard Chagang repeat those stupid fucking words from Han Eun-gol, and rage surged inside him.

"You do not tell me where I need to be!" he hissed in the foreigner's face. "Pyongyang is *my* capital and it is being bombed. I *need* to be there. And I do *not* need coddling."

China tipped his head at him. "I wouldn't give you the disservice of coddling you. It's more not wanting you to drive directly into an air raid over a plateau with no cover on it."

He knew that was a fucking lie. He wanted him to stay here for the same reason Hae had wanted to come see the injured children with him, because he thought he couldn't handle it, because he thought he would lose it and start fraying like he had back in July as they watched the Rubber Factory burn. He thought North couldn't take it and even if that wasn't the same as if his provinces thought that, it still made him want to hit him.

"Move!" he barked, jumping into the Jeep and shoving China aside bodily.

The other country caught himself before he could fall into the gap between the seats, settling into the passenger side as North threw the vehicle into reverse, gunning it out of the ditch and back onto the road.

"So you won't take me to the front, but you will take me into an active aerial bombardment?" China asked, arching a brow. "Your

concern for my well-being seems to come and go."

North hesitated before he could tear down the highway, even though his foot quivered with the force of resisting the urge. "You should stay here," he said stiffly.

"And trust you not to get our Jeep bombed?" he asked. "I don't think so. I have a feeling you would make me foot the bill. Let me get my bicycle, and we can go on your little suicide mission."

"It isn't a suicide mission," North snapped as he leaped lightly from the Jeep. "You made it through."

"A bicycle is a much less tempting target than a military vehicle."

North grit his teeth. He knew it was dangerous, he knew they'd be on a open stretch of highway for over a half hour, a perfect target for any jets sweeping away from Pyongyang to refuel or towards it to destroy.

But he couldn't just sit in the countryside while his city was bombed, not when it looked like this would be another day and night raid. He couldn't listen to the bombs fall in the distance, knowing they were killing his people but unable to *do* anything about it. He couldn't.

It had been hard enough to let the Chinese soldiers keep him from joining the battle. He'd only been able to because he had told the General he wouldn't go off anymore, and he had to stop letting his emotions get the better of him.

And he couldn't let any more of China's comrades die trying to keep him safe.

China kept himself in front of the Jeep as he fetched his borrowed bicycle from the side of the road, looking back at North as he did, making sure he wasn't about to drive away without him.

He should. He should leave him here, it would be safer.

But he couldn't. He would rather he got bombed at his side than kidnapped by some airdropped enemy guerrilla. At least it would

give him an excuse to send him home.

The other country arranged the bike on the back bench, then hopped back in.

"You should let me drive," he offered. "I'm sure I could outrun any Shooting Stars."

North had already hit the gas, the Jeep roaring down the highway. He didn't answer.

He needed to drive. He needed to have his hands around the wheel, feel the engine thrumming through him, or he was either going to pass out or start screaming.

The world blurred worse now, their speed turning it into streaks of red earth and blue sky that streamed by them like banners, then grey and brown as they shot through the pass, bursting from the Kosan Hills like a bullet from the chamber. North's eye zeroed in on the horizon, instantly seeing what had been hidden from him by the hills, the enormous swarm of planes over his capital, dipping and diving like a murder of deranged crows.

The road stretched out, long and exposed, across the flatland that had given Pyongyang its name, the only disruptions to the expanse the small hills to their right, sparse and far from the road, offering no shelter, nowhere to hide if one of those distant specks decided to use its guns on its way back to its carrier.

The burns on the pad of North's foot cracked as he pressed the gas pedal into the floor.

He drove like China, though straight as an arrow instead of veering around like he was considering off-roading, going fast enough to turn a thirty-minute drive into twenty.

They made it without encountering anything more than a reconnaissance plane that tested its guns on them, but didn't pursue after its shots went wide as they swerved.

The earth quaked and tremored, deafening blasts ringing out over Pyongyang as they entered the shadow of the circling murder of

jets. As they neared the neighbourhood on the south side of the Taedong, mud splattering from under their tires, a ball of fire bloomed from the city center, smoke pluming up towards the sky, reaching for the swarm of planes.

North's eye flicked between them like he was marking them for a sniper, identifying British craft and those with the insignia of Rhee's air force, Yankee machines bought on loans and slapped with an eagle that could have belonged on their former owner's flag, among the American-owned Skyraiders and Corsairs, and other fighters and light bombers.

"Do you have any idea how you're going to hide the Jeep?" China asked as they shot for the pontoon bridge across the Taedong, thankfully not destroyed yet. When North didn't answer, he said, "You're aware I don't have insurance on this, correct?"

"Shut up."

China sighed. "Ah, and here comes a plane. It was nice having private transportation while it lasted."

"Shut *up."* North hunched over the wheel, gripping it hard enough to hurt as their wheels slammed down on the wooden planks of the bridge, rattling along the floating rafts, locked on to the far shore, and a Corsair swept in on black wings.

Bullets peppered the bridge, shards of wood filling the air. North took one hand off the wheel, seizing China by the collar and slamming him down onto the floor without taking his eye off their destination, just as they were bombarded by the metallic crunch of rounds meeting their hood. One pinged off the edge of their windshield. The glass didn't break, but more came tearing through the canvas roof and out the back.

As another shot by his head close enough to hear the whine, North briefly regained the clarity of mind to realize that this had been too reckless. He should have left China on the outskirts.

But there was no going back. He could only shove the other man down as he tried to sit back up, and keep his foot on the gas.

The engine whined, the bridge clattered, and artillery blasted along the river, driving off the fighter jet before it could come back around. They hit the bank, the Jeep jumping as they transitioned from wood to mud, North's body screaming as he was slammed down in his seat, sending a wave of agony up his spine.

He didn't stop at the defenders around the bridgehead, not wanting to bring a target right into their midst. He shot through, straight into the maze of rubble, looking for somewhere to stash the vehicle.

An explosion roared nearby and rubble rained down on them, chunks of cement cracking the windshield and bouncing off the canvas. Jets screamed past as a wing of Panthers shot overhead, pumping the anti-aircraft defenders to the north full of bullets, softening them up to clear the way for the bombers on their heels.

"Invaders," China noted, tense, and North almost said 'I *noticed*' before hearing a sour note emerge from the discordant harmony around them and realizing what he meant.

He shot a brief glance over his shoulder, confirming that two B-26 Invaders had broken off and were sweeping right for them, before fixing his eye on the road, needing to focus to keep them from crashing.

As they reached a side street, he yanked the wheel hard to the right, the Jeep screeching in protest as it made the sharp turn, and the jets went roaring by.

But there was nowhere to hide in the flattened sea of debris, and they were still in full view as the planes wheeled back around, coming in for another pass.

'Ssi-bal, ssi-bal, ssi-bal.'

North took a another sharp turn away from the river, not wanting to pin them between the water and the city. Bullets rained from twelve guns, filling the air with puffs of smoke and clouds of shrapnel as the Invaders went by again, and again, chasing the Jeep as it tore through the ruined streets, over chunks of rubble and

through any side streets he could find, following his mental map.

They were toying with them, using their guns when they could just drop their bombs and end them, trying to play cat and mouse in his city. North could almost hear the Yankee pilots joking over their radios, competing to see which would be the one that took the kill, and it filled what blood was left in his veins with fire.

They didn't know it was the Korean and Chinese Countryhumans down here. For all they knew it was one of his people they were terrorizing, watching them like a child watched an ant, just waiting to burn it with a glass. It made him want to-

"They're coming back," China said, twisted in his seat. "Comrade, I think it might be time to ditch the Jeep."

"No." North wasn't going to be the reason his ally lost another vehicle.

"I promise you don't have to pay me back for it."

"I said no!" North snarled, then they rounded another corner and he saw what he had been dreading.

The street was blocked with rubble that hadn't been there when he'd left, stacked cairns of stone and cement from the past raid had tumbled down into the street with the force of the bombings, creating a barricade. The bombers whined from behind them, coming in fast.

"Ssi-bal." He tried to lift his foot, but China's slammed down on it, keeping it on the gas as he seized the wheel from North.

"Get off!" the Korean hissed, trying to wrest it back.

"Take your foot off that pedal and we get blown up," China said, voice tight. "I can get us past this, just trust me. Please, comrade," he added as North hesitated.

He tightened his grip on the wheel, the drone growing louder, vibrating his meat on his bones. Then he tore his hands away.

He was *not* getting blown up again. Kim Yong-hwan wouldn't let him live it down.

"Keep your foot on the gas." China shifted over, half-standing as he leaned over the wheel, eyes fixed on the blockade they were barreling towards.

As it got rapidly closer, every instinct in North's body screamed at him to slam the brakes or take the wheel back from China, loud enough that he had to sink his nails into his palms and turn away to focus on the planes about to reach them.

Then suddenly China's elbow hit him in the ribs as he wrenched the wheel sideways, there was a mechanical scream as their back end swung around, and the world around him was spinning. The chassis of the Jeep shuddered as it smashed into something, followed by a moment of weightlessness.

North had time to think *'**Damn** it, China,'* before their vehicle slammed back onto the ground, tires squealing with the stench of burned rubber as the other country pulled the wheel hard to the side again.

Then they were moving forward, not stopping as the rounds from the aerial machine guns punched holes in their bumper.

North's eye flew open, incredulous, as he realized they had somehow made it over the blockage and were speeding down the street again, China expertly dodging piles of rubble. He jerked over to see him grinning at him wide enough to expose the yellow spots on his canines.

"How did you do that?" he demanded, glancing back to make sure the barricade hadn't been blown up without him noticing.

"What can I say?" His comrade laughed, eyes glowing. "I'm a good driver. Now where to?"

"We'll try to make it to Moran Hill." North shifted over so China could climb onto his seat to hold the wheel better, sitting half on his lap. "We might be able to hide the Jeep there."

But they didn't make it. For a few streets he used his mental map of the city to send China north, evading the B-26's chasing them, and the bombs that fell nearby, obscuring their sight with rolling clouds of dust that burst through from side streets.

But as they caught sight of Taedongmun towering above the rubble, the bombers grew bored. They were a straight shot for the hill now, but the Invaders came in fast, one veering off to wheel around in front of them, spraying the open ground with rounds and forcing China to drift sideways, away from cover. The other came in from behind, and North's jaw creaked as he watched its black-painted belly point up as it ascended, putting distance between itself and the ground.

"China," he said tightly.

His comrade's hands tightened on the wheel. "Almost there."

"China!"

Screw it. North refused to get blown up again.

He wrapped his arms around China's waist, heaving them both sideways and out of the Jeep. He tried to cushion him, but at the speed they were going when they landed they tumbled. North heard a loud *'snap!'* as he hit the mud and had time to hope it was his ribs and not his comrade's before his head was slamming into the ground, making his vision flash white as they rolled away.

There wasn't any time to recover. The moment they stopped moving, he surged up, hissing as pain cramped his chest and the white turned to black, the particles eating up his vision as he staggered, trying to find China but only seeing darkness.

A hand grabbed his, and then he was half running, half being dragged somewhere. He instinctively tried to tear free until China's muted voice shouted, "Comrade, I appreciate the dedication, but I care more about us being blown up than the Jeep!"

That was good, because the Invader had done what he'd known it would, aiming for where they would be instead of where they were,

and even though the vehicle had slowed somewhat without North crushing the gas pedal, it still shot directly into the hundred-pound bomb that dropped from the bomber's underwing, exploding in a burst of fire and thick black smoke.

North didn't see this, too busy being shoved behind the granite base of Taedongmun. His back met the wall as China tried to press him into it, but his head spun, sending him to his knees. His comrade followed him down, trying to wrap his arms around him for some reason. North was trying to thrash free when his vision went again, replaced by a plume of fire as it roared through the tunnel under the gate, followed by choking smoke. It filled his mouth, scorching his throat and sucking the oxygen from his lungs, leaving him unable to breathe. The stone behind them shook, something cracking overhead.

Then everything went still, the only sound the ringing in his head, the only motion the roiling of smoke. He still couldn't breathe, and now his thoughts were melting together like molten steel, dribbling out of his ear slits. Hands grabbed at his body and panic shot through him, before he realized it was still China, a blurry olive shape in the smoke, a flash of red where his scarf had slipped.

He reached out, trying to cover his comrade's face like he had in Seoul, but just ended up slumping over onto the ground.

"Don't touch me," he couldn't hear himself slur, only felt the words rumble in his skull.

The hands obeyed, letting go, only for a spike to stab through his brain a second later.

North lurched up, coughing and choking as he was suddenly able to breathe and think again, spitting smoke-stained saliva on the muddy ground before glaring at China and his little vial of smelling salts.

"Sorry," his comrade said, not sounding it. "But we need to get under the gate before the smoke clears."

North dragged himself over, hiding under the arched tunnel with

him as the B-26s circled, waiting to see if they'd eliminated their target. The smoke was thicker in the confines, and the moment he stopped moving, his vision blurred again, only clearing when the smelling salts hit him once more.

"Just a question," China said while he hacked, trying to clear his throat. "But when your provinces were checked into the hospital to recover from their blood loss, were you perhaps *also* supposed to be there?"

North put his hand over the crook of his arm, protecting the patch that covered his track marks, even though they couldn't be seen past his uniform or the burns.

"And let me guess- you haven't been eating anything to even attempt to replenish yourself?"

"None of your business," the Korean muttered.

He had. He had given in and eaten one full serving of the rice ration a day, trying to recover his blood cells and stop making the edges of his vision go dark every time he stood up or turned his head too fast.

He was starting to realize he hadn't been as successful at that as he had thought.

"So if I understand-" Something in China's smile looked tight. "You have been driving across the country for the six days, touring active combat zones, while suffering from severe blood loss *and* starvation. Alone."

"No," North said flatly, though that was exactly right.

His comrade stared at him for a long moment, then said, "I wonder if your General ever thinks about throttling you."

"He does not." But his provinces probably did.

"You understand why your denials about being suicidal continue to ring hollow, right?"

"I am not suicidal," North growled irritably.

"Then perhaps you should bring a comrade with you the next time you do something stupid."

"No."

Outside, the drone overhead grew distant as the Invaders finally flew away, off to bomb other parts of the city.

North tipped his head back against the cool stone, feeling his skinned head pulse against it, trying to suck in a breath that was more air than ash, and not succeeding. Then he dragged himself to his feet.

"Maybe you should- And there he goes."

He staggered away from China, trying not to balance himself on the wall or hold his aching ribs. He had allowed his light head to make him stumble. He needed to stop being so weak around the foreigner.

Smoke still eddied outside as he stumbled around the side of Taedongmun, being met with the sight of the burning skeleton of the Willy's MB Jeep lying mangled in a crater, more debt added to the pile of what he already owed China.

He turned on numb feet, looking up at Taedongmun. It was still standing, the detonation too far away to destroy it, but the colourful wood was soot-blackened, and several of the tiles had shattered. The crack he'd heard had been one of the pillars that supported the second story being splintered by the force of the blast, jagged splinters sticking out like broken bones.

North looked up as China came to stand behind him, watching the hundreds of planes circle high above, finding the old gate so they knew where their next target was in the sea of rubble, before soaring off to destroy it. The bombs shuddered through his boots as every bit of debris in his capital was ground down again and again, over and over.

They had already been being hit hard these past two weeks. The

20th had seen thirty-eight Superfortresses swarm the city, and hundreds of tons of bombs, making sure their manufacturing district and supply storages couldn't recover, just like they were today. It had happened again on the 21st, and the 23rd. The rains had stopped them for a day, but on the 25th they were back for more marshalling yards and storage areas, and the few parts of their factories they had managed to rebuild since last month, cutting highways, severing railways, sending their bridges crashing back into the Taedong.

And that was only Pyongyang. It wasn't counting the hundreds of buildings, dozens of villages in Hwanghae, the marshalling yards near the front and in Sinuiju, the Sariwon Cement Factory, the entire village of Namyang-ri, the Hamhung factory that produced most of their grenades, the Kyomipo Steel Mill, the supply lines between Chongjin and Wonsan, the fucking hydroelectric plants at Lake Changjin *again,* Pukchon, Kansong, Kangdong, all along the front. North had huddled in foxholes with Chinese soldiers as the earth shook around them and their comrades died outside, he had ran into the smoke and fire to drag those comrades back when they couldn't afford to, and watched them mourn, and the bombs had never stopped. There wasn't anything of real worth left in Pyongyang but his people and still the bombs never fucking *stopped.* If they couldn't find a target then they just invented one. A village *could* house soldiers, a straw hut *could* be used to store weapons, a bridge that hadn't been repaired *might* be soon. It wasn't a successful sortie unless something burned, even if there was nothing left to.

North leaned down, picking up a piece of bomb shrapnel, still hot to the touch.

It wasn't enough to turn his country to bones and rubble. America and his puppets wanted to destroy everything, to leave nothing but ash. And then he would fly in to erase Taedongmun too, when it no longer served a purpose.

And no one would stop him.

"Why aren't they here?"

"Pardon?" China asked.

North turned, still clutching the shrapnel in his hand. "If all the people that wrote those letters care, then why aren't they *here?"*

"Comrade-"

"Why aren't they rising up against their governments?" North snapped, the words he'd been holding back since reading those letters tearing out. "Why aren't they going on strike and protesting conscription, or refusing to make the weapons that are being used to kill my people? Why aren't they filling the streets and shutting down their production and at least *trying* to make them *listen?"*

China stared steadily at him. He knew why.

"My people fought the Occupation," North growled. "They organized, they protested, they *fought.* They cobbled together weapons by hand and went up against an army that outweighed them in everything except will. And the ones that couldn't take up arms shut down cities and factories, they cut off the Japs' supply and refused to feed their war machine. We fought however we had to, even if it got us imprisoned, even if it killed us, because we *cared."*

'Your country is an inspiration to all of us.'

The shrapnel cut into his fingers, soaking the bandages with fresh blood.

He didn't *want* Korea to be an inspiration, he didn't want to be a symbol of resistance or a beacon of hope to foreigners that had never had to resist themselves. He wasn't like China with his grand ambitions of being a red star in the East. He had only ever wanted to be that for his people.

The General had said that they weren't just fighting to Liberate their nation, but for the peace of all the world, that they would defend it to the last. But why should they? Why should North's people have to give their lives for the peace of those that were too weak and cowardly to fight for it themselves, or to do anything more than write letters, like he was a mercenary they couldn't even be bothered to pay with money? Why should they add their banner

to their cause, fight for *their* peace, when they had never fought for Korea's?

"If they care about Korea then why aren't they *doing* anything?" he demanded, voice raw from the smoke. "Why can America get away with poisoning my people and destroying everything we ever worked for and violating international law without anyone lifting a fucking finger to stop him? Why does he have seventeen armies willing to eradicate my people for him, *sixteen damn countries* willing to sell him anything he needs and send their soldiers to die while slaughtering mine, and all I have is *you?"*

China gave him a sorrowed look, killing North's snarl on his face.

"I didn't mean it like- *Ssi-bal."* He spun in a tight circle, wanting to bash his skull of the granite gate until one of them cracked.

"I appreciate your soldiers," he said, spinning back, even though he didn't want to face him. But the faces of the 63rd Army and all those he'd met down at the front were burning in his mind. "I didn't visit them to punish myself, I visited them because I wanted them to know that Korea- that *I* am incredibly thankful for everything- they have done for us. I just-"

He snarled in frustration, holding the sharp edge of the metal tighter. He should just say what he wanted to say, but he *couldn't.*

"I know," China said quietly, stepping closer. "It's alright."

"It *isn't!"* North hissed as his city shook and his skin burned. "My people are dying, my country is being destroyed, and no one fucking *cares!"*

No one ever had. The world hadn't changed at all since 1910, when Korea had been annexed and not a single country had done anything more than protest meaninglessly. The majority had supported it, America giving it his approval and making agreements in private even as he paid lip service to disapproving in public. And even the ones that had been against it had came around, making deals with Japan, buying the materials and goods he had worked North's people like slaves to mine and make, moving their

companies to his land to pay taxes to the Japanese and strip his resources away just like them, the exact same damn thing they would do if America won.

The world might have CCCP now, but what good was he if he was hobbled by the atom bomb? He could sell him planes and lend him pilots and teach his, he could bring canned goods and fucking *letters,* and the other Socialists could donate food and take in his orphans and none of it *changed* anything. None of it changed that they weren't willing to do anything more than hope he would win, because if he didn't there would be one less country for them to trade with. Profit was a good enough lure for the capitalist nations to sacrifice their people for, so care should be enough for Socialists. North loved his people more than anything and would never speak to another foreigner again if he had the choice, but it had been good enough for him. So *why-?*

"To someone that's used to fighting for what they believe in, not knowing how can look like apathy," China said, not looking away as a bomb roared from a few streets away and the earth under their feet shook.

"If they don't know how to fight, then they should *learn!"* North cried. *"I* learned, my people learned, yours learned. And now more of my children are going to have to because no one else will!"

China was quiet for a second, then said, "You're right. There isn't any excuse for inaction. There never has been. But comrade-"

He took another small step forward, North hunching as he looked him in the eyes.

"My people *have* learned how to fight, and they're choosing to fight for you. I know you don't take that for granted. So please don't deny what they showed you at Chorweon, either." He lowered his voice seriously. "If you still haven't read the letters from our comrades' families, and all of my countrymen, then don't say China's people don't care."

North turned his head, watching a cluster of straw huts across the river disappear in the blaze of an incendiary bomb.

"Even if no one else in the world cares about Korea, they do," China told him. "The Chinese people care about Korea. China cares."

His eyes dipped, then lifted again.

"I care."

North averted his gaze, looking down at the shrapnel in his hand, watching blood well around the distorted, jagged edges, warped beyond repair. Then he dropped it into the mud with a dull impact.

"It's not enough."

China's lips parted, then he dipped his head. "I know," he said quietly.

North walked over to still-smoldering Jeep, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the letter from Norway, tearing it methodically into little pieces, then casting them into the flames, watching them burn.

'I can't think the world is against us. I won't,' Kangwon had said.

But it was. Every capitalist and Imperialist nation in the world, the ones that held the power, was against them, and the majority just did what they were told, content to watch Korea burn so long as the flames never licked them. And the people that weren't were too useless to put the fires out. They would only stand by and watch, and apologize to the ashes after, like that Norwegian, like-

The more his provinces understood that, the safer they would be. He shouldn't have let them read the other letters and allowed them to delude themselves otherwise. China... Their Chinese comrades had written because the Koreans had once helped them, and because this had become another shared fight, even if North despised it. But the other senders had written them to assuage their own guilt, to allow themselves to pretend it was fine that they were doing nothing to stop the extermination of North's people because at least they had paid the price to post a damn letter.

But words weren't enough. They didn't change that *their* neighbours were the ones holding his in camps, that *their* countries

were Yankee puppets gleefully slaughtering his people, that Pyongyang was shaking around his ear slits like the earth was about to split open and swallow it whole, or that Choe Kang-ok was-

Words didn't change anything. 'Sorry' didn't change anything.

From behind him, China said softly, "We'll keep trying to make it enough, Chaoxian."

Wordlessly, North turned, limping on feet that bled with every footstep off into the streets of his capital, burning like Seoul after his brother had given the order, to do what he always had and evidently no one else could.

Fight.

August 29th, 1952 was the largest air raid during the entire war, with one thousand four hundred and three sorties carried out against Pyongyang alone, a city where already no buildings over a story tall remained whole. I think the reason for this will become clear soon.

Also I think North deserves accolades for finally not misdirecting his rage at China, even when operating on approximately one litre of blood. It's a low bar, but he has managed to clear it.

The Old Silence

A truck painted an olive so drab it was nearly brown enough to blend in with the dying foliage on the hills rolled down the highway towards Pyongyang. Its thick, corrugated wheels crunched against the dirt like they were rolling over a boneyard, the sounds magnified by the quiet that hung over the vehicle.

The silence was familiar to SH. It was that old shroud that tasted like bitter green tea swallowed to wash away worse flavours, and sounded like a clock ticking down. It was the silence that hung over one night a week, as the door opened and blistered, rag-swathed feet stomped in, over the clink of a spoon on porcelain, chopsticks too sharp to be allowed, and filled the pauses after she asked meaningless questions, so much heavier than the total hush when she was alone.

But she was the one not answering now. She'd been so successful at it that North Hamgyong had finally given up even trying to get a reaction out of her months ago, and now they sat in the back of the troop carrier under that heavy silence, as they had all the way from when she had got in at Hamhung.

SH was no longer afraid of speaking the wrong words. There was nothing left to fall apart. North Hamgyong had already lifted the corpse cloth when he had said what he had to her, showing that it was wrapped around something that had long since rotted.

It hurt. She wouldn't pretend it didn't. That was the difference between her and him- she had wanted the body to be fresh, still capable of being revived. He didn't.

'I wish I hadn't missed.'

She couldn't help the way her eyes flicked to him, sitting on the edge of the truck bed with his back to the open road behind them, glaring at the shoes of the model soldiers they were packed in with, looking as dour as ever, worse.

One of his guards noticed, and maybe saw the dark thing stirring behind her eyes, because he shifted slightly, blocking her view with one of his legs.

The soldier next to her cleared his throat. "Looks like we're almost to Pyongyang."

Some of their comrades actually flinched at his voice. It had been since at least Yangdok that anyone had spoken.

Which was *not* her fault. She'd been chatting with them all the way from her capital, it was just the other province she was ignoring. It was the negative aura he was putting off that had finally killed the conversation.

"Mm." SH turned to smile at Bang Eul-sik. "Are you excited to see the capital?"

Her comrade looked down from where he was peering over the edge of the raised sides of the truck, straining for some sight of the city through the lightening sky.

"For sure," he said excitedly, before his expression sorrowed. "Beng-sung and me always said we'd see it together."

SH stood, her spine aching as it stretched, bones pushing against her crisped skin.

"You'll find her," she assured him, laying a hand on his shoulder, which now wore the broad-banded epaulet of a senior sergeant.

Korea had given her the task, but she still had to hope she wouldn't need to introduce him to Choe Jong-mi. It would be better if she could match her with another good man, and Bang Eul-sik could be reunited with the woman he already loved.

"I hope so," her comrade murmured, staring ahead, eyes brimming with sorrow.

SH heard North Hamgyong make a skeptical noise, and had to stare into the grey, too, painting back the dark with the image of someone falling off the back of the truck as it hit a bump, and

cracking his skull open on a convenient rock.

They'd left the thick fogs behind at the coast, turning inland south of Hamhung, but mist still eddied here, swirling around in the awful dawn light like inkbrushed smoke around a dying fire. They'd taken the northern road, heading through the mountains for more security for their precious model soldiers, so all SH could see through the sooty grey pall was the vague suggestion of the Hyongje Mountains, spots where ink that hadn't been diluted enough had dripped on the page.

She shivered, turning pointedly away, facing their soldiers instead.

The six of them all wore the ensign of a model soldier, the little medal pinned to their breasts, awarded for their exemplary political studies and service records. They were the most model of the model, invited to the capital to celebrate tomorrow's Foundation Day to represent their companies. SH had been glad to see that one of them was a woman, passing a smoke back and forth with the man next to her as she idly twirled one of her braids around a finger.

Bang Eul-sik's entire company was a model one, with his platoon in particular standing out. They'd fulfilled the requirements for the designation while on coastal defense, scoring high points on their tactical, shooting, and political training, taking perfect care of the State's equipment, advancing Party education and maintaining strict discipline, and taking good care of their soldiers. They had the right to fly a model company flag now, and had upheld it.

There were too many names SH didn't recognize when Bang Eul-sik had listed them to her, and too few she did. But at least Kim Kwon-chol was still alive (and chain-smoking), along with a few others from her time in Hamhung on the temporary retreat.

"What about you comrades?" she asked the soldiers here, her voice bright and cheery to offset the creeping dawn, and North Hamgyong's gloom. "Are you looking forward to seeing Pyongyang?"

The woman- Jon Yong-hui- brightened. "Sure am! My ma's always

wanted to go, but we never had the money fer the trip. I'm hopin' I can git a picture to send back fer her."

"You'll have your picture taken for being model soldiers, so I'm sure you'll be able ter. To," SH corrected, flushing.

The thick accent that dripped from Jon Yong-hui's words, from the northern part of their province, was contagious.

The woman laughed as the others chimed in, each saying what they were looking forward to- the Taedong, Moran Hill, the old city gates.

"Not that there's any of Pyongyang *left* to see," North Hamgyong muttered.

"The landmarks are all still there," SH said, louder. "If it was spring, you'd even be able to see all of the Eight Views."

Except for monk-spotting at Yongmyong Temple. Some of the Buddhists had survived, but the temple hadn't.

"I'd like to see the moon from Pubyok Pavilion," Bang Eul-sik said wistfully, staring out at the mist. "But I think I'll wait."

"I feel a bit like I'm killing the mood," one of the men said when it was his turn. "But I'm hoping to see if I can find my sister. She's been missing since the American occupation. We were from Chunghwa, so I'm sure she would've either gone to Pyongyang to try and lay low with the crowds, or at least stopped on her way through. I'd like to ask around, put the word out, y'know?"

SH's heart ached, but before she could ask for the woman's name, someone else spoke.

"She's probably dead."

Rage pierced the wall like a bullet, the dark thing thrusting its maw through, as SH's nails sunk into her palms.

North Hamgyong, of course, curling his lip as he finally looked up, like he was disgusted the man could even *consider* he had a chance

of finding his family.

She should've taken more time to try and stop the gap with paint, but the shocked faces of their soldiers didn't give her the time.

"She is *not!"* she snapped, and their comrades' heads jerked towards her, almost looking more taken aback.

She sucked in a breath, painting the sprays of blood on the rock brighter, splattering across the road and the hole, before pasting a smile on her face.

"Excuse Comrade North Hamgyong," she said to the soldier in a softer voice. "He's just returned from Chongjin, and you know how it is on the coasts. He's not in high spirits right now."

North Hamgyong grimaced, and she did, too, hating that she had to make excuses for him when she knew that's what they were. He was *always* like this, whether it was coming back from the ship-blasted coast and the rubble of his capital or waking up first thing in the morning on a holiday.

"It's... It's okay," the man managed after a moment. "I know it's- I know it's a long shot. It's been so long..." His eyes dipped to the floor, before he shook his head. "But I have to try. I told her I'd come home some day, and I did. Now it's my job to bring her home. Even if..."

He trailed off, and Jon Yong-hui patted him on the back, offering him her cigarette.

"You'll bring her home," SH said firmly, as he took a shaky drag. "Alive."

The soldier gave her a thankful smile. North Hamgyong's eyes darkened, and he opened his mouth, but one of his bodyguards leaned over, whispering something in his 'ear,' and he shut it, glowering at him.

SH wished their guards had been with them in that alleyway, to stop *those* words from ever leaving his mouth.

No. It was good that he'd finally said them. It was good she didn't have to waste any more time and energy on someone who wouldn't change, or any compassion and care on a man who had never had any for her. It had allowed her to finally cut herself free from that anchor.

The silence fell back over the truck, even heaver than before, as they crossed the final ri to Pyongyang.

SH simmered, studiously avoiding catching even a glimpse of pine green as she painted the wall over with the same bloody reds and blacks she used on her real paintings.

She'd been doing good at holding back her anger around the male province, refusing to give in and let the thing out when he tried to shove his verbal splinters under her skin. You wanted the people you cared about to be good people that thought good things about you, so it hurt when they didn't. But you expected an awful person to have awful feelings and say awful words, so it was easy to ignore them, to let them shatter off the wall. It was easier than before anyway.

But he had gone too far today.

But for a moment, as they left the hills behind and crossed the bridge over the Taedong's tributary to round Moran Hill, and the mist was burned away by the rising sun, revealing the city across it, the dark thing stilled. Not in peace, but horror.

At her side, Bang Eul-sik sucked in a breath. "Dear god," he whispered.

Pyongyang spread out before them like a vast lake of debris, painted in browns, greys, and blacks, all the colours SH used sparingly in her motivationals. She could see all the way across the city to the plains and western hills, the view only interrupted by the occasional cluster of chosonjips or mud huts, and a few twisted steel towers. Every single smokestack was gone, even the ones that had been hanging on before, leaning or standing over a factory that wasn't there. The south of the city blocked the sight of the Taedong's bend, but not with houses. Instead a jumbled mess of

factories and dormitories, a sea of spires and confusing shapes lined the horizon like blobs of paint slapped haphazardly on a canvas. The shell of Moranbong Theatre was entirely crumbled now, chunks of white stone and broken pillars spread out at the base of Moran Hill. Korea would not be giving tomorrow's speech on the steps.

Every time she was sure that no more damage could be inflicted on their cities, that there was nothing left to destroy, she always returned to find that America had managed it. The last time she'd visited Hamhung, it had been a collection of houses encircling the decimated center. When she had arrived three weeks ago, it was nothing but a smoking crater between the hills that were supposed to shelter it, and her people now had to hide in like animals. And Hungnam... She hadn't been supposed to get so close to the coast alone, but she'd climbed the hillside above it, needing to encourage at least some of the defenders keeping her capital free and her safe from South's mind-r- the Commands.

It was a charnel ground. The only things that belonged in it were ruined homes and soon-to-be-dead soldiers, completely at the mercy of those *stupid* ships floating just out of reach, firing their unending stream of death. Even as SH watched, more blood had soaked her land, filling her with a fury that yearned to be spent, but couldn't be turned to anything more than trying to solve the problems of her people that still lived.

Hungnam was death. It had been ever since the Yanks devastated it on their retreat, tossing it aside once they'd drained all use from it. And every time she came back to Pyongyang, it grew a little closer to looking just like it.

One thousand four hundred and fifty sorties, the largest air assault of the war so far. That was the estimate that had came through with Korea's telegraph. *'Aug 29th sor 1450,'* the blunt update that had allowed him to justify 'wasting' paper to tell her and the others that he'd made it through.

But she knew it wouldn't have been unscathed. Even though she had burns on her head where Korea didn't, she knew his were worse than hers overall. And her own body was...

Sometimes when she looked down at it, it didn't feel like hers. Just a chunk of meat that managed to be raw and burnt at the same time, whose nerves wouldn't even respond when she tried to prod pain from them. She had to move her fingers and remaining toes one by one, making sure they obeyed, before the queasy, panicked feeling would release her from its grip, and the dark thing gave her at least a chance to paint it away.

She had to change and bathe even quicker than she usually did now. She wasn't sure how Korea did it at all.

The thing stirred from its stupor as she soaked in the destruction of their city, and she swiftly wielded her brush to paint a fireball spiralling from the sky with burning Yankees in it between her and the dark before it could break free. Rage was the right thing to feel when the Capital of the Revolution was laid out before her like some hideous Western abstract 'art,' but she couldn't let their soldiers see that she was so affected by it.

"I know it looks bad," she said brightly. "But all the important factories are still underground." She painted a pale man taking a grenade to the face as she saw the aftermath of her munitions factory. "And Pubyok Pavilion is still around."

She hoped. She couldn't see it from this side of the hill. For all she knew, it could've gone the way of Yongmyong Temple, and the Rubber Factory and the Paper Mill and the Synthetic Fibres Factory and-

"And like General Kim Il-sung says- 'Mankind is the most precious being in the world. No matter how much the enemy may destroy, it can be restored, so long as there are people.'"

SH tried to paint the quote on the wall to muffle the thing's growling, but it just made it louder, the way Hwang had at Hungnam, as he tried desperately to stop her from giving that Yank man what he deserved.

'We can rebuild again, to even greater heights.'

They could, and they would. But it didn't change the fact that the

destruction had happened, was *still* happening, and that their most precious things, the lives of their people that they had lost, couldn't be rebuilt or restored. And that even for so many that survived, who they'd been before couldn't be either.

Her eyes slid to the side, to North Hamgyong, staring at the city with that useless look on his face, not even bothering to hide what he was feeling from their people.

Some things just couldn't be fixed.

"We still have our people." SH dragged her gaze back to the ones in front of her. "And you'll all have the honour of seeing Pyongyang like this, so what we'll turn it into after we win will shine even brighter."

She smiled at North Hamgyong, daring him to give another pessimistic comment. She'd just *love* to tell Korea. With his fuse cut even shorter lately, it wouldn't be pretty.

For the male province, anyway. *She* would love to paint it on the wall.

But he kept his mouth shut, giving her a hateful glare. She smiled tighter.

"Comrade SH is right," Bang Eul-sik said, tearing away from the ruined city. "It's like a fresh start. The Yanks are doing the labour of tearing down all the colonial and feudalist trappings the Japanese and the monarchy left behind for us, so we don't have to waste money on it. All we have to do is build new buildings, ones for the people."

'All' was a simple word when SH knew the rebuilding would take a decade at least. But she would use that the next time South Pyongan was moping over all the architecture they'd lost. Though she'd leave out the part about the feudalist trappings. Some people wanted to erase everything from their unequal past, but Korea had made it clear they were to preserve the good parts of their history. The old palaces were only wicked when grand feasts had been held in their gilded halls every night while the masses starved in

chogajips outside the gates, and women had been treated like chattel inside. With the kings and princes gone, they were just beautiful buildings. Ones that raised the hair on SH's arms, like King Taejo's villa in Hamhung did, telling her great suffering had taken place there, but still beautiful. And her cousin was very firmly on the side of 'old buildings cool.' Reminding her about all the ones that had been destroyed wouldn't do any good. But the Japanese buildings? *That* could lift her spirits.

"Mhm." Jon Yong-hui placed her fist over her heart as she looked away from the destruction. "I'll make sure I get my picture now, so one day I can show my kids what our glorious capital used to look like when they don't believe me."

"It won't be the capital then," one of the others pointed out. "Seoul'll be."

"Pyongyang will always be the Capital of the Revolution," the man whose sister was missing said proudly.

SH beamed as they recovered from their momentary shock and dismay to enthusiastically discuss what their hometowns would look like once they were rebuilt and improved, quickly recovering their morale, as expected of model soldiers.

North Hamgyong, predictably, was grinding his teeth and glowering. But no one cared about him, least of all SH.

They reached the city proper just as the sun's light overpowered the dawn, forcing it to slink away in retreat, and their driver stopped near Moran Hill so SH and North Hamgyong could get out. Korea should be somewhere on the other side, waiting for all the provinces to arrive so they could give their reports on their efforts in their provinces. Barring any air raid-related delays they'd probably be the last ones.

"Thank you for the good company, comrades," she said, the thing behind the wall twitching in anticipation. "Enjoy Foundation Day."

They wished her one back, and she turned to Bang Eul-sik.

"I don't think we'll have the same ride back, but it was good seeing you again, comrade. Tell Comrade Kim Kwon-chol and the others I say hello, and to keep working hard."

Her friend grinned, giving a salute. "They'll be glad to hear it, Comrade SH."

"And we'll try to organize the searching more methodically," she added. "It's just difficult right now with how chaotic everything is."

"I know," Bang Eul-sik said, more soberly. "I don't expect the State to drop everything to focus on it. But I had to write. I had to do something for Beng-sung."

He already looked so different than from when SH had first met him. The freshness was gone from his face, aging him five years when it had 'only' been two, and a thick scar curved across his forehead from a close call with a shell fired from a ship. She wondered if his fiancée would even recognize him.

She hoped he could recognize her. If she was alive, she hoped she could recognize herself.

"You are," SH assured him. "You're keeping our country free so we can go to Busan someday to find her, if she isn't in the north, and so that she'll have a place to come back to."

He dipped his head, swallowing his emotion, and she turned to the man with the missing sister, asking for her name.

"Pyeon Pok-yon," he replied, doffing his cap. "She should be eighteen by now."

SH's stomach roiled at the idea of a woman that young travelling across the country as the Yankee army advanced, alone, but she only nodded confidently.

"I'll ask around with the refugees," she promised him.

"You lucked out with your family name," Bang Eul-sik said with a tight-lipped smile. "Not many Pyeons around, not like 'Kim.' I've already heard about one Kim Beng-sung that isn't mine."

SH had found two in her search over the past year. But she hadn't told him about them after she'd confirmed they weren't his fiancée. It would just be cruel.

"I'll only count myself lucky when I see her again," Pyeon Pok-yon's brother said solemnly.

"You will," SH told him, hoping she was right.

As the truck rolled away, off to find a way to navigate the streets cluttered with debris, SH turned slowly to North Hamgyong.

"Looks like they fucked the damn marshalling yard again," he muttered, glaring across the city. "Tell Korea I'll be at the bunker tonight for my report. He's just going to order me to go fix that shit anyway. Not that there's a point."

"What was *that?"*

The other province swung his head over to glower at her. "Finally admitting I fucking exist?"

SH glared at him icily. "Why would you say that to Comrade Pyeon?"

He curled his lip. "Because his sister's definitely fucking dead. You know damn well the kind of shit the Yanks and their traitors would do if they caught her. And that's if she didn't freeze to death in that fucking cold-ass winter."

SH had been trying not to think the same thoughts, but him voicing them still made the dark thing growl.

"That's *if* they caught her," she shot back. "And *if* she didn't make it to Sinuiju or one of the Liberated zones in the hills."

"If she did, then why the fuck do you think she hasn't reported herself to a People's Committee to get relocated back to Chunghwa?" the man asked, irked.

"There are plenty of reasons someone might not report themselves." They felt safer where they were, they'd been forced to

help the enemy and were wary of the offer of voluntary surrender, thinking they might be punished anyway, they didn't want to bother the people that could help them.

"You think a woman on her own wouldn't take advantage of the rations for a dependent?" North Hamgyong demanded. "She's fucking dead, South Hamgyong. "

The dark thing slammed into the wall, scrabbling to get to him, and SH didn't do anything to stop it.

"Even if she is, you don't have to *tell* him that!" she cried, advancing on him. "You can let him keep him keep believing he'll find her, that there's a *hope,* at least."

"What's the point?" the man snapped in her face as she bristled up at him. "The longer he holds out thinking he has any chance of saving her, the worse it'll fucking be when he realizes he *can't."*

The words struck the wall with full force, opening a crack that the thing gleefully dug its talons into.

It was clear now to SH why her brother had been so hopeless all those years she'd been caged, and why it hadn't lifted when they were out. Why he had made that promise.

Because he'd had nothing to fight for. At some point, he had given up on her, given up hoping she could ever be free. And she had to wonder- when? As he'd stood over her on New Year's and promised to kill her, or as the days grew colder in those last weeks, and the time on it ran out?

Or had he given up from the start? Had he made that promise with absolutely no hope in his heart that one day she would be free, only that he would get to put an end to her humiliation with his own hands?

It had taken her over four decades to finally give up on him. She had went through what she had, *done* what she had, for *him,* suffered through every single one of those days for the chance that someday they might both be free, and then put up with his cruelty

for *thirty-three* more years because she just couldn’t stop herself from slamming her palms on the chest of that corpse, trying desperately to feel the beat of that organ inside it again, even though she knew she never would.

But had he given up on her since the very beginning?

'Then why couldn't you have just left?'

"For siblings who actually love each other, it's worse to give up." She threw the words at him like knives. "But *you* wouldn't know that, would you?"

His face contorted, showing his yellowed teeth as darkness flashed across his eyes.

"Neither would you," he hissed. "And *you* don't have any right to talk about fucking giving up. Who the *fuck* gave up?"

She bared her teeth up at him with the dark thing, taking a step forward that both he and it eagerly mimicked. She could see the gleam in his eye, wanting to push her to the edge, wanting to finally succeed at hurting her again, like it was the only thing that gave him any bit of satisfaction in the middle of this war, and *she* was the cruel one for taking it from him.

"Who gave up?" he asked again, hands balled at his sides. "Who gave up since the very first fucking day, since before we even got in there?"

'We,' like he had gone through *anything* close to what she had, like he couldn't have just *left.*

"If Korea hadn't came, *who* would be the reason we were both dead right now?"

"You," SH growled. "Though clearly you can't even do that right if you missed the shot I practically gave you."

His eyes flashed, jaw bulging as the tendons on his hands turned pale green.

"What's wrong?" she taunted him. "I thought that's what you told me- 'I wish I hadn't missed,' right?"

Even now, with the dark thing tearing chunks from the concrete and him looking at her with eyes brimming fury, she couldn't help but give him another chance, even if taking it back wouldn't change that he'd said it. She couldn't help but hold out hope.

But he crushed it, as always.

"You fucking *bitch,"* he snarled, features twisting in satisfaction as he spat the word.

The thing's fangs sank into concrete and SH's teeth sank into her own flesh, filling her mouth with blood. She straightened up, glaring at the male with every ounce of fire and ice in her veins.

"I don't care what Korea says," she said coldly. "I will not be sharing a transport with you *ever* again. After tomorrow is over, fill out your paperwork and find your own way back to Chongjin. *Alone,* because I will be telling him you are a liability to have around our soldiers."

"Me?" he snorted. *"You're* the liability. You're the one that keeps feeding his delusions and letting him think we have a chance. You've fucking *seen* him lately, he's sprinting full tilt at the edge of the goddamn cliff and you're all just egging him on! What do you think happens when he realizes we don-"

The dark thing tore its upper half free of the wall with a shriek of triumph, and SH lunged forward.

But North Hamgyong's guards had moved first, one of them seizing him under the arms from behind, dragging him back as the other unobtrusively planted himself between the Hamgyongs.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" the province snarled as the man muscled him away.

"Protecting your safety, Comrade General," the man answered, voice tight. "Let's report to the marshalling yards now."

North Hamgyong was dragged away, snapping and whining like a street mutt, and SH was left in the open with her hands fisted, with nowhere for the seething rage inside her to go.

The dark thing howled and thrashed, half caught in the wall, telling her to chase after him and finish planting her fist in his face like she'd been about to.

But she managed to beat it back, smacking her paintbrush over its malformed head until it slunk resentfully behind the concrete again, and she could splatter paint over the crack it had left, turning the immense pleasure she knew she'd feel if she succeeded at striking him into a seal to hold it back.

No, it wouldn't be the hitting him that felt good. It would be teaching him that his words had consequences. He didn't give a damn about her, so her own could never hurt him as deeply as his had used to hurt her. But he *could* feel the pain as she smashed her fist into his burnt and blistered cheek.

And it wouldn't come anywhere close to that she'd felt when he had missed.

"Comrade SH?" one of her bodyguards, Song Ki-gon, tentatively asked. "Are you alright?"

SH took a deep breath, brushing another thick layer of pine green and crimson across the wall, then turned to smile at him.

"Mm, I'm fine."

"He shouldn't've called you that," her other guard, Du Seon-gun, muttered, glaring after the male province as he was hauled out of sight into the city rubble. "Do you want me to give him what fer if he does it again?"

"No need," SH assured. "I'll tell Korea so he can lecture him."

It would be another arrow in her quiver for re-educating him. Maybe instead of normal classes, she could even convince her Countryhuman to treat him as a criminal and get him re-educated through labour. Calling her that word wasn't enough for it, but

damaging their people's morale was near treason.

"And it doesn't hurt me." She smiled. "I expect dogs to bark."

She hadn't been going to hit him because he'd used that slur. It had been to shut him up, before he could say something he shouldn't in front of their guards, or when civilians could be hidden nearby.

It was good she hadn't succeeded, she tried to convince herself. It wouldn't look good if someone had seen one of their Provincehumans going after another, when they didn't know he had it coming.

Her guards exchanged glances that made her tense.

"Comrade SH," Song Ki-gon ventured. "Forgive me if I'm overstepping, but we've noticed some... tension between you and Comrade North Hamgyong lately."

"We're on yer side," Du Seon-gun quickly assured her. "Comrade Don-om says the sitch's prob'ly complicated, but no matter what, we're behind you wholeheartedly."

SH's heart sank a little at that. "Comrade Kim Don-om? He's noticed, too?"

Her guards winced, exchanging another look.

"Yes," Song Ki-gon said after a second. "Everyone at the post has."

"We make sure they keep their mouths shut when we're 'round," Du Seon-gun added. "It ain't right to be gossiping about our Provincehumans."

"But they have definitely noticed."

SH grit her teeth as she imagined their bodyguards all gathered in their guardhouse near the bunker, theorizing about her and the male.

'Stupid North Hamgyong.'

She wasn't shifting blame. There wouldn't *be* any tension if he hadn't insisted on haranguing her even after she'd made it clear she had no interest in communicating with him for anything but political matters ever again.

There would just be silence.

"Comrade North Hamgyong is just a bit of a pessimist," she told her guards. "And he likes to say things to try and make others pessimists, too. Please don't pay any mind to what he said- he doesn't actually believe it."

And still, she had to make excuses for him, knowing he wouldn't make them for her, and that he did.

"And Comrade Korea is fine," she added, even though she didn't believe that. "He's just under stress."

Her guards nodded, faces giving nothing away.

"Our job is to keep Comrade SH safe," Song Ki-gon said. "Not to think about anything else."

"And you're doing a good job."

She liked her guards. Song Ki-gon had been in the KPRA, and Du Seon-gun had fought in Manchuria, one of the soldiers that had kept fighting on Korea's order until China was liberated. The former was a soldier through and through, and the latter had aspirations of being a musician once the war was over. He played the haegeum beautifully whenever they travelled around her province.

And she liked that Korea hadn't singled her out by doing something like asking if she wanted female guards. Men served better, since Yankees and reactionaries thought women were weak, and even one wouldn't hesitate to go after three of them, like that man in the Kangso hills. They weren't, but the point of having bodyguards wasn't to teach the enemy a point about feminism- it was to keep SH safe. And two tall, burly men made the chance of someone trying to take her on at all even just a smidge more unlikely.

Even though SH would love to teach that point herself.

But it meant a lot that Korea hadn't even brought her guards' gender up when assigning them. He knew she had no reason to be uncomfortable travelling alone with their comrades. He saw that she'd moved on from the cage, that it had no control over her anymore. Unlike North Hamgyong.

Thinking of the cage made a trickle of ice run through her as she realized that both her bodyguards and the other province's had heard what he'd said about 'getting in there' and giving up.

She opened her mouth, then smiled and lightly ordered, "Please don't repeat anything you heard just now, comrades. That was a conversation we should've had in private."

She didn't want to call attention directly to what had been said, and make them ask questions. She should have *known* North Hamgyong would start something-

'You should know. It's your fault.'

No. She wasn't blaming herself for what he had done, especially not since he did.

The memory of a soft voice she'd give anything to hear again whispered in her mind, '*Why would I blame myself?'*

She had been done with it a long time ago.

"Won't speak a word, Comrade SH," Song Ki-gon vowed with a salute, and Du Seon-gun said, "I reckon I ain't even know what yer talking about."

Good. She hoped North Hamgyong's guards would be just as diligent. Though considering they were his-

That was wrong thinking. Their comrades hadn't had any say in where they were assigned. It wasn't their fault they'd been born in the Northern Hamgyong, or that Korea had picked them out. She wasn't going to let her feelings about her- about the other province spill over on to others. Not like North Hamgyong did.

"Thank you," she said, smiling. "Now let's get to the rendezvous point for our orders."

They'd probably be assigned to scavenging duty, since it looked like it was still ongoing. That was good. Hard, rewarding labour that would take all day. She'd be asleep the moment she hit the pillow after her bath, and her mind would be dead until she woke up for last watch, and then to organize her cousins for their ambush. And try to find out why Korea had sent that order out through the Worker's Party a couple weeks ago.

She felt a flicker of worry as they set off into the rubble, so much worse up close, where she had to pick her way around the craters, and could see the rusty stains that splotched some of the debris, soaked too deep into the wood and stone to be washed away by the rains.

*'You've fucking **seen** him lately.'*

For all of North Hamgyong's wrong thinking and incorrect attitudes, he was right about Korea. He was almost always sprinting full-tilt at the edge of a cliff. They just usually achieved their goal before he could reach it. SH didn't agree with what the other province had been about to say- they *did* have a chance. But in the meantime, she knew someone had to stop their Countryhuman, to reach out and hold him back at least enough to slow him down.

But the way to do that wasn't by telling him everything was hopeless. It was by making him eat and drink, and forcing him to get at least one full night of sleep. And by making sure he knew that to them, the Day of the Foundation of the Republic wasn't just the day Korea had finally declared a government for the people.

If they told him there was a chance of anything that wasn't victory, he would just run faster.

But she wouldn't expect the person that had sat across from her at that tiny table for all those years, soaking in bitter tea and refusing to even attempt a smile for her, or tell her it would be okay, to understand that.

There wouldn't be any tension if it wasn't for him. There wouldn't be any anger or this lurking unease he'd managed to plant in her with his persistent grimness, despite all her efforts. There wouldn't be all those nightmares and memories and the eternal uncleanliness that still-

If it hadn't been for him, she would've found South Pyongan or North Chungcheong or someone, and Korea would have found her fresh and plucky, with all her rage reserved for what their people had faced.

He'd had no right to say the way he had turned out was her fault, or that *any* of what had happened to *either* of them was.

Because if it wasn't for North Hamgyong, there would never have been a cage at all.

There's a chapter I'm so excited for coming up! A lot of them. I actually feel that way about every chapter I write.

The fun thing about my map app is that it will say 'Seoul to Rason? Of course you can drive from Seoul to Rason. Here's a route! Ignore the existence of the DMZ or the border checkpoints or the fact that the roads are blown out.' But if I ask for Seoul to Busan it says 'Seoul to Busan? The capital city of South Korea to a major shipping port that is also in South Korea? That is clearly connected by a highway? Are you crazy? Are you fucking stupid? There is no way on earth you could EVER drive from SEOUL to BUSAN. LOSER. Fuck you.'

Starving For It

SH crept down the hall, the light of her flashlight landing on Korea's door. She hushed the cousin giggling behind her, then reached for the handle, wrapping her fingers around the thick steel.

They'd agreed that they shouldn't use last year's method this year, since their Countryhuman wasn't... feeling his best. Having him wake up in a panic and lunge into the hallway with a loaded gun might not end well for them this time.

The plan was to wait quietly outside until he emerged, so South Pyongan could restrain him before he could grab his weapon, and the rest of them could launch their attack. SH was only trying the door as a formality. But surprisingly, it opened a crack.

She held up her hand, signalling her cousins to be quiet and move to the sides, since their Countryhuman slept with his pistol. Once they were clear, she held up three fingers, silently counting down with them. As the third curled in, she swung the door open, and they all shouted, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY KOREA!"

Immediately there was a high-pitched feminine cry, sending a bolt of terror and betrayal through SH before she peered wildly in and realized who it was.

"Aiya," China said in his normal voice, arms crossed protectively over his chest. "Look at you all barging in here without even a warning."

"Where is Korea?" SH asked, taking another look around the room to make sure he really was the only one in it. It was too tiny to hide anyone else, but the foreigner had sounded *exactly* like a woman. Eerily so.

It had been an instinctive, stupid fear. Korea had no interest in women, and even if China would sleep with one of their people or his soldiers, her Countryhuman wouldn't let him bring one back

here.

"Not even a single care for my modesty," China sniffed, offended.

South Pyongan stuck her head in over SH's shoulder, raising her eyebrows. "You're literally fully dressed."

"Ah." China looked down at his uniform, uncrossing his arms. "So I am."

SH shook her head, unimpressed. "Korea?"

"He rushed out of here a few minutes ago," the foreigner replied, going back to what he was doing- crouching in the corner and openly rummaging through Korea's bag. "What do you think this is?"

SH's heart squeezed as he held up a rock shaped like one.

'Look what I got Korea for his birthday! Think he's gonna like it?'

She swallowed, and China's eyes flicked to her throat, marking the reaction.

He tilted his head curiously, sounding too excited as he asked, "Something bittersweet tasting?"

"What is it?" Hae asked, trying to see around SH.

She blocked her cousins' line of sight, not wanting to bring their moods down. Marching into the room, she snatched the rock and bag from China's hand, dropping it back inside and pointedly doing the clasp up.

"No fun," he sighed, sitting back on his haunches.

"You should come wish Korea a happy birthday with us," SH said, placing the bag back in the corner, adjusting the painting there as she did.

Korea couldn't have anything too important (government-wise) in there if he was willing to leave it in the same room as China, but

she was sure he didn't exactly want him snooping around in his things. Especially if he had anything else like that rock.

"Alright." China didn't move.

SH narrowed her eyes. "Now."

He sighed again, but stood. "How could I say no to a woman as lovely as you? Lead on."

SH turned, catching North Hamgyong glowering at the man from over Hae and North Pyongan's heads.

The nerve made her blood boil. He still thought he had any claim over her after he'd said those horrible things.

She soothed the dark thing by reminding herself Korea was going to give him a piece of his mind once she told him what he'd said to their soldier, and to her. She hadn't last night, and she wouldn't today, since she didn't want to upset him on his birthday, but before she left for her province again, she would make sure of it.

Just to annoy him more (and to make sure China didn't sneak back in to snoop), SH linked arms with the Chinese country, pulling him from the room.

"Okay, comrades," she said cheerily. "Attempt number two."

As she shut the door to Korea's room, she took one last look in the corner, where the painting she'd made him last year, the one with the flower standing tall under the boot, screaming *'RESIST!'* was propped.

It sent a little glow of warmth through her. Hopefully he would like this year's enough to display it, too.

Pushing away thoughts of the pencil sketch of Seoul that wasn't there, SH shut the door.

They hurried down the hallway, stopping before the exit. SH clipped her flashlight back on to her belt, leaving the bunker pitch-black for a second.

She hoped Korea was outside, and hadn't taken off for the city without them. She hadn't been able to get him to eat dinner yesterday, and since she'd been gone for almost a month, he likely hadn't been eating much then either. If he didn't eat this morning...

SH grabbed the wheel, whispering, "I'm opening the door now," before turning it.

Grey light crept in through the crack, and SH mustered her strength to shove the heavy steel open. Relief filled her as she spotted Korea standing by the GAZ, arms crossed.

Then she was almost bowled over as Hae shot past her, and she quickly stepped out of the bunker after her, the rest of her cousins following.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY KOREA!" they cried again, swarming across the clearing to surround him.

He stepped back against the truck, snapping, "Don't touch me!" making Hae screech to a halt with a pout.

"But Korea-"

"It is *not* my birthday and I do not need a hug."

That was disappointing, but expected. SH stopped a few feet away, North Pyongan instinctively stepping away from her so Korea had a gap to escape their encirclement.

Their Countryhuman's shoulders eased slightly, and he repeated irritably, "This is still not my birthday. It is-"

"'The day our people finally declared a state that belongs to them and them alone,' yadda yadda," South Pyongan interrupted. "Shut it and accept the congrats, Birthday Boy."

"Respect your country," Korea muttered.

"You weren't in your room," SH said, and he gave her a look with a tinch of smugness to it.

"I was told if I wanted to avoid your stupid pranks, I should wake up earlier."

"Ruining our fun," she sighed.

But it was good to see any look that wasn't ice, anger, or the paranoia he'd had when they surrounded him on his face. And it was good it still wasn't burned, even after that major assault.

"Sorry, jiejie," Liaotung said from over at the hearth, where her and Liaoxi had kindled the hearth and were preparing the rations for breakfast. "He snuck out the second you went to get the others."

Liaoxi nodded. "We would've alerted you to your plight-"

"But we were afraid he might bite," her sister interrupted, ignoring the other Chinese woman as she insisted that hadn't been going to be her rhyme.

Korea's head cracked towards her, alarmed. "What did he tell you?"

Liaotung's brow furrowed. "Pardon?"

China laughed, gliding over to them. "It looks like my Little Sister is just intuitive."

SH gave Korea a look. *'Do I want to know what that's about?'*

He hunched, avoiding her eye.

She decided that meant, *'Definitely not.'*

"Come on, comrades." She turned back to her cousins. "Let's start breakfast so we can head to the city for the General's broadcast."

"You're not making it," South Pyongan said immediately, prompting SH to give her a dirty look.

"I wasn't going to," she sniffed.

"We can cook for our hosts," Liaoxi volunteered. "Since it's your

holiday, it's right for us to do the most."

"I will help," North Pyongan added.

That worked. He made good food, and while the Liaos' cooking skills were about the same as the Koreans' (*'Not counting me,'* SH reluctantly added.), only able to boil rice down into juk, that was all they needed to do.

And Kangwon, who really was the best cook out of the northern provinces, even if he pretended otherwise, was the one cousin not here. He hadn't even been at the rendezvous yesterday, or slept at the bunker. Korea had said he was needed in the hospital full-time, though he'd be at the speech later.

SH looked over at him as North Pyongan went to help the Chinese women cook, finding him thinking about her cousin, too, his head turned towards the city. She frowned.

It wasn't just the usual concern he felt when one of them wasn't in his field of vision she saw in his eye. It was the same thing she caught glimpses of when he heard there was an air strike on the military complex when Jong-il was there, or when he received the casualty reports for a battle at the border- fear.

He looked over, not at her, but at Chagang. SH saw the question in her cousin's eyes, and Korea's answer as he nodded seriously, before the bars closed back over his face, hiding what he felt.

It worried her, but if he hadn't said anything, it wasn't her business. Though she was still suddenly anxious to see Kangwon.

She distracted herself with something that *was* her business.

"Korea," she said casually. "Why did you send out that order that anyone who wanted to give you a present this year should bring it to their local People's Committee?"

She thought she might have caught him off guard, but he just gave her an unimpressed look, the same one he'd given her when she asked last night.

"You will find out," he replied, giving nothing away.

"Is this going to be one of the times when there's absolutely no reason to hide something from us, but you're doing so regardless?" Hwang asked from where he was reviewing short course information.

"No," Korea said stonily.

"Yes," said China.

Their Countryhuman glared at him. "It isn't necessary information right now."

But it wasn't *un*necessary information. And it wasn't like they were rushing off anywhere- the sky was still painted with shades of soft navy, only starting to pale in the east.

SH exchanged wry looks with her cousins, making sure to exclude a certain other relative that was glowering over by the door.

"You will find out." Korea was still glaring at China. "When it is necessary."

SH puffed her cheeks. She supposed she had a few ideas of what he might be planning. She knew no matter what, none of the options were that he'd finally decided he actually wanted birthday presents, especially not from their people. He hadn't even liked the Liberation Day letters, to her dismay.

"Do you think there's been any leeway on the talks?" Hwang asked, glancing towards the road through the trees, clearly eager to head to Pyongyang.

"Ah ah," SH cut Korea off before he could answer. "No talking work until we're in the city."

"Yeah, you'll cause indigestion," South Pyongan said, watching her brother cut up scallions and late carrots from the garden, waiting like a cat to snatch one. "'Sides, no way the Yanks would ever cave on a holiday. It'd be like giving us a present."

"And they have been consistent with their week on, week off method," North Pyongan added, smacking her wrist lightly with the flat of his knife. "I doubt we'll hear from them again until this one is over."

A hush filled the clearing at his words.

It was September 9th. And even though the hornbeams still wore their coats of emerald, and the air was still warm and muggy, a chill had started to push through the blanket of heat at night, especially up in the northern mountains. As picturesque as it was, to anyone that had used to live in the wild, in mountains and forests, sometimes unable to light a fire for fear of being spotted, autumn wasn't really its own season. It was only a herald, a final warning to finish your final preparations, to trap as many animals as you could for new boots and fur to line your clothes, and to powder the meat, to dry every wild vegetable and fruit you found, and cut up as much wood as possible in the hopes that if you got trapped up on a mountain or snowed in by a blizzard, you would have enough to make it through. SH had just returned from reminding her villagers in higher altitudes to do just that, in case the supply lines got cut by weather.

The provinces, at least, didn't need to fight for survival in the way they'd used to. But that didn't change the instinctive anxiety that seeped into SH's bones when she'd noticed that the preparations for the rice harvest had begun.

Winter was coming. And they still didn't have a ceasefire.

"We're not going to hear from them at all," North Hamgyong grunted from over at the bunker. "They're going to tug us around until the damn snow comes, and then they're going to starve us out."

"They're going to try," Korea said before SH could snap it. "And if they do, we will outlast them again, and they will be forced to sign next spring."

North Hamgyong's face darkened, and the thing behind the wall tensed in anticipation.

But then he just shook his head, turning for the door.

"Come get me when the food's ready," he grunted, the clang of steel slamming behind him echoing in the early morning mist.

SH glared after him, then caught North Pyongan watching her with his brow furrowed.

"Be careful," she said sweetly. "Don't cut yourself."

Her cousin went back to chopping the vegetables, sweeping the carrots into the pot when Liaoxi said it was time.

"We will be fine," Korea said, glaring around at them like he was daring them to challenge it.

None of them did.

"Did everyone have their bath last night?" SH swept in, wanting to shift the topic to something nicer. They shouldn't have to think about anything America-adjacent they didn't have to today.

She made sure all her cousins had washed, and Hwang assured her North Hamgyong had, too. She didn't care if he wanted to wallow in his own filth like he wallowed in everything else, but she did care that he looked presentable for their people.

Korea didn't talk much as they chatted, only occasionally rebuffing Hae for her attempts to hug him, not even softening when she used her big eyes on him. Otherwise he sat as still as a statue, not looking over at the hearth, where the fragrant smell of cooking rice was coming from.

"We'll need to start preparing vegetables for kimchi making," Hwang mused.

"Ah'll plant more turnips before we head out again," Hae chirped. "They'll be a li'l late, but we should have 'em in early December. *If* Korea takes good care of the garden while ah'm gone." She gave him a hopeful pout.

"I have had people tending it," he said. "They will continue to do

so."

"Good." Hae nodded happily. "And we have lots'a dried bracken and scallions, and the wild garlic patch, so ah think we'll be okay. And it doesn't feel like this winter'll be as bad as the first one."

SH was relieved. "That's good. We'll start the first batch of kimchi in late October then."

Hwang looked cautious. "And when you say 'we...?'"

SH sighed. "We will ask Comrade Kim Song-ae if she can make it for us."

"Ura!" South Pyongan cheered, and the others heartily agreed, besides Hae. SH thought she even saw Chagang let out a breath of relief.

But she was tentatively pleased to find that her cousins' joy at her not preparing their food didn't rankle like it had used to. Not as much, anyway.

South Pyongan narrowed her eyes at her a little. *'You better remember what I said.'*

SH stuck out her tongue, and her cousin grinned.

Hae chattered about how the newly-organized experimental co-operative farms were coming along, and how she thought the agricultural plan would get fulfilled this year, and they might even have a bumper crop, looking hopefully up at Korea as she said it. He nodded, but didn't say anything.

Soon, the juk was ready. Everyone headed for the buttumak, not looking over at the stump where Korea remained seated.

SH took the ladle from Liaotung, serving all of her cousins up heaping bowls, but making sure there would be enough left for dinner. They'd be too tired to do more than heat something up tonight, so they'd cooked all their day's rations together. Once they all had steaming bowls in their laps, and Chagang had gone to get North Hamgyong, SH set the spoon down and left her own bowl on

the hearth. With another one in her hands, she walked across the clearing.

"Korea," she said, stopping in front of him. "You should eat today."

He avoided her eyes, and the bowl of juk.

SH's own stomach had hollowed out at the comforting smell, but she didn't back down. "It's the Day of the Foundation of the Republic." She knew telling him he deserved to eat a good meal on his birthday wouldn't work. "Everyone needs to see us looking our best."

"And you still need to get over your blood loss," China said idly, making Korea whip his head towards him. "Preferably before you make any more questionable decisions."

SH didn't know what he was talking about, but since Korea looked like he wanted their comrade to shut up, she focused on the first part.

"Blood loss?" She scanned his body, eyes lingering on the bandages poking out of his collar and sleeves. And the one on the back of his head that he'd told her wasn't a burn.

"I've been giving donations," he said stoically. "With all of you gone, I had to make up for it."

SH gave him a disapproving look, but knew there wasn't anything she could say that Kangwon wouldn't have already.

"Then you definitely need to eat something," she said firmly, holding the bowl closer to him.

His eye flicked to it, then away.

"Please?" she tried.

Korea's jaw feathered. He didn't agree, he just wordlessly took the bowl and spoon from her. He didn't start eating right away, but SH retreated, taking her spot on the other side of Hae with her own juk, where she could make sure he didn't try and offload his portion

in her cousin's bowl.

With breakfast in their Countryhuman's lap, the rest of them started to eat, talking louder again. SH watched North Hamgyong have to serve himself, satisfied.

The juk was thick and hot, the soft chunks of carrot falling apart in her mouth, and the scallions providing a pleasant tangy crunch. It was only slightly seasoned with salt and shoyu, but lately she was feeling like Hae- every meal was the best thing she had ever tasted.

She'd had a few in her province, the times when she felt like the villagers insisting on hosting her would get more from being able to take care of and spend time with their province than from the meager portions she allowed them to talk her into, but mostly she just subsisted on plain rice rations without even any salt. Cooked by Song Ki-gon, not her.

But even though they were all digging into the juk with gusto, Korea was just pushing his around in his bowl, staring out into the trees. Every once and awhile, his eye would stray to the rice slurry before tearing away.

China finished first, standing up from Korea's other side and handing his bowl to Liaotung to place in the washbasin, despite the fact that he was literally already standing.

"I hate to eat and run, comrades," he said. "But I have a package to pick up. And it's going to take some time, considering someone had our poor Jeep put down."

SH groaned internally as he looked at Korea.

"What?" North Hamgyong of course looked more invested in that than he had even wishing Korea a happy birthday. "You told me it was in for repairs."

Korea grimaced. "I told you it was in the shop. It is."

"Being salvaged," China clarified. "Trying to repair it would be quite useless. It was hit almost directly by a bomb."

"Fuck," North Hamgyong grumbled, looking even more sour than usual.

South Pyongan whistled, impressed. "How'd you manage that?" she asked Korea.

"Were you in it?" Hae worried.

"No," Korea said at the same time China said, "We got out a few seconds before."

SH looked at her Countryhuman, alarmed, and he bristled.

"Stop talking about my business!" he snapped at China.

The man arched a delicate brow. "I know I said the Jeep was ours, but I *am* one half of that. I would say it's my business, too. But it's alright, I don't blame you for its unfortunate demise. I can walk anyway. Unless someone wants to carry me."

He looked hopefully at Korea, who glowered at him.

"A one-time thing then, I see how it is," he sighed. "Anyway, keep an eye on this one if he takes your GAZ anywhere."

Korea shot daggers at him, but SH tipped her head as he glanced at her. But before she could pin down what the look meant, he started to walk away.

Oh, right.

"By the way, Korea," she said, turning to her Countryhuman. "China was looking through your things."

"What?"

"I'm leaving~" China sing-songed, walking faster and disappearing into the trees, not even leaving any rustling undergrowth to track his path.

"Weird fucking bastard," North Hamgyong muttered, glaring after him with Korea. Which was unwarranted- it wasn't *his* things he'd

been snooping in.

"We humbly apologize for our Countryhuman." Liaotung made a small bow. "And when he does it again, we will still be humbly apologetic."

"You didn't tell me the Jeep was destroyed," North Pyongan said to Liaoxi.

"I assumed you knew," she replied. "We thought your Countryhuman would have told you."

Korea looked away.

"We didn't know gege had a hand in its fate though," Liaotung said between bites of juk. As her sister elbowed her she added, "You don't need to take responsibility or anything. It was a British vehicle anyways, so losing it isn't any stress."

"And now China might drive less," Liaoxi murmured hopefully, making North Pyongan chuckle.

SH had thought the Liaos looked unsurprised by the news. They'd probably noticed the Jeep was missing last night, just like her and her cousins. But she'd noticed them glance at Korea in surprise when their Countryhuman implied he had something to do with it. If he hadn't told them last night, but was being a bit confrontational now...

SH was fairly confident she was right about his look from before. And if she was, then that was... nice of him.

She glanced at Korea, still stirring his spoon through his juk, no longer surrounded by wisps of steam.

She would keep an eye on him while she was here, and tell the General to watch out for him while they were gone. Whether it was blood loss or hunger, the idea of Korea driving when he was on his own made her uneasy.

"What transpired?" Hwang asked, pushing his glasses up to keep them out of his food.

"Exactly what he said," Korea clipped, setting the spoon down like he'd been looking for an excuse. "We were caught in the assault on the 29th. I got us out of the Jeep before it was destroyed. That is all."

"Is it?" South Pyongan asked skeptically.

"Yes."

"You better not let that guy borrow the GAZ." North Hamgyong glanced over at the tarp over the vehicle like he was making sure China hadn't made off with it in his sleeves.

"He will not," Korea said with zero shame, even though he had been taking China's vehicle without permission for over a year now.

SH gave the Liaos an apologetic look, humbly apologizing for *her* Countryhuman with her eyes. They accepted it with bemused smiles.

Hae mumbled something with her cheeks full of the last of her juk.

"Don't speak with your mouth full," SH reminded her. "It's rude and no one can understand what you're saying."

Hae chewed fast and swallowed hard, looking sadly down at her empty bowl before saying, "Ah said 'Korea, you better hurry up an' eat. The sun's almost up, so we've got to get goin' soon so everyone can wish you happy birthday.'" She took a deep breath.

She was practically in Korea's lap, but he didn't look at her. He stared down at his bowl, then stood.

SH's heart sank, but thankfully he just muttered, "I'm going to eat inside."

Hae frowned. "But it's your birthday! You should eat with us."

"It's not-" He sighed. "I'm eating inside. I will be out once I'm ready."

He slunk away, not looking at any of them as he disappeared into

the bunker.

Hae pouted, and SH crossed her arms, watching the wheel lock into place.

"At least he is eating," North Pyongan soothed.

"Mm." SH knew he wouldn't waste the juk. 'Waste' was the reason he had trouble eating, after all.

'Even if that isn't what it is.'

She got not wanting to take food from their people. She couldn't help the little twinge of guilt she'd felt dining with hers, no matter how happy they were to urge her to take more banchan or share more of the main dish, and now that the government wasn't taking wheat or barley for the tax in kind, leaving more food for the people who harvested it. She had even been reluctant to have those extra helpings Oh Tae-uk and Pak Jung-ho had given her after her escape from America's camp, even though she knew she'd needed it.

But the rations weren't taking food. They were distributed by Supreme Command for their soldiers, and for Korea and the provinces. They were calculated for him, set aside for him, and even if he refused to take them, so long as every other soldier had collected theirs, no one else could.

And she got the desire to give away what he could stand to, obviously. She had been doing it alongside her cousins before he made them stop. But that was in winter, when the refugees had a harder time foraging, and she'd still eaten half every day. Korea didn't.

Before Liberation Day, she hadn't seen him eat at all since... At least since the Supung Dam was hit. She knew that wouldn't have changed while she was gone.

Even if it was shameful, she would still prefer Korea starved himself over glutting himself, but...

She was really starting to get worried.

—

North sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor, looking down at the bowl in his lap. SH wasn't here to scold him for manners, so he lifted it with one hand almost to his face, then changed his mind and lowered it to his chest, trying to put some distance between his 'nose' and the aroma.

The wholesome, hearty smell of cooked grains made his mouth water and his stomach churn. The broken-down rice glistened in his bowl like a morass of maggots, a thin layer of cloudy liquid lining the edges, and welled where he'd dug his spoon into it. It was a pale, lumpy slurry, almost looking half-digested already, and North knew it would come up the same way.

He took a deep breath, lifting the spoon and scooping a bit of the juk up, avoiding the few chunks of orange and green for now. He had already removed the rock from his mouth, so there was nothing stopping him from opening it, and being immediately disgusted when a trickle of saliva escaped his lips and ran down his chin.

Ssi-bal. This was why he was doing this alone. Part of it anyway.

He didn't put the bowl down to wipe his face, refusing to let himself stall anymore. He'd locked the door to their room, so there wasn't any risk of China or one of the others coming in.

North stared at the lumpy gruel, then carefully moved it past his lips, sliding it off the spoon.

It sat on his tongue, warm and heavy, and he immediately felt his gorge rise. He forced it back, stopping his breathing so the cloying scent wouldn't fill his nasal passages.

He sat there for a second, stomach constricting and esophagus tightening as it tried to refuse to let the interloper into his body. North Pyongan and the Liaos hadn't watered down the juk as much as usual, maybe as some sort of misguided 'birthday' gift. It just made it harder to swallow.

Then, slowly, he tipped his head back and made himself, his throat

spasming as he forced it down.

He gasped for breath when it was done, and the rice was sitting inside him like a lead weight. His stomach roiled at the sudden invasion, the first since yesterday afternoon, clenching painfully before it decided to accept it and started screaming for more.

North ignored it, waiting to make sure the nutrients wouldn't be rejected in a minute, keeping his head lifted away from the rest of the rice waiting in his bowl and continuing to wrestle with his nausea.

He could hear South Pyongan calling him dramatic in his head, the way she would if he'd done this out there.

He wasn't. This was necessary.

It was always easier for him to starve than it was to eat. But there reached a point where it became easier for his body, too. And as much as it might crave sustenance, it would start to reject it.

But it hadn't been this bad in... awhile.

North took another inhale, then started to eat the juk with small bites, forcing himself to eat slow and steady, struggling with each mouthful. It hadn't gotten any easier, even after he'd kept up eating one meal a day so he wouldn't collapse at the speech today.

When the bowl was finally, mercifully empty, he set it on his lap, waiting. He didn't have to wait long before more saliva suddenly gushed into his mouth as his stomach surged up behind it.

He hunched over, clamping a hand over his mouth as grainy slurry filled it again, burning with the taste of stomach acid this time.

Splinters under his knees, a foul stench from the bucket as more waste splattered into it, trying to muffle the sounds.

'Don't wake up South, don't wake up South, don't-'

North grit his teeth, willing himself to force the juk back down, refusing to waste any food. Every single meal he had wasted in the

prison shack sat even heavier in his stomach than even the ones he'd kept down.

Finally, he managed to swallow the rice slurry for a second time, actually half-digested now. His stomach seized again, but he locked his throat, preventing it from coming back up.

'Disgusting.'

Eventually he was sure his insides had finally accepted the meal, and allowed himself to breathe again, reaching for his canteen and using the lukewarm water to wash away the taste of bile and fill his stomach with something it wouldn't try to turn away.

At least he had as much as he could drink now, and he didn't have to rinse his mouth with the metallic kind in the bucket, usually almost gone by the time he needed it. After they'd stopped being denied water, South had gorged himself on it, drinking like at any moment it might be taken away again, even after it had been months since- By the middle of the night, North would only be left with a few small inches to tip into his mouth and use to desperately try and clean the film off his teeth, and the taste off his tongue. Not enough to get rid of the hot stench on his breath and the evidence of what he'd been doing. Though luckily South had never noticed.

This wasn't as severe as back then. North had never been strong enough to control it.

There had been a part of him that hadn't wanted to.

But he could now. And he *did* want to. He needed to keep his meals down so he could stay strong for his people and keep giving blood. He needed to save her.

He stood up, then, because he had to, he reached into his bag in the corner, groping around until he felt the fraying edges of the photo paper, and his tension eased.

He had caught China (or China had let him catch him) examining his things more times after their expedition south. But he had been leaving the photograph alone. Or at least putting it back exactly

where he had found it.

He felt that yearning in him, even stronger than his stomach's need for food, to look at the picture. To see his brother. It pulled at that cord inside him, tearing at something deeper than his body.

He was strong enough to stop himself from wasting the juk. He was strong enough to stop himself from doing anything he'd regret if he couldn't stomach this.

He inhaled, then took the photograph out.

It was pathetic to admit, but even seeing his brother's face was enough to ease the knot of tension inside him, even if it drew a new one tight. And made that cord pull more painfully than it already was.

'North, we could actually have a photo of us!'

'Why would we need a photo of us?' They wouldn't be 'them' for much longer now.

Gyeong's eyes shone behind his glasses as he cut in. 'Because photographs can keep a moment alive forever!'

He had wanted to keep that moment alive forever. As the sun cast golden rays over their victory and his brother put his arm around him, pressed his side to his and completed him, no less of a relief than it had been hours earlier as they met in that crowd, the smile on his face the brightest North had ever seen.

It had been supposed to be a funerary portrait. The last photo ever taken of North and South, so that Korea could look back on it and remember what Japan had done to them, and celebrate that they were now whole, the way they were supposed to be. And so he could remember what it felt like to be brothers.

South had turned it into a favour, something a husband left with his wife to hold on to while he went off to war, so she could look at it and think of him, yearning to see him again. And by not just dragging him with him when the Yankees had arrived to claim him, North had let him.

He had expected to get mad when he saw his brother's face, smiling so joyfully even after he'd done what he had. But he couldn't. It wasn't the face of a person that would turn a blind eye to Jeju or refuse to stand up against America or Command their provinces or burn Seoul to the ground and kill their people. Or cut out his eye.

It was just his brother.

That feeling of shame welled inside North again, and anger at the idea anyone could look at that smile and think he *wanted* to hurt anyone. South had never wanted to, not even their Japanese jailors. He hadn't wanted to kill Kang Kyung-nam, he had only been trying to protect North. And he wouldn't have wanted to burn Seoul, he only...

North bared his teeth, having to look at the wall for a moment.

They weren't supposed to be this way. There was never supposed to be two of them.

He couldn't understand the Hwanghaes. They had been so excited to tell the others he'd decided to divide their province, and so had their cousins, like it was something to be happy about. They were *meant* to be together, meant to be one, but they were rejecting it. Instead of wishing every single day that they could melt into each other and finally be together the way they were supposed to, they wanted to be separated permanently.

Hae had asked if his heart felt lonely, and told him she felt the same way when she wasn't around her brother. But she couldn't. If she did, she would never have asked him to be her own person. Even though North's pain had been made worse by the Division, creating this tether that constantly pulled inside him, even that soft ache from before had been unbearable. And the only thing that could soothe it was Unifying, Reunifying, with his brother. Even if it wasn't for their country, how could he ever think of not?

They couldn't understand what it meant to be missing your other half, somehow not even the ones who were. None of them could.

This wasn't his birthday. It was only another reminder that Korea didn't have a Day of Reunification yet, that North and South were still here, instead of being who they were supposed to be, being *together*.

North stroked his thumb over the softness of his brother's paper face, still with that tight, uncomfortable feeling that had plagued him since China had told him what he had, but aching aching *aching* for the real thing. North and South had never been meant to grow up, only Korea. But even so, he wanted to see him as he was now. Even if it was the eyes that had stared in stupid shock after cutting his out, the mouth that hadn't answered after North had asked if he had ever lied to him, and the voice that must have given the order to raze their capital, he would still give almost anything to see him. To get answers from him, yes, to shout at him and call him an idiot. But also just to touch him, to hold him, to *be with* him.

What would In-su or Oh Ryong-jin or any of those who had lost their homes and families in Seoul say if they knew the first thing their Countryhuman wanted to do when he saw the one responsible for it wasn't reprimand him or drag him off to re-education for his crimes against their people, but embrace him, tell him he'd missed him?

The shame welled stronger, like starchy water in slimy juk, and he made himself tuck the photograph back away.

He should *want* to tear it, he *should* have to stop himself from destroying it. And the fact that he didn't sickened him worse than the meal occupying his stomach.

North breathed out, then wiped his face and started to get dressed, shoving aside all those useless thoughts.

When he was Reunified with his brother, he wouldn't feel like this anymore. And South would never do anything else like he had. He would be North, and he would never hurt anyone that didn't deserve it again. Korea could devote himself wholeheartedly to their people, and would never harm them.

They *would* be Reunified, even if America insisted on forcing them

to weather another winter. One year or a thousand, Korea would withstand, and be free.

Even if the thought of being without his brother for that long made his stomach convulse again.

But he wouldn't think about it anymore today. He had to find the words for what he would tell his people tonight that he hadn't been able to so far. He had to be strong, to stand up on that stage and make them believe they would be Liberated, that they could still trust him to do it.

That they always could.

North smoothed his dress uniform down, adjusting his belt, buckled in the new hole he'd poked in it with his tiger knife. He hesitated as he reached for the flatcap, then put it on. The skinned patch on the back of his head should have healed by now, but it hadn't. He would cover it today, then just make sure to block himself so the audience wouldn't see it tonight.

He paused in the doorway, leaning his forehead against the cool steel as his vision went black.

He would have to make sure he avoided Kim Yong-hwan when he visited the hospital later. She was watching over their charge while Kangwon was busy, so it would be easy. North could visit the other patients, then slip out without being seen.

He couldn't go in that room. Not if she wasn't going to wake up.

When the spots cleared from his eye, he pushed off the door, glancing back at that painting propped in the corner, like someone had straightened it up, the little bellflower glowing under the 'Made in USA' boot.

'RESIST!'

North let out a breath, scratching under his eyepatch, then left the room.

Like he had any other choice.

That's right. I have accepted that there will be three parts to this. What use is there in striving against the inevitable when your own brain is the obstacle? Please look forward to when we reach 401 chapters.

Also I'm not intentionally placing all the chapters during American recesses, but it keeps happening. Them taking one week off from the talks every other week is real, and my chapters keep landing on recess dates.

On another note, I feel like I'm the anti-George Martin of food scenes.

In The Embrace

Applause echoed from behind the thick red curtain as the last performance ended. It was only a few seconds before SH was sliding in from onstage in the dress uniform she'd been dancing in, heading straight for North.

He saw the glance she gave Kangwon, asking if he had been able to look at his burns today, and the reply as his other province wordlessly told her he hadn't.

North hid his grimace. He was fine. He had tended to them as best he could, wiping them down with boiled water and bandaging himself thoroughly. Even if his back-

He was fine. He would check tonight. All that mattered right now was that he wouldn't bleed through.

"Head up to the box," he ordered his provinces as an instrumental version of *'Aegukka'* filled the underground theatre, accompanying the dancers as they flooded in from the stage, clearing out the back area for him.

"I wanted to check on you first," SH said.

He grit his teeth. "I am fine."

She gave him a look. "I just wanted to see you."

No she didn't. She was doing what Kangwon was- fussing. China had told her he was anemic, so now she was reassuring herself that he wasn't going to keel over on stage in front of an audience of hundreds.

"You know even if she was checking on you, that'd be fine, right?" Kangwon asked, yawning. "We're your provinces, it's normal for us to care about your well-being."

"I don't need you to."

It was his own well-being he should worry about. North had forbidden him from giving more blood, since he needed him ready to deploy to his province, either if his patient recovered or- He wasn't donating like North was, but he *was* staying up all night. The almost maroon stains under his eyes proved it. And he was swaying on his feet, worse at hiding it than his Countryhuman.

There was also a heavy anxiety in the lines of his face, even if he insisted she was making progress.

"It's not about need, Korea," he gently told him.

"Get up to the box," North ordered again as their anthem reached its midway point.

SH sighed. "Alright. Work hard."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

She gave him a wry smile, supporting Kangwon by his elbow as they headed for the exit on the opposite side of the stage. Before they disappeared, she looked back.

"You know we really look forward to these speeches, Korea."

"Yeah," Kangwon agreed. "They really help. You should see the hospital when they're broadcasted- everyone crowds around the radio. Even the patients that can't walk either ask for one, or to get carried out to listen."

"Why are you telling me this?" North asked, tense.

SH smiled. "Because we appreciate you."

Lying again. They just wouldn't let him forget that he had been cowardly enough to miss that *one* live speech.

North tried not to look at them, but his eye couldn't help but be drawn to Kangwon, leaning against his cousin.

'By this time next year, you'll be able to operate again.' North had said those words to his brother last year. And now Gangwon was back in

the south, locked away like he had been before, possibly hurt in some way his agents couldn't see, like North had told him would never happen again.

Kangwon had been an idiot, going to Norway. Gangwon had been one, too. But North knew no matter how much he blamed his province, it wasn't truly his fault.

It was his. For not being there to stop them. For being so weak he couldn't handle a damn fever and hadn't been there to do the one thing he was good for.

And now both their brothers were gone.

Kangwon smiled down at him, but his eyes asked the same accusatory questions Gangwon's had last year.

The answer was 'no.' Foundation Day had came again. And Gangwon still couldn't operate. They still didn't have everyone back. And the war wasn't over.

North turned away, waiting until he heard their footsteps cross the stage, following the performers. When he was finally alone, he climbed onto it himself, staring at the curtain stretching above him like a waterfall of blood.

He could feel bombs impacting their land, shuddering through his flesh. Fresh blood soaked the bandages under his uniform, blood he couldn't afford to lose.

He exhaled, trying to drive the pain away. He couldn't let a single person in that audience know he was feeling it. He listened as the last strains of *'Aegukka'* filtered through the curtain, the lyrics echoing in his mind, even without anyone to sing them.

'Our country built on the will of the people

Infinitely prosperous, oh Korea!

The path forever shines!'

He had never wanted to hear a song in his brother's voice more.

North exhaled, and as the final chords faded, he sank his fingers into the curtain.

—

SH made her way through the rows of seats with Kangwon, smiling and nodding to the people that quietly hailed them. They climbed the stairs at the back, settling into one of the boxes with the rest of their cousins, the General and his household, and Kim Tu-bong and his. Kangwon stayed on his feet, leaning over the back of Hwang's chair.

The General smiled at SH as she took her seat on the opposite side of him from Kim Song-ae. "Is our country in high spirits?"

"He's ready to give his speech," she answered diplomatically.

He nodded, understanding. "Korea is resilient. Our comrade is, too."

SH dipped her head, smiling at Jong-il and Kyong-hui as they greeted her, before turning her attention to the auditorium.

The seats below them were packed to the brim, every single bench occupied by workers, Party members, teachers, soldiers, and peasants. The other boxes were full of Supreme People's Assembly deputies, wearing humble suits and choson-ot. Latecomers were still coming in, a few men and plenty of women from the fields, some of them still dressed in the muddy clothes they'd been working in, too eager to see Korea to change. They bowed in the direction of their provinces, Premier, and Chairman before squeezing into seats or finding a spot along the wall.

SH picked out Song Ki-gon near the doors, and Du Seon-gun standing by the front, near the band that was playing off to the side. The rest of her cousins' bodyguards were scattered around Moranbong Theatre, in this room or the underground halls, standing guard against any enemy terrorist attacks. She could see China, too. He hadn't joined them in the box, but was perched almost directly below, with Song Kum-mi and her mother. He had the girl in his lap so she could see better, and even at this distance,

she could tell he was flirting with the woman.

The province puffed out her cheeks in exasperation, but turned her attention to the stage as the final notes of *'Aegukka'* drifted around the hall, and the military band lowered their instruments, heads swiveling like all the rest.

As the echoes faded, a deep hush fell over the theatre, not a single person in the crowd of hundreds making a sound. The crimson curtain remained still.

SH had time to exchange concerned glances with Kangwon before it was swept aside, and Korea strode onto the stage.

Without him even saying anything, it was like the sight of him drained the tension in the room. The strained energy that had been hanging in the air even through her and her comrades' singing and dancing dispersed, shifting to something more anticipatory.

His boots echoed on the stage as he crossed to the front, standing under the single spotlight that hadn't been doused, powered by their precious rationed electricity. It shone down on him, illuminating his white dress uniform like sunlight on snow, gleaming off the golden thread of his epaulets. The band on their flag was turned to the rich scarlet of the Taedong at sunset, and the red star on his eyepatch blazed brilliantly.

Gone was the tense, wary man of the past few months who hunched when he was stared at for too long, and had that glint of paranoia in his eye. With his spine straight, shoulders back, and head held high, Korea was the picture of unflinching confidence, and, like the crowd, SH felt the tension she'd been carrying in her own shoulders ease before he even spoke a word.

She resolved to capture the moment in paint when the war was won. She could call it *'Lone Magnolia In The Light.'* And if that was too fancy, she would just call it *'General.'*

Korea didn't speak immediately, turning his head as he scanned the room from one end to another, taking in every single person gathered in the dark to see him. He lingered on the provinces in

their box. SH smiled encouragingly, even though he probably couldn't see her in the shadows, and he looked back at the audience, bracing his hands behind his back.

"Comrades," he began, as he almost always did, making sure their people knew he didn't see them as servants or subjects, but equals. "I am glad to see you here, on our Day of the Foundation of the Republic."

His voice boomed out around the hall, the acoustics carrying it to the ears (or 'ears') of every onlooker without needing a microphone to capture it. SH leaned forward in her seat, so hers could receive it just a second sooner.

"You will have noticed this year that I repealed my order to avoid gifting me anything," he said, making her perk up. "You were told that if you had presents you wanted to gift me or your Provincehumans, you should bring them here, or to the Pyongyang People's Committee, or your local organs for those from the provinces. The vestibule in this theatre alone is currently full of hundreds of pounds of clothing, daily necessities, food, and other supplies."

It'd already been burgeoning when SH got here ahead of time to get ready for the performance, filled with gifts from the theatre workers and Song and Dance Ensemble units- mittens, scarves, and socks for the coming winter, crocks of kimchi, dried namul, homemade bandages and antiseptics, all things someone had thought their Countryhuman or provinces could use.

Korea scanned them again, then delivered, "We will be accepting none of them."

A ripple of disappointment ran through the crowd below.

"Hey, wait, who made that decision?" South Pyongan muttered, then added, "Joking," when SH shot her a look.

"Everything you brought will be distributed to those who have lost their homes, refugees from the south, and our hospitals and orphanages."

That was pretty much what she'd been expecting. She saw North Pyongan bobbing his head from the corner of her eye, mouthing something to himself.

Korea looked seriously at all of them. "I am honoured that so many of you are willing to give what you do not have for your country, and I am proud that my people and our Chinese comrades are the most generous in the world."

SH smiled as he nodded to the Chinese representatives, a few local soldiers and some members of the Mobile Command, including Deng Hua. He'd done well adding their comrades to that. She was sure no one else but her and her cousins had heard the little hesitation in his voice.

"But I am not in need," he continued. "I know many of you see this day as my birthday, and wish to do something to mark it. But this day isn't about me."

Down the row, South Pyongan moved her hand to imitate a mouth, lip-syncing Korea's usual spiel to them. Without looking, North Pyongan took it, pressing it back to her lap.

"The Day of the Foundation of the Republic is to commemorate the first time in history that the Korean people formed a state of their own, not one for the yangban or the monarchs, or ruled by foreigners, but one that belonged to the masses."

SH didn't see why it was so hard for Korea to understand that he *was* that state, so commemorating it by giving him presents just made sense to a lot of people.

"And if it wasn't for those masses, for *you,* this day would never have existed. That state would not exist. If it wasn't for our workers that build and produce everything we need, our intellectuals that craft our laws, our artists of every stripe that raise morale, our politicians who guide our development, our peasants who keep all of us fed, and our soldiers, who have fought to Liberate our country and are *still* fighting to keep it free, none of us would be here right now." Korea marked them with his eye in the crowd, turning that glowing star on them one by one. "I am the representation of what

you have all struggled to create, but *you* are the Creators. As are your kin and neighbours and people you have never met and never will.

"They are who deserve your kindness and generosity. Not me."

SH frowned at his word choice. Hwang did, too.

"I know in this face of this war, it can feel like you aren't doing enough. But I assure you you are. Every weed you pluck is a field kept healthy to feed our soldiers at the front, every bottle of shoyu brewed, every pound of salt or bar of soap or pair of rubber shoes produced is another person whose misery will be lessened, every piece of art you make or song you sing is a heart that will be light enough to keep fighting for our nation."

The military band straightened as his gaze landed on them.

It was hard for some of their comrades to enlist to fight the enemy, only to be handed an instrument and told to play just because they'd been learning music for fun before. But sometimes a horn was just as important as a gun. If SH hadn't known that before, that first August Fifteenth at the Raktong would've proved it.

"You have all learned how to fight in whichever way you can." Korea's voice almost sounded like it darkened for a moment before it evened again. "And every one of those ways is equally important to this war, and to our country. That you know how to fight, that you aren't afraid to, is already the only gift I ever need. That you would give away what you can't afford is special enough. You already give back what you can, and Korea would never ask for more than that."

He lay a hand over his snowy breast. "All I will ever ask for Foundation Day is that you honour those who got us here, and those that guarantee we will see another."

Their people were moved, SH could tell. There were soft murmurs from the crowd, and she could see more than a few wiping their eyes, including Song Kum-mi's mother.

But they weren't entirely swayed.

"That idiot realizes he's one of those, doesn't he?" North Hamgyong muttered from where he was standing by the back of the box.

SH's lips flattened. She *hated* agreeing with him.

"If you truly can't afford to give away what you brought tonight, then take it back," Korea told them. "But if you are willing to part with something for your Countryhuman, then you should be willing to part with it for your countrymen."

Even if he couldn't convince them that he didn't deserve gifts, SH was sure there would be very few people in here that took theirs back, if any. Maybe they wouldn't have brought them if they'd known they wouldn't be going to him, but they wouldn't take them home now.

"I told you last year that I was proud of you." Korea's voice rose. "And that hasn't changed and never will. Every year, my pride in all of you only increases. Every year you withstand the hardship and injustice being thrust upon us, every year that you prove to the enemy how resilient Korea's people are, every year you keep fighting, I only grow more proud." He put his shoulders back even more. "If I was formed as any other country, I could not be half as such."

SH smiled waveringly, clutching her hands to her chest.

"If we were born anywhere else, we couldn't be either, Comrade Korea!" a factory man shouted from somewhere in the audience, ignoring his wife's embarrassed attempts to shush him.

Korea opened his mouth, then closed it. "Thank you," he said, the words not echoing as much as the others.

He lifted his chin, then lowered it, finding his volume again.

"That is why I know that by next year, we will have won this war."

The dark thing, lulled into silence by his voice, stirred as SH heard a growl from behind her.

"And even if we haven't, I know that we *will."* Korea's voice grew sharper. "With every year that goes by, America's faith in his people only wanes. He realized a long time ago that his army isn't capable of accomplishing his aims of conquering all of Korea, so he has turned to the tricks of 'voluntary repatriation' to hold our comrades hostage and stretch out the peace talks in an effort to wear us down. He knows his soldiers don't have the courage to fight for another year, let alone ten. He knows that with every month that goes by, his masses at home become more disillusioned with their families and neighbours dying for the interests of their bourgeoisie and Imperialist state."

But never disillusioned with humiliating and murdering *their* people. SH sank her nails into her palms.

"But with every day that passes, my faith in you only grows," Korea declared. "I know there is no world in which the Korean people ever again accept slavery and unjust rule. I know there is no world in which you abandon our comrades in arms and southern brethren. And there is no world in which Korea's faith in his people ever wanes."

He stopped, almost abruptly, eye moving from one side of the room to the other again, ending on the provinces.

'And there is no world in which the faith of Korea's people ever wanes in Korea,' SH mouthed to herself.

But he didn't say it.

"When I say I know we could fight for a thousand years, I am able to mean it, without exaggeration, without doubt. Because of you." Korea took a step forward, towards the crowd. "Because I know my people are the best in the world, and I believe that no matter what, you will never falter. And neither will I."

His words took on an edge as he balanced on that of the stage, something raw that made SH's breath catch, and almost made her want to turn her head.

"I will not stop until you are free, until our country is Liberated

and Reunified. I will not rest until our soldiers are released from the enemy camps, until every single one of our people, north *and* south, can go home, until every single last invader is driven from our Peninsula forever and we are *one."*

With every promise, his voice rose. His chest heaved now like he was out of breath, even though he wasn't moving. SH's hands fisted in her uniform skirt, unable to look away from him.

"I will never stop believing in *you!"* he cried, eye shining with a wild lustre as he teetered on the edge of the spotlight. "Korea will *never* lose faith in the people who have carried us so far, Liberated us from the Japanese, resisted the Americans, built us our own independent Socialist state, the first of its kind in Asia, and give our nation a reason to *exist!* To all of you, on this, the fourth anniversary of the Day of the Foundation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, to our workers and peasants and teachers, to our artists and musicians, to our comrades and brothers and sisters in the south suffering under the enemy, to our Worker's Party and People's Army and People's Committees, to our General Kim Il-sung and Chairman Kim Tu-bong, and to S- to *all* of our people, north and south and living over mountains and seas-"

Korea inhaled a jagged gasp of air, gasping the last word out at them.

"사랑하오!"

Hae squeaked from somewhere in the box, and SH pressed her fist against her heart as flowers of light bloomed in it, knowing that was the closest they would ever get to hearing Korea say that to them, and treasuring it.

On the stage, their Countryhuman thrust his fist up at the sky beyond the ceiling with such force that SH knew his skin had to have torn, baring his fangs at the audience as he screamed in a raw, bleeding voice,

"LONG LIVE THE KOREAN PEOPLE!"

He roared it at them like a challenge, one that every single person

in the hall answered, SH with them, throwing herself at the balcony wall to throw her fist towards the same unseen sun as him, commanding in one voice,

"LONG LIVE KOREA!"

The surge of wild elation filled her throat, burning away the pain and grief and anything else clinging to her like grime, driving the dark thing back into its corner. Her cousins rioted beside her, Kangwon shouting *"Manse!"* over and over with their people, Hwang making the loudest cry his thin chest could manage, almost matching Hae, and South Pyongan howling like a wolf. North Pyongan held his clasped hands to his chest, white eyes shining, and Chagang stood at attention, transfixed by Korea glowing on the stage. She couldn't see North Hamgyong, but he was the last thing on her mind right now anyway.

Kim Il-sung gripped the arms of his chair. His dark eyes reflected the light like star-filled pools. Jong-il had shoved his way in next to SH, peering over the edge of the box at Korea, his own eyes wide, lips parted in a childish mirror of the General's expression.

SH had always thought the boy looked more like Jong-suk, but right now, utterly in love with Korea, he looked just like his father.

She knew how they felt. In this moment, she knew every single person in this theatre, even if there were enemy spies nestled among the rows, did too. But especially the people in this box.

They were the ones that knew Korea wasn't always the person on the stage, full of confidence and charisma. Sometimes he was the man that snarled at them for asking how he was feeling, slunk away to eat his meals alone, or backed himself into a corner like he thought they were going to try and punish him for something he had no control over. And that just made the moments he stood under the spotlight shine even more brilliantly.

SH could remember following Korea down that mountain, away from Kanggye, and realizing from his stilted answers and refusal to look any of them in the eye that the boy who had strode into her cage and stripped her of her unimportant flesh with his piercing

gaze wasn't who he was all the time. He was awkward and standoffish, and didn't know how to hold a conversation. And he didn't know if their goal was possible any more than she did.

But he believed it was. Every time he stood before the provinces to tell them how the world should be, how they would *make* it be, she could tell he believed it more than anything. Even though he had... She couldn't say he had doubts, then or now, but he had fears and worries. He just didn't turn them into inhibitions, like those that had kept her in her cage.

He wasn't always a beacon of surety. He just had hope. And that meant someone like her could, too.

Against her better judgement, she looked over her shoulder. North Hamgyong still stood against the wall, broad arms crossed tight over his chest, his head turned away from the stage.

He had to turn away, or he might be forced to have it to. And that would ruin his wallowing.

She wasn't sure if Korea fell or jumped, but either way he canted off the stage and onto the theatre floor, landing on his feet, meeting their people as they converged on him in the space between the stage and the seats. They thronged from around the room, younger people making way for their elders so they could greet their country first, mothers carrying their children on their hips so they wouldn't get lost. China had set Kum-mi on the floor, saying something into her ear before gently pushing her forward when she looked back uncertainly. Her mother took her by the hand, leading her down through the rows, a soldier joining them, protecting her flank in case the crowd got too rowdy.

Now that he was out of the spotlight, Korea was just another white shirt in a sea of them. It took SH a moment to colour pick his navy and crimson palette in the shadows, finding him already in the arms of an elderly woman as she held him by the backs of his, and an older man rested his palm on his shoulder. More hands reached in to touch his face or pat his back, a swirl of soft colours as people eddied around their Countryhuman, feeling him.

SH knew objectively that to most people, these post-speech... she couldn't really think of anything better to describe them than as 'touching sessions,' would probably be strange. CCCP and the Soviets had never said anything about them on the anniversaries of Liberation Day during the trusteeship, or that first Foundation Day, but there was no way to know if they did the same thing in their country or if they were just being diplomatic. And the Chinese...

She looked over, finding that the foreign soldiers had all gathered together, watching the huddle down on the floor. China had joined them, throwing an arm over one of their shoulders, but still locked on to Korea with his eyes.

Maybe the idea wouldn't be so strange for them. If they knew their Countryhuman was with them, they might do the same.

But for the majority of the world, SH was sure it would be. Especially if they thought they had any knowledge of Korean culture. They weren't the touchiest people, and SH knew from the Soviets' sensitivity guides that foreigners placed a lot of emphasis on their hierarchies. For people from countries whose Countryhumans would never let their people handle them like this, it would probably be inconceivable that Korea would.

Honestly, sometimes it was almost inconceivable to SH. As much as she loved and trusted their people, she wasn't sure she could be comfortable with letting so many men surround her and touch her the way Korea did. It had been one thing when they were Liberated, and in the spur of the moment a dockworker or farmer would embrace her like a daughter or take her by the hands and spin her around. But every year, when they knew it was coming, could look forward to it... She hated that she had to feel like that, but she did. And Korea disliked being touched even more than her.

But every August Fifteenth and September Ninth, he would let hundreds upon hundreds of thier people surround him like this, many of them he'd never even met, folding him into them and touching him more intimately than even any of the provinces had ever been allowed.

Sometimes she thought it might be strange for the audiences, too.

Social hierarchies *did* matter, even if they were trying to rework them. But mothers that would usually be aghast by their Countryhuman using hao-che with their children were down there letting them cling to his leg and call him Korea without even a 'comrade,' peasants that would never dream of addressing him with anything other than formal hasipsio-che and office workers that would still feel the hesitation of questioning a superior if they had to ask about something were wrapping their arms around him in a way they might even struggle to do to their own fathers. SH could see Dan Won-sun, a professional, serious man from the Pyongyang Artist's Union that she'd never even seen look anyone in the eyes, take Korea's face in his hands and touch his forehead to his. And Korea let him.

Maybe it *was* a little strange. But SH couldn't see it that way. She could only be proud that her country was one who saw their people as worthy of embracing him, and that their people saw him as worthy of embracing, so much so that on days like these, the few ones where he allowed them, they let it overflow so that he would know how much they loved him back.

She didn't know if Korea would hold her and her cousins like that if they went down there. None of them had ever tried, not even Hae. Instinctively, they left these moments between their Countryhuman and their masses. And so long as they did, they could pretend he would.

She tried not to resent it, but she knew when it came to South, there would be no question.

Down below, the soldier took Kum-mi from her mother, holding her out so she could reach Korea. The girl rubbed her cheek against his like a cat, and he leaned into it, lighting her up like another tiny spotlight.

SH didn't know how North Hamgyong could even be in the same room as their people celebrating Korea this way, let alone with their Countryhuman's words still ringing in their heads and hearts, and not understand that they would win this war, that there was no other choice, that they couldn't even afford to *imagine* a world in which they lost days like these.

He was clinging so tightly to the bars of that old cage that there must be rust-filled grooves carved into his callused palms. It would've made her sad, if he couldn't just *let go,* like she had. He was the one that insisted on holding on, refusing to let anyone pry him free or convince him to even consider that tomorrow would be brighter than today, that the dark past and its filthy fingers didn't have to stain every day to come, that even people like them could be happy.

Not her.

'My body and my past might not have belonged to me. But my mind and my future do.'

South Hamgyong turned to look forward.

She refused to look anywhere else.

—

North had been too desperate, too vulnerable. His people had heard the plea in his voice, *'Please believe me, please trust me,* ***please-'*** He could see it in their eyes as they surrounded him, asking what Kangwon had, asking how they were supposed to when he had said this war would be over two years ago, that their country would be Liberated and Reunified by the first Liberation Day, when they shouldn't have even had one Foundation Day while its fires still raged, let alone *three.*

As his face was buried in sweet-smelling hair, he felt the urge to say what he'd wanted to the first time he had done this with his people during that torchlit vigil.

But he couldn't. They needed him strong, needed him unflinching and empty of regrets or doubts, or they would be filled with their own.

'Weak,' the eyes, browns and blacks and hazels, around him accused, and North squeezed his shut, letting a gentle hand trace the bandage on the back of his head.

They weren't saying that. He had reassured them tonight, and the

only thing in their eyes was faith. He knew it, even if he could hear a voice in his head saying otherwise.

But he didn't deserve it. They didn't know that South had burnt Seoul, they didn't know that he had known about Jeju, even if he hadn't known the full story, they didn't know that he was the reason North wore this eyepatch and that he forgave all of it.

They wouldn't look at him that way if they did know, wouldn't touch him like this or believe in him the way they needed to.

The worst part was that he knew that was a lie. Here, with the hands caressing his face and the husky murmurs of "사랑하오, 사랑하오" filling him to the brim, spoken in middle courtesy even when the rest of their words were in high, North knew the answer to his question from Kaesong- his people would forgive him. Even if they didn't, most would find some way to justify it to themselves, like In-su, telling themselves his reaction was expected when it came to his brother, excusing him.

He knew they would forgive him. But *should* they? Should they, when if anyone else had done what South had he would kill them himself, and he was only able to forgive him because he made that same excuse?

No, that wasn't it. It wasn't because he was his brother, it was because he was half of their country, because North- because *Korea* needed him. *They* needed him. The Korean people needed Korea, whole and Reunified and the way he was meant to be.

But if they ever found out what South had done, they might start thinking like North Hwanghae, like all of the provinces might, that South *wanted* to do those things, that he *was* the enemy, that Korea should be put back together from two halves of the country but only one Countryhuman, and when North made it clear that they should never accept that and he never *could* accept it, when they Reunified they would never trust Korea because one half had burned their homes to the ground and the other half knew he had done it and forgave him anyway, even though if any other member of Rhee's puppet government or his own had given the order, he would have put a bullet in their skull without hesitation.

His skin felt too tight and too hot, prickling under the burns and splitting open around his bones, and all the touching was soothing it and making it so much worse at the same time. His teeth came down, shearing off part of his cheek as someone hugged him too hard, and the gash on his torso screamed. He refused to make a sound, not wanting any of the hundreds of people around him to realize that if it wasn't for the thick pads of bandages he'd wrapped around every inch of his body, his ribs and shoulder blades would be cutting into them, and his uniform would be dyed scarlet with blood.

He didn't know what called them to embrace him like this, if they felt the same thing he did, or if it was something else- old superstition driving them to rub him like an odd coin in the hopes that good luck or prosperity would cling to them after, or just because they could, because Korea's people were some of the few in the world that held their country in their hands, and wanted to hold their Countryhuman in them, too, to prove to themselves that they were his masters. Or maybe it was always the same as that first night, as the villagers had gathered around and touched him with disbelieving faces, needing to assure themselves that he was real, he was *here,* that after all those years they had someone to fight for them and someone to believe in.

No matter what it was, North had to stand strong. He needed to be someone they felt like they could draw strength from, needed to prove that Korea was in their hands and always would be, needed them to believe in him so much that they would never waver until this war was won, never feel the same f-

He needed them to trust him enough that they knew they always could, even once he wasn't 'him' anymore.

So whatever it was the people around him were looking for in him, North gave it to them, trying to melt into the crowd like he always did, to feel how little the pain and swirling shame in his chest mattered compared to the people around him, to stop feeling everything in his body and mind for just a few minutes.

A soft cheek pushed against his and he pushed back; arms wrapped around him, a man's voice rasping, "Thank you," and he

echoed it; a palm rested against his ribcage, meeting his heartbeat under it, and he focused on feeling the pulse behind it pick up to match his.

Through his half-slitted eye, he saw hundreds of faces, many of them familiar- Bang Eul-sik, Ryu Tae-yong, Pak Sun-do and Kim Su-im, his wife, Pak Chol-jin, Yun Jin-suk and her family, Kim Rak-won and Oh Beng-hwan, the woman older and frailer, tears glimmering in her eyes as she patted him on the cheek and thanked him over and over, and dozens more. The rest were familiar because they were his, even if he had never lain his eye on them before.

He saw North Pyongan's charges through the crowd, Oh Tae-min lifting his hand, then hesitating. Hyun Han-jin took it, reaching out for him, and their Countryhuman stretched through the people between them, not feeling the burns under his arms crack, to intertwine his fingers with both of theirs, letting them know he saw them. Dark eyes and light went wide, and his lid dipped lower as that emotion he still didn't have a name for swelled within him, stealing his breath and making his blood rush even faster than before.

사랑 couldn't capture it. For everything it held, it was still too paltry. There wasn't any word in their language or any lesser that could embody how it felt to be emptied of everything, pain, hunger, rage, grief, and be filled with someone else's being until it felt like you would burst, all their bitters and sweets overwhelming yours, *becoming* yours, to know the people around you better than you knew yourself, even if you didn't even know their names yet.

But in the absence of a better word, 'love' served.

Careworn hands turned him towards their owner, and a matronly woman in a threadbare choson-ot squeezed him tight.

A hand touched his hip as she murmured in his ear slit, "It's not about 'deserve.'"

His breath hitched in his throat, and the too-much-touching-not-enough battle finally short-circuited his brain. He went limp, only

remaining on his feet by muscle memory and the sheer amount of people around him as his mind melted out of his head, body finally surrendering the last bit of resistance it had carried by instinct.

People from every corner of Pyongyang and all across the country surrounded him, clasping his hands and wishing him a happy Foundation Day, happy birthday, thanking him and telling him they loved him, loved him, sweet everythings that made his heart swell.

North didn't want to lose this. This had to be the final year, he had to win by next Liberation Day, he *had* to Reunify them, he had *promised.* But he knew when he did, America would tell his people about the order South had given. He would tell them he knew about Jeju and Yeosu and Taejon and Pyongyang. He would tell them he had been the one that took North's eye and no one would understand that the foreigner had *made* him, one final blow to try and crush their faith in their country. Reunification had been supposed to fix the unlikeable part of him, but now this might be the last time they ever looked at him this way as their tongues sang his name like his brother had used to sing songs to get them through the dark and he didn't want to *lose* them.

But North wasn't capable of thinking anymore. Korea was empty of everything he had to carry that wasn't his people or his love.

He tilted his head back, surrendering to the hands that ran along his throat as a soft voice worried about his burns, and he assured the man he was fine, that nothing the enemy could do to him would ever hurt more than what they were doing to their kin.

The deep ache he always carried, different than the cord that bound him to their other Countryhuman, grew sharper, greater, pushing against his ribs like it wanted to burst out, and like when Korea had hugged South, it felt like all he had to do was shred the skin-thin barrier between them to merge into the people around him, to be one with them. But no matter how he pushed, it wouldn't tear, and he was left holding those around him as close as he could, wishing they would hold him closer.

He wanted *this* to be the reason they gathered around him like this, because they could feel it, too. He tried to push his own

feelings into them, all of them, every single Korean in the room and beyond, to let them know he loved them more than anything, to let them know he was ashamed he forgave South, but to make them understand how much he also loved him. If they knew how he felt about him, they would understand, they would love him too, and when the time came, they would love Korea for every part of who they were.

More than anything, he tried to push those words he couldn't say into them, to apologize for not being able to hate someone that had hurt them, for not even being able to be truly angry at him the way he should be, for not being good enough as he was to save them.

But he would be. Even if they would never love him like this again, all that mattered was that his people and provinces were free and happy and had nothing to envy in all the world.

It wasn't a thought that would have crossed North's mind. But for a second, Korea wondered if merging with someone that could burn their capital *would* make him good enough.

Then a woman that smelled like damp earth buried her face in his chest, crying, and he stopped thinking altogether as he told her she would be alright, that everything would be okay.

Her bitter and all of the sweet around them, flowing out of his people and into him, was almost enough to drown out the ache in that cord even Korea was trying so desperately not to pull.

Almost.

I love whatever is wrong with him.

The title is a reference to 'In The Embrace of My Motherland' by Choe Dok-sin. Also if you've seen 사랑하오 **spelled** 해요 **before, that's because it's the Southern verb ending.** 하오 **is the proper Northern one.** 제 고양이를 사랑하오**. It means I love (you). If that isn't common knowledge. Also** 오다 **is conjugated** 오오**. This has nothing to do with the chapter, I just love saying it because it sounds exactly like my disappointed noise.**

If you're curious about what China said to Kum-mi before sending her to North, it was 'Gege has some wounds from the enemy under his clothes, so make sure you only touch his face.'

Like Poetry

Last year's speech had been all fire and brimstone, but the simple light of this year's wasn't outdone by it in any way. A profound passion filled the air of the Moranbong Theatre, pushing against the bones of the high roof and those of the people in it, a wave that carried the theatregoers on its swells, eternally cresting but never reaching its peak.

It was unmatched by any church service, but it was the closest thing North Pyongan could think to compare it to, and the reason why he preferred when Korea gave his speeches inside. There was something sacred about being packed in together with your comrades, your thigh pressed to someone else's on a wooden bench, tasting the breath of those around you instead of having it stolen by the breeze, your cries echoing back at you instead of into the void. It turned the theatre into a cathedral, one where the sermons weren't praising God, but the audience, and the preacher spoke like his voice was about to break under the force of the love behind it. The devotionals were the susurrations rising from below, fervent voices occasionally climbing above the rest to praise him back.

No one wanted to leave, not even the peasants that would have to rise early tomorrow to tend the fields. No one wanted the wave to decay, least of all North Pyongan.

When the doors were opened and they started to trickle out, to walk home to their huts and dug-outs and barracks, the feeling would flow out with them, droplets still soaking their skin and dripping from their lashes, comforting them with its warmth as they went to sleep. But when they rose the next morning from their beds of rice straw or thin cots, it would start to dry, and they would remember again that they were at war, and everything that came with it.

And Korea would dry even quicker than them, leaving him prickly and on edge again. By tonight, he would once more be refusing to eat at all, even alone. That rapturous look on his face as he spoke

with their people down below would fade, replaced by sharp edges and weary lines.

But for now the Moranbong Theatre swelled with devotion like North Pyongan's heart as he held his hands to it, feeling the rhythm beat like waves against the shore.

'Arcing high into the sky, burning in the mist,
Bursting like a balsam flower, our courage to resist.
Parting waves to the side, holding back the tide,
Crimson star, your light leads us far,.
The love of those below is deeper than you could ever know.'

It was a good one. But he thought Korea wouldn't enjoy it.

Hae broke first, as usual, scurrying out of the box and down to the floor to talk to those that had finished receiving comfort from Korea, and had made way for others to. North Pyongan wasn't able to stand before South Pyongan was pulling him down with her.

"Come on, comrades," she said cheerily. "I think we deserve some praise, too."

"You mean we should reassure our people of victory and let them know their provinces care for them," he corrected.

"Yeah, sure, that too."

North Pyongan shook his head fondly, looking back. His cousins were all following them, and Kim Song-ae was speaking with Kim Tu-bong and his wife, holding Kyong-hui's hand. But Jong-il was still hooked over the balcony railing, straining to see down below. And though the Premier had stood, his eyes remained fixed on Korea.

The province looked forward, watching his step as they descended the steep stairs, making sure his sister didn't drag him down them.

They were met at the back of the room by a flood of people, wanting to greet their Provincehumans on their holiday, too. They weren't as touchy as they were with Korea, sticking to forearm clasps and taking their hands, though there were also a few

embraces, especially for Kangwon as he was thanked for saving someone's son or sister or husband, or for the anti-germ warfare campaign. And as older women fussed over the exhaustion that even the shadows of the theatre couldn't hide, though he only assured them he was making sure not to overwork himself.

North Pyongan was happy to receive the congratulations and praise for all their efforts, letting those who gave it know he was proud of theirs, too. None of their work went unnoticed, as he would let his own people know once he returned to Sinuiju.

They lingered, talking about the difficulty of harvesting crops with the planes overhead, and the struggles of working the factories and mills with the electricity shortage still ongoing. They weren't looking for solutions tonight, just to share their troubles, and to receive the comfort that things would get better. Sometimes that was all someone needed- the assurance that those in charge would listen, and that they cared, even if there was nothing they could do.

But they still had to try to do what they could wherever they could. So North Pyongan tucked every word away, keeping the prayers for later, even if those that gave them weren't aware that was what they were.

He searched the room, finding Liaoxi and Liaotung with China and their soldiers. He ached for them, knowing the masks between the Chinese provinces and their comrades must feel stifling. On their National Day, they could only stand in the corner and watch their soldiers celebrate, instead of joining them and all their people the way the Korean provinces could, and as they should.

'That's why we have to sign peace soon. Please-'

He stopped himself before he could say it. If he didn't believe that he and all the people around him could do it, then it would never happen.

The time flowed like the Taedong on a lazy summer day, so that he barely noticed it passing. It could have been ten minutes or seventy before people gradually started to leave. The first person to muster the will to touch the door was a mother whose young child

had started to make low cries, tired of being up and overstimulated by noise. Another woman helped her, opening it and letting the dim glow of the hall lights illuminate the back of the theatre.

The mother glanced back, gaze caressing Korea, then stepped out. A few more people followed, all looking back first, at their Countryhuman or their provinces or neighbours, or their General.

North Pyongan knew the reluctance of leaving a celebration. The melancholy that would settle over his shoulders as the festivities wound down, and he knew the warmth and companionship would be replaced by hundreds of ri of unforgiving wilderness and rough living again. Wanting to be the last ones in the town square, rocking gently to music only you could hear.

It was the kind of sorrow you could only taste if you had known joy. The kind of bitter that made the sweet all the more precious.

"Hyung!"

He turned to see Han-jin and Tae-min making their way up from the floor, the taller boy making sure his friend's cane didn't slip.

"We got to touch Comrade Korea!" he declared, stopping in front of him with a grin. "I'm never washing my hand again."

He held it up, wiggling the fingers.

"If you don't, I'm not letting you back in the house," Tae-min threatened.

But he was holding the hand not on his cane to his chest, looking down at it with a glow in his dark eyes.

North Pyongan was glad to see he had overcame the reluctance to join the crowd Han-jin had mentioned after the Liberation Day speech.

"If you don't let me in, where am I supposed to sleep?" Han-jin demanded.

"Outside. You like rolling around on the ground anyway."

"Aww, look who's getting along now." South Pyongan interrupted their bickering to throw her arm around Han-jin, knuckling him on the head. "Glad to see you aren't being a loser anymore. You can thank me for that, by the way."

Han-jin flushed. "Thank you? Noona totally exposed me!"

South Pyongan nodded smugly. "You're welcome."

North Pyongan smiled to himself as Han-jin protested, and Tae-min yelped as the woman suddenly grabbed him, aggressively knuckling him now, the excitement of the sermon making her rowdy.

"Sister," he chided as she worked the boy into a headlock, making him drop his cane.

"Whoops, sorry." She darted down, placing the magpie-headed aid back in his hand. "Foundation Day, you know how it is."

She vigorously ruffled his short hair, leaving him to hopelessly try and straighten it.

North Pyongan arched a brow at her. *'Is he messy enough that you don't have to hurt him for being pretty now?'*

She squinted at Tae-min, then gave a thumbs up.

Her brother shook his head as she swaggered away, off to find soldiers willing to roughhouse with her.

As Han-jin helped Tae-min fix his hair, North Pyongan said, "My apologies for her. But it really does lighten our hearts to see you doing well. Both of you."

Something around the boys had smoothed like the sea after a storm, that tension that had lingered between them ever since they escaped Ganghwa finally gone. They no longer stood rigidly, like they were hyperaware of every inch between them, but leaned into each other more naturally.

North Pyongan still had no idea what that day on the mountain

had been about, but if it had helped in some way, then he was glad.

The two exchanged looks, eyes softening.

"Yeah," Han-jin said, ruffling his friend's head. "Me too."

"Stop messing with my hair," Tae-min muttered.

But as he looked away, the edges of his lips curved.

North Pyongan offered to walk them home, but they assured him they were only going to the rest house to tell the women there about the speech, and help them with the extra work that so many coming to the city for the holiday brought.

He watched them go as they climbed the stairs to leave the hall. Every uneven step of Tae-min's made his shoulder bump into Han-jin's, pushing them apart before they drifted back together, like flotsam in a current.

"They helped us get some of the costumes ready for the performance," SH said, coming up behind him. "They're good kids."

North Pyongan felt a little glow of pride at the words. It wasn't like he was their parent, but he thought the families they had lost would agree.

"I know a few women I could introduce them to," his cousin said, and he blinked at her.

"I didn't know you were a matchmaker."

She nodded, keeping her voice too low for the people filtering out of the hall to hear. "Korea wants me to find couples that would work well together."

That was even more surprising. Between that and Korea's unexpected... mostly acceptance of North Pyongan and Liaoxi's courtship, he was beginning to wonder if his Countryhuman had some hidden romantic streak. A *very* well hidden one.

"And it would be nice for them to have someone to look after them

once the war is over," SH continued. "Especially Oh Tae-min. I've seen them at the rest house, and they're both capable enough to take care of a household."

North Pyongan agreed. "I don't think either of them would be unequal in a relationship."

Neither boy liked being dependent on even each other, so he doubted they would be a burden on a woman, even with their disabilities. And with how they had treated Ahn Chun-hui (pray for the bliss of the dead), he knew they would respect their wives.

SH nodded decisively. "I know a few women that would get along well with them, I think. Do you what they would look for in-?"

"No."

The two of them jumped slightly, turning to see Chagang had pushed his way through the crowd from the other side of the aisle.

"No?" North Pyongan asked, surprised. It wasn't like his cousin to insert himself into conversations.

"No," he repeated.

"No what?" SH prompted.

"Do not set them up with women."

"SH isn't saying she'll arrange a marriage," North Pyongan reassured him.

"Never," she agreed vehemently, sounding offended Chagang might think that. "I'll just introduce them so they can see where it goes."

Even if they didn't fall in love, they could at least make some friends their age, instead of spending time with almost exclusively aunties.

"No," Chagang repeated stubbornly.

North Pyongan and SH exchanged glances.

"Chagang," she said kindly. "We've talked about this. You can't just say 'no,' you need to elaborate."

Their cousin bored into them with his eyes for a very long moment. Then finally he said, "They are from Ganghwa Island. They will want to marry Ganghwa women. If you try to set them up with women from here, they will feel like you are saying there is no chance of that."

SH's eyes went wide, and North Pyongan winced.

He hadn't even thought of that.

"He's right," he said to SH, chagrined. "Even if they didn't think that way, if you chose Pyongyang locals for them, the women would have to leave their families behind here."

"I was going to introduce them to people who lost their families," she explained. "Ones who wouldn't mind leaving bad memories behind. But no, Chagang is definitely right. We don't want them thinking- Well."

"I have to get them home," North Pyongan said into the bubble of silence that had formed around the three.

"You will," SH softly promised, and Chagang nodded, then looked at her.

"So you will not matchmake them?"

She shook her head firmly. "No. I'll wait until they can go home. Then if they need me, I'll find some good-quality Ganghwa locals."

Chagang dipped his head. "Good."

With no more words, he disappeared back into the crowd like a ship forging through ice.

"He's been... weird lately," SH said delicately.

North Pyongan nodded. "But he said his headaches have gotten better."

Though he felt strangely... distant in a way he hadn't before. He couldn't put his finger on it.

"That's good." She rubbed her chest, then glanced over. "Oh, Comrade Bang Eul-sik."

A man looked their way, waving as he climbed the stairs to join them. "Comrade SH, nice to run into you again. And Comrade North Pyongan."

He bowed his head, manners starting to creep back into the congregants with distance from Korea.

"Are you heading out?" the female province asked.

"Yep. Me and the other model soldiers have the toast with Premier Kim Il-sung now. I can barely wait." The man bounced on his toes as he looked over his shoulder. "And I can't wait at all to get back to Comrade Kim and the rest of the platoon to tell them about all this. But I don't..." He laughed, half-sheepish and half-wonderingly.

North Pyongan knew what he meant. It was difficult to describe Korea's speeches, even to someone that read the transcript or heard them on the radio. Even his poem had done a poor job. That feeling in the air just couldn't be captured, only experienced.

He looked back down at Korea, only to find that he had finally extricated himself from the knot of remaining people, and was coming their way with purpose. He notified the other two, and they turned to meet him.

"Kor- Comrade Korea." Bang Eul-sik stood at attention.

"Bang Eul-sik."

The way their country said his name made North Pyongan's eyebrows rise. Korea still had that dreamy look in his eye that dulled his tone, but there was an aggressive undercurrent to it.

Bang Eul-sik seemed to hear it, too. "Yes, that's me, Comrade Korea."

"Why did you write me that letter criticizing the South Hamgyong People's Committee's efforts in the search for missing persons?"

SH opened her mouth, but he cut her off with a click.

Bang Eul-sik blinked, looking confused. "Because I think they could be doing better. And I know you'll fix the problem. Comrade General."

Korea pierced into him with his eye, then gave a jerky nod. "I will. Continue to send any more complaints you have. At ease."

He tossed the last part over his shoulder, stalking over to a cluster of people and immersing himself in them.

Their comrade finally lowered his hand from its salute, looking askance at the provinces.

"He's..." SH sighed, giving up. "He's like that. It means he's glad you wrote."

Bang Eul-sik relaxed. "Good. I didn't want it to seem like I was blaming him or Comrade SH, but I figured it was better to be blunt than downplay how I felt."

"If we don't know the full extent of a problem, we can't fix it," North Pyongan agreed.

This was a hard one to fix. With the sheer amount of people missing, and efforts needing to be focused on the war...

But those with missing loved ones needed to vent, and they needed to hear. If something could be made better, then it had to be, even if it was difficult.

"That's what I was thinking." He looked after Korea. "But if you get the chance, could you tell him it wasn't a complaint? It was just criticism."

They promised they would, and the soldier bid farewell, going to find North Hamgyong to say goodbye (something SH didn't look entirely pleased by). She soon followed him. North Pyongan would give her the benefit of the doubt and say it *wasn't* to eavesdrop.

He took the moment of solitude to stand under the shadow of the balcony and savour the dregs of the atmosphere. The few dozen people that still lingered in the theatre, scattered amongst the pews as they talked enthusiastically with Hwang and Hae, or tried to convince Chagang to take one of the jumeokbap they hadn't left in the vestibule, his cousins, less tense than they had been in months, and himself, the tide of pain from his burns momentarily receded, and his hunger sated, even though he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

And Korea, of course, the look of bliss settled back over his face as he returned to the embrace of their people. Touched by peace for a rare moment, just like the crowd.

North Pyongan searched their faces, the shining eyes and soft expressions as they reached for him, holding on for just a little longer.

There was still awe in them. How could there not be? But it wasn't the kind that followed them from village to village during the Occupation. God hadn't descended from the heavens to feed them- he lived amongst them, and helped them develop the tools to feed themselves.

It was almost contradictory, in a way. Perhaps it was just North Pyongan's bad habit of still looking for religion in everything that made him feel the way he did about Korea's speeches, but he didn't think it was. A cathedral, a sermon, a preacher, he was certain it wasn't only those who attended church that could feel those parallels.

The way Korea's words raised a crowd, got into the blood of the audience and lit it on fire, and the way he and their people embraced each other after, the looks on their faces and the timbre of their voices as they burned together, made it unmistakable that it was something near a religious experience for both sides, and greater than any North Pyongan had ever experienced singing

hymns. He knew because he felt the warmth, too. Though Korea would deny it if he said any of that to him, and likely smack him upside the head.

But despite the devotion that filled the room, and the laying of hands that could very well be called worshiping by both sides, it didn't elevate Korea. It didn't set him farther ahead on the path, making the awe between him and those they were guiding grow cold with distance, like the kind that filled the faces in church pews, or felt towards a far-away idol, like Joseon. It only melted it.

North Pyongan had to wonder if there was ever a moment when Jesus Christ had stopped being the son of a carpenter to his people, and became the Son of God. If the eyes that had once met his became fixed respectfully on his feet, and the hands that once reached out in friendship reached out solely in supplication. If he had ever been as scared of straying from the path as Korea was.

He still couldn't believe he would. Not when he was across the room with a woman resting her hand on his arm as casually as if she was his brother, and his brow was bending towards hers like he was fighting the urge to rest it there. But his province would walk beside him anyways, and he would watch. Jesus' miracles had turned him divine. North Pyongan would make sure that, to their people, these sacraments only continued to make Korea more mortal.

Perhaps that was part of why he gave himself over to the crowds, not just to heal them, but to let them feel that he was only flesh and blood. And to remind himself that he was walking *with* them.

North Pyongan didn't think he could forget. Because while they still felt awe, and Korea's was greater than any of theirs, he knew that was no longer what he saw shining in any of their eyes.

South Pyongan sidled up next to him, holding a finger over her lips as she held up one half of a jumeokbap that had been 'forced' on her. North Pyongan smiled, taking it, turning Korea's charity to mutual aid for him. He rested his head on her shoulder as he chewed, just for a moment. She made a face at him as he pulled back, her cheeks full of rice, and he smiled. Embarrassed, she

looked back out at the theatre, at Korea still rocking with their people in the far reaches of the spotlight's pale glow.

Eyes shining like their Countryhumans', the Pyongans bore witness.

—

"It's okay to take just a little."

"I'm alright, really," Kangwon said again to the auntie trying to force tteok wrapped in mugwort leaves on him. "I get enough to eat at the hospital."

Korea had upped his rations again, meaning he got the amount headquartered officers had been receiving before the army economization. And he'd added another hundred grams to help with his blood loss, at least until he wasn't suffering from anemia anymore.

'Without upping his own.'

The woman gave him a skeptical look, from the bags under his eyes to the way he was standing.

Yeah, he looked... rough. He felt rough, like usual. But *he* was eating enough. Even if nothing could fill the empathetic hole in his stomach, he was recovering steadily. He might even be able to sit down again soon.

"I know they aren't very fancy," the woman fretted. "But I'd like Comrade Kangwon to have them."

"It isn't about how fancy they are." Kangwon gently out his hands over the wrapped tteok, pushing it back towards her. "You need it more than me."

She'd said it was gaetteok, flimsy rice cakes made with namul pounded into paste, glued together with whatever scraps of flour you had. They were a step up from pine bark (not that Kangwon had anything against bark), but still survival food. It wasn't something you brought as a gift for your Country or Provincehuman

if you could afford to bring anything else.

"Please," she urged. "I told my son I'd bring you something."

"Your son?"

"Sin O-jong?" She said the name like a question, thinking he might've forgotten it.

He hadn't, and it let him attach her to a name the man mentioned during his time in the hospital- Beom Sun-dol. He'd never met her in person before since she was working during his follow-up visit at their dug-out.

She looked relieved at his nod. "You saved his life and never asked anything for it. We want to pay you back, even if it's just with something like this."

"His treatment was free thanks to the State's care for war victims," Kangwon deflected. "And I didn't save his life. He was always going to make a smooth recovery."

The Rubber Factory worker had been too close to one of the detonations during the big raid back in July. He'd had some bad orbital fractures and globe ruptures, and he'd been trapped under rubble for too long to get the urgent care he needed. His vision had never came back, but he luckily hadn't received any major head trauma or internal bleeding.

"Not... like that." Her eyes dipped. "It's been... hard. Adjusting. Especially when I have to be at the factory so much. But he talks about you a lot, and the things you told him. It makes me think... that maybe he'll be okay."

Kangwon felt one of the hundred tiny knots tied inside him loosen a bit. He'd felt like Sin O-jong was doing okay the last time he saw him, but he'd been too busy with the germ warfare investigation, and then... He hadn't been by lately. It was good to hear a positive diagnosis from someone else.

He couldn't play dumb now. But he could redirect.

"I didn't save him," he said again. "I just healed his body, and tried to help him develop the mindset to save himself."

He'd seen the despondency on his scarred face as he sat in his hospital bed, unable to read or write stories the way he'd used to to pass the time, and the frustration as he groped around blindly for his spoon at mealtime. He'd made sure to put aside time to visit him at City Hospital One at least once a day, even if his body'd rather pass out in the break room, right up until he had to leave to help the foreign scientists, trying to help him realize that losing his eyesight wasn't the end of the world, or his life.

Beom Sun-dol was undeterred. "Either way, you're the reason I'm still able to come home to my son at night. If I could know a meal I made gave you the strength to make sure someone else can come home to theirs, it would lighten this mother's heart."

When she put it like that, Kangwon couldn't refuse anymore.

"Alright," he gave in, and she pressed the wrapped gaetteok into his hands, then went a step farther and pulled him into a hug.

Like every one he'd received tonight, it immediately made his body want to go limp, exhaustion flooding through him. He'd been sleeping even less than before, on the floor in one of the rooms, too afraid to drift off in case he didn't realize the IV was empty, or couldn't hear if the ragged breathing above him had stopped.

'Warm...'

"Thank you," Beom Sun-dol whispered. "Truly."

Reluctantly remembering he was supposed to be the one comforting her, Kangwon rubbed her soothingly on the back, then pulled away a bit.

"It's going to be a constant battle," he told her. "Recovery isn't a straight road. There'll be better days and worse ones."

She nodded tearily, letting him know she'd seen both. Kangwon squeezed her rough hands.

"Let him know you're there for him," he advised, thinking of Sip Tal-sun. "And that he isn't a burden. Don't let him bottle things up- even if he doesn't want to talk, make him."

Hypocritical advice, maybe, when he couldn't make Korea. But Sin O-jong was easier to talk to than their Countryhuman, and hadn't had as many years to internalize suffering in silence like so many men did, like Sip Tal-sun had.

Korea hadn't said anything when he'd told him about his suicide. Just grimly nodded like he'd expected it. It wasn't a reaction Kangwon liked, especially when he put his own body at risk so often, running into combat by himself or apparently almost getting blown up with China's Jeep.

"Let him know he isn't alone."

Beom Sun-dol nodded fervently, squeezing his hand back. "I will. My boy could *never* be a burden."

"Sometimes even if how you feel about someone is obvious to you, it's less obvious to them."

'It's not about need.'

Or not obvious at all.

Under her watchful eye, he tucked the gaetteok into the pouch on his general's uniform. He could eat one or two to fulfill her wish, then see if Kim Yong-hwan wanted the rest. She'd been working just as hard as him lately, picking up the slack when he was with the ISC or for those few days he was in his province.

And when Korea took him back to Wonsan last week.

His anxiety spiked, the way it had when he'd left for it. His capital was still under siege, and even worse than before. So many faces from the last visit had been gone- Kim Ju-kyu had been one of them, and Heung In-kun, only two days after Kangwon's last visit. He'd led a charge to repulse a reactionary landing party, and been cut down by a destroyer's cannons.

With every nail of grief hammered into his heart, his nerves had only frayed, dreading that he'd get back to Pyongyang just to be met with another. Korea had refused to talk about it, but he knew he'd feared it, too. He'd taken him straight to the military hospital the moment they returned.

They'd been spared then, and every day since. But...

Kangwon needed to get back to the hospital.

He said goodbye to Beom Sun-dol and looked around the theatre, confirming that almost everyone was gone. Even the Premier had said his farewells and left for the toast to the model soldiers, and the few people left were either stagehands, performers, or occupied with Korea or his cousins. It shouldn't be a problem if he got his guards and headed out.

He glanced over as the door to the theatre opened, and someone entered instead of exited.

His heart dropped.

An Il-rae hurried in, stopping at the top of the stairs to frantically scan the hall like she was looking for someone.

Him. He'd told her to come get him if something changed in her condition.

Part of him wanted to hide behind one of the benches. Korea's speech had lifted the weight on him up at least a little, allowing him to breathe. If it came crashing back down now...

His heart couldn't take another nail.

Kangwon inhaled deep, then exhaled.

It would. It had to. He needed to become someone Korea could depend on, so he'd let him take care of him again. He needed to make sure more parents would be able to come home to their children. He had more people to save.

Even if he lost her.

He headed for An Il-rae, trapping his nails in his palms.

"Comrade Kangwon!" she cried when she saw him, scurrying over, and when he saw the look on her face, he almost could've added another tally to the amount of times he'd cried in his life.

A wave of relief washed over him with her words, and he quickly thanked her, jogging across the room. He grabbed Chagang, taking a second to let him know what they'd done had worked. His cousin dipped his head, happy, but Kangwon was already going straight for their Countryhuman. He couldn't wait for the people around him to leave, and maybe if he knew, he'd be able to have a few moments with them with one less worry hanging over him.

"Korea!"

He stiffened as he grabbed his sleeve. "What?"

Kangwon grinned up at him, finally able to say the words he had been waiting twenty days to say.

"Choe Kang-ok is up."

This chapter was finished days ago. But you know how it is. Three days to write a poem. ㅠㅠ

I think modern day North Pyongan believes in Juche like a religion. Not follows it, because he's not dogmatic and they're the ones guiding it, but *believes* in it. All of the provinces do ideologically, but for him there's still very much a religious flavour to that belief. Because even once he's no longer religious that influence has left an indelible mark on his character and way of thinking and feeling about things. He doesn't go to church anymore, but he does go to Party Central Committee meetings, and that's almost the same thing. Except the god isn't intangible anymore, it's the people behind the walls whose lives they're trying to make better.

The reason Tae-min was hesitant to reach for North in the last chapter (and at other speeches) is because even though he's accepted that he's gay, he still feels that others would be

disgusted by it. Like if North knew he liked men, he'd feel violated that he was touching him. He wouldn't (especially not when he's blissed out), but it's obviously an understandable fear, especially considering something that happened to Tae-min in the past.
Hehe, finally I can post him and Han-jin's backstory and future chapter. These will be in the artbook tomorrow.

Skinship

They hurried down the halls of the hospital, Kangwon having to stretch his legs to keep up with Korea, to the point that his burns were sending shocks of pain up into his hips. But there wasn't any getting his Countryhuman to slow down. He'd taken the GAZ instead of walking, leaving the other provinces (and China) stranded at the theatre, and wouldn't even pause for the nurses that wished him a happy Foundation Day as he strode past. After only setting foot in the hospital for his blood donations and refusing to go anywhere near Choe Jong-ok's room, now it was like he couldn't wait another second.

He only halted at the impassable barricade standing in front of the room door with her hands on her hips.

"He appears at last," Kim Yong-won said scathingly. "But not for the first time today, I hear."

"Move," Korea ordered.

"Oh no. I haven't seen to your injuries in months. *Months,"* she emphasized. "And neither has this one."

Kangwon winced as Korea swung his head his way, feeling him scorch him with judgement for 'talking about him behind his back' (discussing a patient's condition with a fellow medical professional).

"Even after those last two big runs." She glared at him. "The city burned for the entire night during that July one. Fires were still smoldering when we finally left the shelter. Even if it wasn't for all the other hell those bastards are raining all over our country, you would need a good exam and disinfecting for that alone. But I bet you haven't even been doing that."

"I am taking care of them."

The nurse scoffed. "And by that you mean you've been splashing

water on yourself and slapping reused bandages over them."

"No," Korea said stiffly.

Kim Yong-hwan crossed her arms. "I'm not letting you in this room until you let me have a look at you."

A dangerous move. Though probably the only one that would have a chance of working. Kangwon eyed Korea.

His face had darkened. "You would deny your Countryhuman access to one of his soldiers?"

The woman was unimpressed. "How many times do I have to tell you- pulling rank means nothing when we're in my hospital. The girl has been on the up, which you would *know* if you ever came by. She's too strong to be kept under anymore, and that means I don't see her backsliding any time soon. She'll still be here in ten minutes. If you've allowed yourself to get gangrenous, *you* might not be."

She took a step forward, like she was going to grab Korea's sleeve, and his eye flared as he took one back.

"You do not touch your Countryhuman without permission!" he snarled, and the sound of his voice stopped Kim Yong-hwan short, shock flickering across her face. Kangwon's own eyes widened.

Korea's fierce expression faltered for a moment as he took another step away, before he curled his lip again, showing his fangs at their comrade.

"I am going in there *now."*

His voice was low, and Kangwon recognized the unsteady light in his eye as the same from when he'd attacked him in the Quarantine Hospital after finding out about Hae's condition. Kim Yong-hwan might as well have been holding him at knifepoint instead of just wanting to make sure he was okay.

"It's been a long day." Kangwon kept his voice causal as he put himself between them. "And Comrade Choe is probably still worn out. It'd be better to see her now so she can get some rest, and

Korea can come in tomorrow for an exam."

They both knew he wouldn't be doing that. If they let this leverage go, they were letting the chance to treat his wounds go.

But there was only one more step Korea could take before his back would meet the corridor wall.

Kim Yong-hwan's jaw feathered as she looked past him at their Countryhuman. Then she stepped aside.

"Fine. Go."

Her voice was icy, and so was the glare she shot him as he brushed past her into the room. But the look she gave Kangwon was concerned.

She was too professional to take a patient's attitude personally, but she knew Korea, and that he'd just spent the past hour getting manhandled. She knew he shouldn't care about touching right now.

Kangwon made an apologetic blink, and her hand grabbed his shoulder as he walked by. Korea could still hear them, so she couldn't say anything. But she flattened her lips, a look he could read as easily as his cousins'.

'Take care of him.'

He wished he could. Even if he thought he knew now why his Countryhuman hated the idea of letting them tend to him, he still couldn't understand it. All he could do was keep trying to prove he could rely on him.

And hope Korea didn't die of sepsis in the meantime.

Kangwon entered the room, shutting the door behind him, and as he laid eyes on the person in the bed, for a moment, his worries melted away.

"Hey Uncle Kangwon." Choe Kang-ok gave a strained smile as she pushed herself up on the cot.

Her voice was raspy, and the left side of her face didn't move as much as the right. Her eyes were sunken into purple sockets, and he could see the withered, reddened skin where her lesser burns peeked out of the collar of the blue and white striped hospital gown and crossed her scalp.

But she was alive.

Kangwon swallowed the lump in his throat. "Don't move too much," he advised, heading over to adjust the pillow under her and move her cup of water closer by instinct.

Her hand shot out, grabbing his uniform. "Gyuri," she said urgently. "Is she-?"

"She's alright," Kangwon told her. "But she wants to kill you."

The women let out a shaky breath, relaxing. "Of course she does. That dumba- idiot. She wouldn't leave that stupid gun. *I* should kill *her,* making me save her like that."

"Try not to talk too loud, your throat is still healing."

"Yeah," she whispered hoarsely, putting a hand to it. "It feels like I'm gargling gravel."

"It should go away," Kangwon assured her. "Your larynx and lungs took damage from the heat, but it wasn't too severe. You might have a little shortness of breath in the future, but it shouldn't be chronic, and your voice should go mostly back to normal."

She nodded. "Comrade Kim Yong-hwan told me. And she... she said I should be able to return to service."

She said it hopefully, looking up at him.

Kangwon followed the line of stitches on her face. Then he nodded.

"Yeah," he managed, even though the idea of her heading out to the front again made his own throat want to swell shut. "It shouldn't affect your ability to serve."

Choe Kang-ok sagged, her head tipping back against the steel frame of her cot as her dark lids fluttered closed in relief for a second, before sliding back open.

"I need to go now," she said, trying to sit up more. "I need to get back to Commander Ryang and Gyuri and- I need to tell them all I'm okay."

She made a noise, sliding back down as Kangwon moved to steady her.

"Careful," he soothed as she gasped in pain. "I'm sure Comrade Kim also told you you shouldn't be asking if you're capable of returning to the field so soon."

She looked down sheepishly. "She called me an idiot."

"I have a better bedside manner than her, so I'll just say you're not in any condition to fight yet. We'll send a telegram to Comrade Ryang and the rest of your unit to let them know you made it."

There were still plenty of things that could go wrong in her recovery. Infection could still set in or the grafts could get rejected after all or there could be some unknown complication from what he'd done or- But she'd made it through the worst of it. So all Kangwon could do was believe she'd made it, and keep working to make sure he was right.

"I don't want to be lounging around in here when we win," Choe Kang-ok whined, and looking at her stubborn pout, her flat nose scrunched up and the one cheek that was still freckled puffed out, Kangwon felt a sharp pang in his heart.

Korea was standing stiffly in the corner, not speaking. But he'd looked away, so the province knew he'd seen the same thing he did.

"You're just like your dad," he said without thinking, and her cheeks flushed. Both of them, part of his mind noted.

Choe Kang-ok's mouth opened, then closed, her bottom lip disappearing under her teeth. "That... That means a lot. Thank you."

There was a beat of silence, then Korea said what Kangwon had been working up to, "Are you aware of what had to be done to save you?"

The woman's hand went to her face, fingertips grazing across the left side. "Yes," she said after a moment. "It's blurry, but I remember Comrade Kangwon waking me up to ask if it was okay."

'Will you let me save you?'

Kangwon tugged at his sleeve, which hid the almost healed incision he'd made in his wrist. He'd managed to hide it from Korea once he'd gotten back to the camp. His dedication to saving Choe Kang-ok had just reinforced his belief that he should never know that drinking their blood worked like the transfusions.

"Have you had the chance to see your face yet?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Comrade An Il-rae made Comrade Kim Yong-hwan bring me a mirror earlier."

Her fingers traced the stitches that separated her normal tanned skin from the patches of russet that cradled her eye, covered her cheek, and ran from her burnt scalp down into her collar. Where Kangwon's skin had been turned red from burns, hers had become the exact shade he'd been before.

None of it had came from his face. You shouldn't do skin grafts from the head, almost couldn't. Unless it was a desperate situation and you weren't the doctor performing the surgery. But he'd still had small patches of normal skin in between his burns, just enough to cut away and piece together. And that stubborn patch on his haunch had come in handy. He hadn't been able to sit down in weeks, but that was a small price to pay.

"I... saw my body, too," she said, subtly eyeing Korea's face.

"We didn't have enough skin," Kangwon said, feeling their Countryhuman staring at him. "I wasn't enough. Comrade Chagang had to chip in."

"I'll have to tell him I say thank you."

"I'm sorry it's so noticeable," he said, feeling weirdly awkward, considering he was talking about a medical procedure. "I couldn't focus on cosmetics."

He'd had time to think while prepping for the surgery and waiting for Korea and Chagang to arrive, feeding her just enough of his blood to keep her heart beating, but not enough to make him woozy. He hadn't been sure if he should try and take skin from other parts of her body to cover his own. Not for aesthetics, but to maybe help the grafts take. But in the end he'd decided it was too risky to cause any more damage to her. He'd stuck with just theirs, working with steady hands and an unwavering will to sew the skin over the worst of her napalm burns, covering bone and muscle back up.

And it had worked. His flesh had integrated with her wound beds. Where the cells on SH's toe had died soon after it was amputated, his own had latched on to Choe Kang-ok's, and been sustained by them. Hwang's throwaway musings in the lab over a year ago had been right- they *could* use their skin to perform grafts.

He wished he'd know that for Kim Mi-ju. But at least it had worked for Bong-nam's daughter.

"It's okay," she said, still feeling her patchwork face. "Now I've got cool war scars like Abeoji. And bigger, too."

The little cut on his cheek from one of their final battles against the Japanese. He'd been so excited when Kangwon said it would probably scar, like he didn't already have those old marks on his back, stretched out by time.

'Yeah, but people can actually see this one without me taking my shirt off.'

"Am I going to get cool powers to go with it?" his daughter asked. "Will I be able to heal fast like you, or bring people back to life with my blood? Chukjibeop?"

She was joking, but Kangwon could see a nervous flicker in her eyes. Her body had been changed, parts of people that weren't

exactly human grafted on in place of hers. And like he'd told her in the medical tent as he asked if she would let him do it, they didn't really know what that could mean for her.

"I don't think so," he said, leaning against the wall. "I've been monitoring the grafts. For the first week, my cells were replicating just a little less than average. But they slowed down after. And for the past few days, they've plateaued and started acting like yours."

Like a normal skin graft, just one that resisted infection better, and had a little bit of boosted regeneration, long enough to heal.

"But keep an eye out," he advised her. "If you notice anything out of the usual with your body, tell a nurse immediately, even if you think it's just the burns."

Choe Kang-ok nodded, her hand dropping. "That will be hard to do if I'm on Paektusan all of a sudden."

"You won't be able to do chukjibeop."

"Never say never."

Korea shifted slightly. Kangwon looked at him, encouraging him to say something. But he stayed quiet.

"That's your blood, isn't it?"

They looked over. Choe Kang-ok was staring at the IV bag feeding into her arm, half-full of red liquid.

"I feel like I could take on a hundred Yankees," she noted. "That's what a comrade who had a transfusion from Comrade Gangwon said it was like."

"Yeah," Kangwon said. "It's Korea's." He ignored the man's glare.

Choe Kang-ok ran a burnt fingertip along the tubing, tracing the blood until it disappeared into her veins. She looked up at them.

"You really did a lot for me, didn't you? I'm... not sure I deserve all of this."

"Don't say that," Korea said sharply before Kangwon could. "It isn't- about 'deserve.'"

"But if I was just a regular soldier-"

"We didn't do this because you are Choe Bong-nam's daughter," he firmly cut her off. "We did it because you are one of our people. The flesh and blood of Korea and his provinces belongs to you as much as any other Korean."

Really glad he hadn't let him find out about the blood drinking thing.

Kangwon nodded. "We might've been even more worried than usual, all things considered. But if I'd had the idea, I would've tried it on you even if I'd never met your father, or you. You gave your body for your comrade- it was only right someone should give theirs for you."

Choe Jong-ok's brown eyes glimmered slightly as her lips pressed together, and Kangwon saw a little boy do the same thing, trying not to cry over the pain from his back.

"Your father would be proud," he said softly, and their comrade ducked her head.

"Thank you," she said, swiping an arm across her eyes. "Thank you, Comrade Kangwon, Comrade Korea."

"We really don't mind 'uncle,'" Kangwon said, ignoring Korea's noise of protest.

Choe Kang-ok smiled tremulously, freckled cheek and russet one both pushing her eyes up into crescents. "Thank you, Uncles."

"Any time," Kangwon assured her. "But maybe try not to get napalmed again until our skin grows back."

She burbled a laugh, holding an arm out. After a second, Kangwon leaned in, bending slightly awkwardly to avoid sitting down as she wrapped him in a half-hug. His cheek rubbed against his own flesh, hers now.

"I hope it's okay to say," she whispered in his ear. "But I think Abeoji would be proud of you, too."

Kangwon's throat swelled shut. He didn't answer, just squeezed her a little tighter.

She winced when he let go.

"Are you okay?" he asked, when he could almost sound normal.

"I don't want to complain when you and Comrade Chagang skinned yourselves for me, but it still hurts," she said. "A lot."

It was why they'd kept her in a medically-induced coma even after her body had came out of the one it put her in. Their blood in her system had kept trying to bring her back to weary half-consciousness, but the shock of the pain would've just put more strain on her. They'd gone through... far too many sedatives doing it, but they'd decided to keep sending her back under until she woke up clear and strong enough to think.

"And I'm itchy." She scratched lightly at her neck. "And *starving."*

"The stitches will be coming out soon. Did you already eat?" Kangwon asked, eyeing the empty bowl.

She nodded. "But I think calling me a glutton would be unfair when I've probably been living off liquid rice and blood for the past few weeks."

She had been. Rice slurry poured into her mouth and Country and Provincehuman blood constantly pumped into her veins, hoping it might help their skin accept its new host.

"I wasn't going to," he said. "It's normal for you to be hungry. Just... Once you've recovered a little more, and you get to eat enough to be full, tell me if you still aren't."

Choe Kang-ok tipped her head.

He glanced at Korea, then said, "You'll know what I mean. If you never do, then don't worry about it."

He didn't think the empathetic hunger was tied to their skin or blood. It should be about what they were, connected to their being. And it looked like their flesh had started to become more... human anyway.

But he had performed a medical experiment that had possibly never been attempted before in all of history. Or if it had, it had been never been shared, for one reason or another. You couldn't blame him for being on high alert.

"How vague and unsettling," Choe Kang-ok remarked, and he chuckled.

"Sorry," he said, pulling the leaf-wrapped tteok from his pouch. "Here, gaetteok to make up for it."

He couldn't not let her eat all of them. Hopefully the fact that she had so much of his blood still in her system and his skin merged with hers would be enough for Beom Sun-dol. And at least he'd received her feelings.

"Sorry it's not much," he said as she snatched them. "But they were made with love."

"Tastes like it," she mumbled, already shoving one of the floppy green discs in her mouth. *"Way* better than pine bark and lichen."

"Pine bark and lichen aren't that bad."

"Abeoji said you had a strange thing for it. You know one time I caught Comrade Gangwon eating bark when we had just received rations from some villagers?" She shook her head, then looked up apologetically. "I hope he's okay, by the way."

"Yeah," Kangwon said, her at squeezing. "Me too."

"Here." Korea suddenly thrust something out for Choe Kang-ok. "Take this, too."

"And jumeokbap?" She eagerly took the rice ball with her free hand. "I'll be back on the field in no time."

Kangwon gave Korea a disapproving look, knowing he was giving away something one of their people had given him.

His Countryhuman glared at him. *'Hypocrite.'*

Kangwon raised his brows, sending the accusation right back.

"Uncle has been quiet," Choe Kang-ok said, a hand over mouth as she chewed. "Are you feeling alright?"

Korea had tensed at the question, so Kangwon again excused, "It's been a pretty long day. We came here from the Foundation Day speech."

Her eyes widened as she tried to sit up, putting down the gaetteok she'd been gnawing on.

"No one told me it was September Ninth! Happy birthday, Uncle Korea!"

Korea's shoulders hunched. "It isn't my birthday." At Kangwon's look, he muttered, "But thank you."

"How old are you now?"

"Four," Kangwon said.

"Forty-two," Korea corrected acidly.

Choe Kang-ok scrunched her face. "Old men," she teased, taking another bite of tteok.

Kangwon felt a pang as he realized he was older than Bong-nam now. He had been two years ago, though he hadn't known it at the time. His friend at died at forty, while Kangwon kept aging, even if his body stayed the same.

'But you weren't much older than me, were you? Or even my daughter now. You were both just kids, too. You still are.'

Kangwon had been younger, in years. And now he was older. And one day, Choe Bong-nam's daughter would also be older than her

father had ever been. Eventually she would age, her hair turning grey and her body failing. And someday she would die, and her years would come to an end while her province's kept climbing, past her and her father's combined, into an amount no actual human he met and loved could ever reach.

But at least Choe Kang-ok *would* age. She could go on to rejoin the fight, to save more comrades and kill more of the enemy, to Liberate their country and make it better, build the life in it her father had never be able to. Bong-nam would want her to live longer than him, that had been the life he'd been fighting for for her, and all their children. He hadn't lived to see his big brothers grow up, but now one day his daughter could get married and have kids that would call the Kangwons and Korea their great-uncles, and Kangwon could watch *them* grow, and their children, and their children's children.

And maybe, just maybe, as the rest of Kang-ok's face drooped with age, those russet patches would stay forever young, and give her a few more years than she should have. Because Kangwon had succeeded.

He hadn't lost her.

He sat on the bed, even though it hurt, asking about their anti-aircraft efforts before she'd been wounded, and Korea stood silently in the corner, not saying anything, but not leaving either, his eye tracing the dimpled line between her old flesh and new over and over again, like he was convincing himself it had actually worked.

Kangwon wished he'd let him tell her how much their Countryhuman had really done. Besides giving his permission, and the transfusion loop Kangwon had set up between the two as he performed his surgery, circulating his blood through her system until she had more of it in her veins than he did, and he had more of hers, and all the blood he'd donated after, leaving it with Kangwon so he could keep it in her system, give her just a little more strength to fight. Even with all that, there was more.

But he didn't want her to know, just like he didn't want anyone beyond them, Chagang, and Kim Yong-hwan to know the full story

of what they'd done. He probably would've hidden his donations from her, too, if he could. He wanted Kangwon and Chagang to take all the credit.

But they couldn't. And Choe Kang-ok would probably realize that someday, when she was out of the hospital, as she twisted and turned to examine the patches of coloured skin that interrupted her burn-marked brown.

Because Kangwon and Chagang still hadn't been enough. They'd needed just a little bit more skin to patch the worst of the napalm burns.

On the small of her back, taking up a space the size of a fist, was a patch of crimson the colour of the band on their country's flag.

My babyyyyyy I love you Choe Kang-ok. <3 If you read the Softening chapter in Safeway Pyongyang, something about the way her portrait is described will make sense now. Also my skin graft foreshadowing from forever ago. My chapters may multiply, but my ideas have (almostmostly) always been planned.

In this world, the DPRK is the first country to perform a successful limb graft. It's some random worker who got his arm torn off in a factory accident in the late 50s post-war rebuilding period, that Kangwon uses his own tissue to help graft back on. But this is never revealed, for the same reasons that they keep what their blood can do hidden. So the rest of the world still thinks the first successful attempt was in 1962 in America. This *really* pisses South Pyongan off, (and North, if we're honest), and frustrates Hwang, for different reasons. But North manages to prioritize his desire not to see colonized countries or provinces be used in medical experiments over national pride. It's maybe a *little* harder than he'd like to admit. South Pyongan can only be talked out of going public about it because SH points out that going 'Actually, you know that limb

transplant the US just did? We did that first.' Would definitely be called propaganda and used to mock them, and as usual, America would be believed over them. It's also a little frustrating to Kangwon, not because of bragging rights or wanting to be considered pioneers in the field, but because he thinks more people's limbs could be saved if more countries knew. But at that point, he also doesn't fully believe the other nations would donate parts of themselves like that for the good of civilians, so he lets it go, and focuses on his own practice.

Seething with rage at the peace vigil. 'Ohhhh nuclear weapons are bad and we're so committed to everyone not having nuclear weapons! >< ' (refuses to commit to the non-nuclear principles) What Takaichi really means is 'the DPRK and any of our former victims shouldn't have nuclear weapons but the US should ship them to us immediately so they can use us as a launchpad ^^' No matter where I go I am destined to live in a cucked nation.

Why

[image]

Twisting, turning, each scrape of flesh against coarse fabric only making the pain worse but needing to *move,* to try and escape it, even if he knew he couldn't when it was part of his body.

North rolled over on the bedroll, sinking his fangs into the pillow to muffle the pathetic sound he could feel building in his throat, grateful for once that Hae kept returning it as agony rolled through him in waves.

He didn't have to worry about China. The other country had never came in from his dinner, probably off annoying someone somewhere. And the steel door was too thick for his sleeping provinces to hear. But he still couldn't let the noise escape. It was weak, and *he wasn't weak.*

The pain wormed down into the roots of his nerves, finding ones that were still alive to scrape against, gnawing and clawing until they went dead, too, and he was just left with the unceasing burn. And there was that fucking *itch,* not the prickling, but a real place he needed to scratch, but couldn't unless he wanted an infection to set in for sure. He couldn't see that part of his back, but he knew from the terrible burning itch that it likely already had.

He could feel the strikes increasing, like they had ever since the sun had gone down, targeting the military supply center northeast of Pyongyang, as he had seen before the General insisted he return to the bunker for the night, and in dozens of other places.

They would be especially hard tonight, and for the next couple weeks, as they had been for the last few. They always were on holidays, his *and* America's. He had seen the photographs in the foreign papers, grinning American infantrymen standing next to 500-pound bombs with *'HAPPY FOURTH OF JULY, MR. AMERICA!'* written on them in sloppy streaks of paint. The words would end up as blackened and twisted as the metal that burst over Korea's cities

and rained fire down on his people. Celebrating the liberation of their country with the destruction of North's.

Another one hit, blasting through his abdomen, and he gasped unwillingly into the thin fabric, before baring his teeth and pushed himself up on his arms, even though it made his flesh throb worse, a nauseating sensation that struck down into his bones, making him feel like he was going to throw up again. He panted with his mouth closed, eye shut tight as every single inch of his body screamed.

He should be glad China wasn't here to witness this. But right now his annoying chatter and yammering about nothing would be a relief, so long as he kept his mouth shut about... other things.

'China cares. I-'

North sat up, flipping his pillow to hide the saliva stains on it, and the tiny holes where his fangs had torn through. He reached for his bag, hating that it took more than one try to grab it.

It was hard now that he wasn't surrounded by his people, to remember that what he felt was nothing. He needed something, a worse pain, to drown this useless physical one.

His fingers brushed photo paper, but he recoiled.

Not that. He couldn't look at that again. What he felt, what he didn't feel... It was too much when he was like this. Light-headed, shaky, like he was half-unmoored from his own body but still far too much in it. He'd came down too fast from the euphoria of of the theatre, almost the moment Kim Yong-hwan had ambushed him. It had slammed him back into his dead meat and left him worse than before.

The heart-shaped stone, the wooden tiger, the bloody pottery shard, the faded blue cloth, that tteok-dream sketch, the photo of Yao Song and Li Meihua, a dried jindallae, petals crumbling and leeched of colour, that *stupid* note with that meaningless word on it, all placed on that clumsily-stitched kirogi-po. They all hurt, left him feeling restless and hot, the prickling coming back in force, driving away the itch, at least for a second. His people didn't deserve to feel

what the burns on his body represented, but *this* pain he deserved to feel.

He paused on a small canvas, a new addition, staring at the painting of the Peninsula SH had gifted him before going to her room.

It was an old concept- Korea in the shape of a tiger, one paw down in Mokpo, one curled up on the Hwanghae Peninsula, and the top two pressed up against the border in Chagang and North Hamgyong, like it was holding their neighbouring countries to the north back. Its head was by Paektusan, the great mountain balanced perfectly on its nose. Whoever had first created the myth about the tiger and the bear, cementing both in Korea's mythos, would be smug to know that their modern borders could so easily be seen as the former, an enormous striped cat coiled in the East.

But though the idea was older, this one wasn't done in traditional style, or in the thin lines of that traitor Choe Nam-seon, but in their new style- bright colours, solid strokes, and stark shadows for contrast. Its glaring red eye, stark in the silver fur SH had chosen instead of orange, didn't stare north, but burned into his. And the gaping jaws were bared less aggressively at their comrades, the long white fangs instead protectively cradling a glowing red star.

It was impressive. But all North could see when he looked at it was that tiger sawed in half, butchered like the Japanese had butchered their real ones, intestines trailing in the sea. Jeju Island wasn't a part of the tiger's body, but in this it could have been a splash of blood, despite the pure white SH had painted her in, a bloody pawprint left by the southern half of the beast.

She had seen it in his eye, he was sure. It. was why she hadn't tried to hug him this year, however quickly. She knew he would just reject it.

Not this. Not any of this. It didn't hurt, it *ached,* the weight of all these let-down hopes. He needed to feel them, he *deserved* to, but tonight it didn't help him turn the agony in his body back into nothing. It just made him more conscious of each new flare inside him, and how every one destroyed something precious to him.

North shoved the new painting behind the one of the flower and boot, facing the wall so he wouldn't have to look at it, then plunged his hand back into the bag, finding the picture of him holding their flag before Paektusan.

It made him think of that drawing from CCCP's daughter that SH had kept. He wondered again if Belarus would have drawn him smiling if she had met him, or if she would have erased it like Mun Guk had.

He grit his teeth, setting it aside. Again as he reached back in, his fingers brushed a photograph, a different one this time. After a moment, he pulled it out.

The faces of the 63rd Army smiled back at him. His platoon, as the caption claimed.

North's eye traced each of the fifteen Chinese soldiers and their casualty recorder, lingering on Wang Wei, Zhang Guangqiang, He Sengqi, Meng Yuyu, and Hong Hongjun. Yao Song had made it back to his Li Meihua, but none of them had made it home to the families he'd been foolish enough to listen to stories about. They had taken this photo, smiled in the face of death, knowing that they wouldn't. That they would never smile at their brothers or fathers or wives again, and never see theirs. That they were going to die for him.

He exhaled, placing the photo aside. After a long moment, he pulled one last thing out of his bag- a stack of letters, bound together by twine.

He knew he couldn't wait any longer to read these, even if it was just to prove China wrong.

'If you still haven't read the letters from our comrades' families, and all of my countrymen, then don't say-'

He undid the string, holding one up. *'Yao Song and Li Meihua,'* the envelope read.

Theirs would be the kindest, so he read it first. He refused to

provide a balm for what he would be faced with in the others.

It was greetings, cheers for the war effort, and a congratulations on his Liberation Day and upcoming Foundation Day, at the time it had been written, along with the news that they had been married last year like they'd said they would be. And, to North's bittersweet feeling, the news that Li Meihua was pregnant.

It was all scrawled in an excited hand, slanting like the writer had been rushing to get the words out. But at the bottom was a postscript, written in a more halting way.

'Comrade Korea, I opened the envelope back up to write this while my beautiful wife is sleeping, the one thing I'll hide from her in our hopefully long, abundant years of marriage. If she opens this on her way to mail it, I hope she can forgive me. I don't really know why I did, I just'

The line cut abruptly, continuing below.

'Sometimes it feels unfair. That I made it out and they didn't. I had no family to miss me, and I hadn't even been brave enough to confess to my amazing wife yet. I wouldn't have been missed the way Comrade Zhang's father probably misses him, or Comrade He's grandmother must miss him.
I'm grateful, always grateful, that you and Comrade Mao saved me, and gave me the chance to be with the woman I love. That should be all I feel, shouldn't it? But sometimes when I've just set the table for my darling wife, when she comes in from the fields all sweaty and beautiful, and I get to hold her in my arms, it feels so ***unfair.*** *Is it really okay to look forward to the birth of my daughter when Comrade Hong died without seeing his? Is it really okay to write poetry about the joys of the land reform when none of our comrades will ever get to experience it? Why did I survive and not them? Why do I get to be happy? Do I really deserve this?*
I don't know why I'm writing this. You have more important things to worry about, I know. I just
Does it ever get hard for you, too?'

More than even he would ever know.

'I'm afraid to tell my lovely wife. I know she should understand- she

was the only one that made it away from the Kuomintang prison she was in. But she's always such a force, like nothing can ever faze her. And I don't know how to tell her that I'm not, and that as happy as I am to be her husband, as excited as I am to be a father, I somehow feel like I shouldn't ever be happy again. I can't find the words, and it's not something you can write a poem about, is it?
I'm sorry. I hope I'm not depressing you on your Liberation Day. I hope you don't feel the same way I do. But if you do, then I hope maybe this helps you to hear, the way it might help me- I understand.
Happy Liberation Day again, comrade. Keep avenging our 63rd Army.'

Yao Song's slightly shaky writing ended there, but there was another note under it, in a less refined, but steadier hand.

'I opened the letter. And I suppose I can find it in my heart to forgive him, at least for using our candle up writing last night. Less so for the rest of this crap he's written. Does he think it's been easy for me to be 'such a force,' or that I don't already know how he feels? What a blind man I married. Even so, I want you to know that Li Meihua will always be grateful to Korea for saving him, no matter what he feels about it. I would have missed him as much as any wife would miss her husband. How couldn't I when I waited for him for so many years, and it was the poems he wrote for me when we were little that were the only reason I held on long enough to make it out of that prison?
Don't worry about my foolish husband. I'll make him see sense. If I was able to be happy again, so will he. And I am ***very*** *happy. Comrade Korea, if you ever do feel the same way as my idiot husband that I love, just know that the people you came home to don't. For every person that mourns someone that didn't make it back to them, there is one that will be forever grateful that someone else did.*
Thank you for bringing my Song back to me.'

North lowered the letter, chest squeezing.

It might be comforting to say. But it wasn't true. Far more of the 63rd Army hadn't made it home than those that had.

He did understand how Yao Song felt. But there was no use in writing back. Even if he understood, their situations were different. North *had* to make it out, he *had* to survive, even if every single other soldier on the line gave their life, he wasn't allowed to- he

was the Korean Countryhuman. Yao Song was only human. There was no solace in being able to say he had survived because of what he was when he had been no different than any of his comrades. The only thing that had spared his life was luck, something that didn't even exist.

Li Meihua would take care of her husband, offer him the understanding he was looking for. And no one could answer the question he really wanted an answer to. Even North had never been able to.

'Why me?'

He set the letter aside, turning to the others now, picking up the one with the feminine Mandarin written on it, and that familiar family name.

He couldn't put this off any longer. It was unfair to hide from their judgement when they couldn't hide from the pain he had caused them.

He slit the envelope with his silver-hilted dagger, and pulled out the letter, unfolding the creased paper.

'Comrade Korea, my name is Hong Mingzhu. You don't know me, but I received a letter sometime back, from my Countryhuman of all people, that says you knew my father. Hong Hongjun. It feels all sorts of weird to write that when I grew up thinking of him by his given name, which isn't even close to 'Hongjun.' But I like it. It feels like him.
Comrade China told me everything that was in the letter you sent him, how you were both in the Chorweon Blocking Battle, how you fought beside him. How he died.'

North had never mentioned that battle in any of his fake letters, besides in clinical terms of casualties and results, like he hadn't even been there. China must have sent out personal letters of condolences after, and used him as an excuse for why he knew what had happened so intimately.

'When I heard about the Letters to Korea campaign, I knew I had to write you something, but I didn't know what. I honestly still don't. I grew

up my entire life thinking my father had given his life in the cause of Liberating our country. Mother never stopped hoping, and I hoped for so long, too, that I had a father out there, that the hole in my life was only temporary. Even when I grew up, and I tried to accept that I would never see him coming up the road, the triumphant hero returning, I could never really crush that sense of loss, or the hope that I would.
Comrade China said my father told you all about me, so I guess you know how mother found him, and sent him a letter. Did he tell you he sent one back? It was so strange, to suddenly know there was really someone out there that could fit into that hole. That all those years of hoping hadn't been for nothing. I had a father, one who loved me. And so scary to hear that he was heading off to fight for a foreign country just when we'd finally found him.'

North grit his teeth, bracing himself before reading on. He deserved to feel this. If he had succeeded on their Fifth Phase Offensive, Hong Hongjun wouldn't have died at Chorweon. If he had just won that first year, not one single Chinese soldier would have died in Korea.

'I thought 'Is this really my father? Would he really go off to risk his life for strangers before ever seeing his own daughter?' I think part of me wanted to be mad at him. Me and mother spent so long holding on to him, waiting for him to come home, and he was willing to make us wait longer for the sake of some foreigners.
But then I realized what I really felt- pride.'

North blinked down at the letter.

'Mother always told me father was a hero, that he'd gone off to fight for our country. But it was always so hard to believe her. I didn't know what sort of man he was, how hard he'd tried to find her after the Kuomintang attack, if he'd even tried at all. If he was really fighting for China, or if he'd joined one of the warlords or was running around like a brigand or died in his first engagement. Or if he had just moved to Beijing or Jiangxi or somewhere else to start a new life.
But he didn't. He fought for our country. He was on the Long March with Comrade China and Chairman Mao. He helped fight the Japanese and ran the Kuomintang off. He Liberated our country. And when he had the chance to come home to us, to finally experience the peace he fought for, he went to go Liberate someone else's.

Mother was right- he was a hero.'

The paper creaked under North's grip. He was nearing the end of this page, but there was an entire other side. The hammer was coming.

'I think that's why I'm writing. I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for letting me know my father is a hero. That he was always someone worth waiting for. And thank you for being at his side in the end.
And I have a request, if it's okay. Once you've freed your country and avenged my father against the Yankees, could I please visit? Comrade China said you couldn't recover his body, but I'd still like to see the place he died, and hear about him from the person he fought with. I think mother might ask for the same thing in her portion of the letter. It would really mean a lot to us. Now please imagine me saying this next part in a very impressive way.
Happy Liberation Day, Comrade Korea! Love live Sino-Korean friendship, and long live our heroes!

-Hong Mingzhu, daughter of Hong Hongjun'

North stared blankly at the letter, then skimmed through it again, then again, looking for the words he'd missed, the accusation that he had let her father die and hadn't even been able to send her a corpse back, the judgement for being so weak that he'd needed him there in the first place.

He didn't find it. He didn't find it on the other side, either, in between her mother's heartfelt plea to not give in to the men that had killed her husband and her thanks for speaking so highly to China of him, and fighting beside him. He didn't find it in any of the letters, not from He Sengqi's grandmother, getting her daughter to scribe for her, not from the mother herself, not from Feng Jiahao's brother or Zhao Qiaolan's wife or Xiao Xiaodong's parents or that Shancheng Village address, Zhang Guangqiang's pa, telling him he was glad his son had went out doing what was right, and inviting North over for salted fish and soju so he could tell him how it had happened. He didn't find it anywhere.

His hands trembled from the bombs and the bombs alone as he opened the last envelope. It was from a Wang. He knew who it had

to be- Wang Wei's father, who had taken the death of his mother so hard. He had to have harsh words for him.

The penmanship was practiced, plain, someone that had just learned how to do it.

'Comrade Korea, I'll keep this short. Comrade China told me what you said happened at Chorweon. Thanks for not taking my boy for granted. I'll never be able to celebrate it. But I am for damn sure proud.'

North stared numbly at the letter quivering in his hands, and all the ones in his lap, and lying scattered around him like plucked feathers.

They were lying, they had to be. Or at least just hiding their resentment. Even if the Chinese soldiers had made the choice to fight for him, wanted to defend his country and people for whatever reasons they had, those they'd left at home *had* to resent that they had died for someone else, for someone as weak and useless as him that hadn't even been able to save his own platoon.

He read through the letters again, trying to find some Chinese character he'd misread, a place where the pencil or brush had pressed too hard, a sign that the writer had been fighting to keep the anger they felt from flowing onto the paper.

He didn't.

North bared his fangs at the letters, wanting to tear them apart to get rid of the tightness in his chest, the way the walls of the room felt like they were closing in on him. He held Wang Wei's father's letter in his burnt hands, shaking.

Their families were dead, their blood soaking his soil, soaking *him*. They weren't soldiers, they didn't understand sacrifice and giving their lives for the greater good. How couldn't they *blame* him?

The door behind him creaked open, and panic shot through him. By reflex he tossed the letters away from him, papers spiralling around the room like snow.

"Getting some reading done?" China asked before he could grab his

gun.

North stiffened, staying seated on the floor, not turning to face him right away.

There was a rustle as the other country picked up one of the letters, and a brief silence as he read it.

"Having trouble finding what you're looking for?" he asked when he was done.

"Did you tell them to write what they did?" North demanded, twisting to look at him.

"No. And I know you won't believe me, but I didn't even ask most of them to write at all. They were already planning to once they heard about my call for your Liberation Day letters."

When he didn't respond, China asked in a light tone, "What were you thinking? That these would be full of slander and criticism?"

The Korean hunched, irritated and embarrassed that he'd guessed it so easily.

"Aiya, even after fighting with us, you really think my people would blame someone being attacked for their grief, and not the one attacking us both?" The other country sighed dramatically. "I'd say I was offended, if I didn't think you used that brush to paint people even closer to home."

A stack of letters was held over his shoulder, China smiling down at him. After a second, North took them.

His throat worked before he inanely managed, "...Li Meihua is pregnant."

"Ah, that's good news," China said happily. "I'll need to send them a gift basket with some provisions in it. Health food and the like, since from our comrade's descriptors, I'm certain she'll be the type to ignore her first-month sitting period."

"Comrade Yao Song says she thinks it's going to be a girl."

"It looks like Comrade Hong's apology will be needed after all." He bent, plucking the letter from the man's daughter off the floor. "Though if you ask me, Hongjun is a perfectly acceptable name for either sex. The Red Army and its successor are for everyone, after all."

"You told their families that I wrote to you about Chorweon."

"En," China admitted. "I thought they deserved to know what happened, and I couldn't exactly explain why I knew in such detail otherwise. There were also some things I thought you might have difficulty saying."

North knew he should be mad that China had been putting words in his mouth. It was something he usually despised. But he also knew that from the way Wang Wei's father had ended his letter, his comrade had relayed his son's words about wanting to die in a way he could be proud of.

He couldn't have said that to him. It would feel too much like he was trying to justify it. 'Your son didn't come home because he wanted to die for me.'

"But I didn't tell them everything." China handed the last letter back. "It's good our Comrade Hong's daughter will be paying you a visit once this war is won."

North knew what that meant. He had told Hong Mingzhu about how her father had lived and died, maybe told her how he had said if he was martyred without ever meeting her, then at least he had died making sure another father could one day meet his child. But he was leaving it to him to tell her about his last words.

'Tell her I would've made it home if I could've.'

"I'm not trying to torture you, comrade," China said softly as he looked down. "I just want my people to know that neither of us see their loved ones as tools."

"I know," North forced out. "I will invite Hong Mingzhu to... tell her about her father."

But the place he had died was below the front.

"Thank you."

North looked down, tapping the letters on his thigh. He wanted to get their edges all strictly aligned, but they resisted. The papers were too swollen by touch, refusing to stay flat with each other.

He kept trying. "If you didn't tell them to write me, then why would they?"

"You know why."

He did. Like he had known why China took him to Chorweon what felt like years ago.

"I wasn't the one to tell them about how their comrades died," he said, not looking up. "I didn't ask you to do that. They are thanking me for nothing."

He hadn't let Hong Mingzhu know her father was a hero- her own Countryhuman had.

"Isn't that what all those details in your report to my Comrade Peng were?" China asked. "And if I hadn't been here, could you truthfully tell me that you wouldn't have still ended up at Chorweon or somewhere else, and written to me about my comrades' sacrifices after?"

North looked away.

"Exactly. And even if they knew it wasn't you that wrote, you still did something much more important."

China squatted next to him, reaching into his collection of aches to pull out the photograph of the platoon, smiling back at their dead comrades.

"You stayed. You fought for us. You showed my soldiers that someone cared. That's what their families are really thanking you for."

North turned his head away from him.

"Is it really so hard for you to accept that we care as much about Korea as Korea cares about us?"

"I don't-" He bit down, trying to strangle his instinctive urge to deny it.

North's people had fought with the Chinese for decades, and he had fought at their side in his country for almost two years now, seen their lives get cut short by enemy bullets, and watched them work side by side with his soldiers to fix what America had destroyed. When the war was over, Korea's flowers would bloom bright because they had been watered with their blood, and he could never slander the 63rd Army's name, or the names of any of those from the People's Volunteer Army he had fought with, by pretending that he didn't care.

...Or that they didn't.

China's people *shouldn't* care enough about Korea to give their lives. Their families shouldn't care enough to forgive it. He didn't *want* them to.

China shouldn't care about his country enough to risk his own either, just like North shouldn't care about his. But the other Countryhuman was here. Still here, for another cursed Foundation Day. And...

North had already eaten his h- mind long ago. If America released Korea just to sink his bloody talons into China, the moment he could say their country was stable enough, the Korean People's Army would cross the Amnok to defend their comrades, to give their lives to Liberate their homeland, the way they had after Liberation, the way the Chinese had at Chorweon, and still were.

He did care. He cared about Hong Hongjun and Meng Yuyu and the rest of their fallen platoon, division, and Army, and he cared about Yao Song and Li Meihua, and all of those that would never be able to go home, and their loved ones that would mourn them, and all the Chinese that had written their letters, even if he wished they

hadn't, and wouldn't read the rest.

He cared about his comrades. And he knew China did too, about North's people, about... Korea. Even if he despised that they did.

He shouldn't have told China it wasn't enough. If the other country had said that to him after Liberation, when his own Volunteers were risking their lives for him and his people, dying without ever being able to see their homeland Liberated after fighting for it for so long, he would have torn him open.

But he didn't know how to apologize for it. It *wasn't* enough and neither was he and both of their people were still dying because of it. It weighed his tongue down, made it even harder to force out the words that didn't come easily to him even when he didn't feel like this.

He didn't finish his sentence, and China didn't ask him to. He just stood up.

"Come with me," he said. "I have a surprise."

North swallowed his discomfort, trying to sound wary as he asked, "What is it?"

His words still came out too raspy.

"You might not understand the concept of a birthday gift, but I know you know what a surprise is. I remember you told me you hate them."

"I *also* remember telling you I wanted no more of them."

China smiled. "This is a good surprise."

"Is it the one you mentioned last year?"

His comrade arched a brow. "You're still thinking about that? You really *are* paranoid."

"I am not," North muttered. "I just don't like there being something in my country I don't know about."

"You will," China said mischievously. "When the time comes. But that time isn't today, I'm afraid. This is a different one."

North should have put up more of a fight. But he knew he couldn't sleep, not with the throbbing inside him. And the General would have someone watching to make sure he couldn't sneak back into Jonsung Complex to work.

And he wanted out, away from the letters and photos and stifling smell of charred meat. He hadn't found the pain he'd been looking for in the foreign words, only a deepening ache. He needed a distraction, even if it was just one of China's schemes.

"Fine," he said.

China smiled, giving one last long look at the photo in his hand before turning it over. North took it, tucking it carefully back into his bag with all those other hopes.

But as he went to follow the other country to the door, he halted.

He didn't want to do this, but... Ssi-bal. The itching was still there.

"Wait."

China turned, and so did North, starting to unbutton his shirt.

"This is the kind of surprise you can keep your clothes on for," his comrade said mildly.

North ignored him, removing his undershirt, taking it all the way off for once instead of maneuvering it over his head, so he could unwind the bandages around his torso until his back was exposed. He held them over the gash in his side, not looking at China.

"On the small of my back," he said. "The burns there. Are they infected?"

China padded closer, making him tense.

"Don't touch me," he said sharply.

"I wasn't going to."

The other country stopped a few inches away from him, examining the burns that covered every inch of his back. North kept his eye on him, head twisted over his shoulder.

He was silent for a little while. The Korean knew it was because his skin made it hard to see. There wasn't a burn on his body that hadn't been torn open tonight.

But China didn't say anything about it, or tell him he should go to the hospital. It gave North the resolve not to immediately put his shirt back on, though his muscles quivered with the urge to.

"You know," the other man remarked as he made his examination. "I'm surprised you would ask me to check you, when you won't even let your little doctor do it. Or your nurses, if the mean one is to be believed."

North couldn't say it was because Kangwon wasn't here. Now that Choe Kang-ok had woken up, Kim Yong-hwan had practically booted him out of the hospital, and told him if she found out he slept at the Quarantine or civilian one, she was going to report him to the Ministry of Public Health for jeopardizing patients by overworking. He was sleeping down the hall, hopefully deeply.

"That's a little out of character for you, isn't it?" China asked when he didn't respond. "I think it might put your province out to know you trust a foreign country over him."

"I don't," North denied irritably.

"Oh? Then why am I the one here right now?"

China lifted his eyes, and even though it made him bristle to have him behind him with no supervision, North averted his, keeping it on the small bloodstain on the undershirt pressed to his stomach.

It wasn't about Kim Yong-hwan or Kangwon, as he kept trying to get through to his province.

Well... it was. But not because he didn't trust them.

Kim Yong-hwan didn't talk about her past often. North only knew about it because An Il-rae had told SH and Sang while they did laundry, and he had been watching from across the stream to make sure they stayed safe.

She had lost her parents at a young age. They'd been evicted from their farm over rent, and her father had killed himself out of shame, leaving her and her mother to wander the countryside, until the woman had decided rebuilding her life would be easier without a child, and abandoned her in the North Pyongan mountains. She had practically raised herself, until a wealthy Japanese doctor took her in. Not out of kindness, but for free labour. She hadn't learned her medical skills from him, but from teaching herself to read the texts she was made to organize and dust, and practicing with the supplies he discarded. And when she had been arrested for being part of a leftist organization, he hadn't had any problem leaving her with no place to come back to after being released. Nowhere but the Korean People's Revolutionary Army.

Kim Yong-hwan wasn't 'mean.' She was stern and could be harsh, because she had never been able to rely on anyone but herself. Even once she had taken up arms with them, it was her their guerrillas had relied on to put them back together after engagements, and it was her their soldiers depended on now. Even if life had been kinder to the rest of their doctors and nurses, which it hadn't always, that was true for all of them. If their railways and railway workers were the veins of their country, their hospitals and the healthcare workers in them were the cells, responsible for repairing the rest of their organs, their factory workers, soldiers, mothers, children, politicians. There wasn't a single person in their country that would never have to rely on them, whether it was for themselves or a comrade.

But who could *they* rely on? With so many lives resting on their shoulders, whose shoulders were *they* supposed to rest on?

North's provinces were the same way. For nine years to a decade or more, he hadn't been there for them. They had been alone, enslaved by the Japanese or kept as pets or servants by their own

bourgeois, or roaming the wilderness, with no one to depend on because he had let South-

Korea's provinces hadn't had anyone to rely on but themselves. And Kangwon had had the worst of it, when it came to that. He hadn't just had himself and a sibling to take care of, but an entire village, alone. North could still see the reluctance on his face as he chewed his nails across the fire from him, not scared to fight, but scared to leave the people who were his responsibility. All of their lives had rested on him. He had carried that burden alone for *nine years.* And like all of their healthcare workers, far more lives rested on him now.

He and all of his provinces, all of their doctors and nurses, all of their *people* needed someone to rely on, someone whose responsibility *they* were, someone whose shoulder they could rest on when they were crumbling under the weight of all the lives on theirs.

They needed Korea. They needed to know that if there was ever something they couldn't take, *he* could. He could take all of it. And they wouldn't feel that way if they had to take care of him.

It had been one thing to let someone sew his wounds shut after a battle during the Occupation, or dab antiseptic on one of the small patches left by the occasional Japanese firebombing of their camps. It was another when he looked like this, when he was charred black and red from chin to footpad, and every single inch of the damage would make the person whose job it was to clean it think of what the Yankees were doing to them, what they had done, what they *could* do.

Kim Yong-hwan was tough enough to carry her responsibilities without breaking. But she couldn't help but bend. North knew she was exhausted, that she worked herself to the bone every day to take care of their soldiers. He'd seen it in her eyes, and in how she hadn't snapped back at him after they had left Choe Kang-ok's room. She had to deal with the weight of their patients- she shouldn't have to deal with the weight of her country, too. None of their nurses should. If they saw the burns on his shoulders, they wouldn't trust that they could lean on them. If they saw that

disgusting gash, they would question how he was still standing.

If they thought he was weak, however misguided, they wouldn't believe that he could take it. And if they thought he couldn't take it, they wouldn't believe that he could win, that he could save them.

They would be afraid.

And Kangwon had seen him at his worst. He had seen him half-dead, calling out for him, a memory that still burned shamefully, as bleary as it was. He had seen every part of him, wiped the blood and grime off his mangled body, cleaned his wounds every day, spoon-fed him while he slept, massaging his throat to make him swallow, cooked for him and supported him while he used the latrine in those first days after he woke up. North's life had been entirely in his hands, back before those hands could even stitch up a boy's cut without trembling. Just one more patient, one whose loss would have crushed his province.

North knew that was what he thought of every time he gave him a check-up. When he saw the imprint of his ribs, he saw them jutting out like blades about to pierce filthy white skin. When he saw his burns, he thought about stitching him up with trembling fingers and fearing he would lose him. And when he saw that old scar, he saw his Countryhuman sliding to the ground on legs that couldn't stand anymore, and rasping out in a pathetic voice, *'I need you.'*

Like all his provinces, all his people, Kangwon deserved to feel safe, protected, unafraid. He deserved to be certain that if he ever staggered under the burden of the germ warfare, the shelling, and all the lives in his hands, that he wouldn't fall, because North would catch him. He needed to feel like if there was ever anything he couldn't take, his Countryhuman *could.* And he couldn't, if every time he looked at North, he saw that small, bleeding, broken boy, who hadn't even been able to protect himself.

It *was* about Kangwon, the reason North wouldn't let him tend to his wounds anymore. But not because he had lied about Hae's condition or taken Gangwon to Norway, and never because he couldn't trust his skills. It was because he couldn't trust *himself.* He couldn't trust that he was strong enough for his province to only see

him as he was now.

How could he, when he had failed both their brothers?

It wasn't like he wanted to let China look at his burns. He always tried to change as quickly as possible, leaving his undershirt and boxer shorts on, and his skin was prickling now, telling him someone was within striking distance and he had to defend himself. But he was different. He was... still North's responsibility. He was in his country, and cared for... his people. So North was responsible for him.

But as a foreign country, he didn't need to be strong in the same way around him. He needed to be formidable, in case he ever became his enemy, but the Chinese country should be able to see by now that North and his people would be able to stand against whatever force he brought against them. He may have seen him more... vulnerable than he would like, but he had also seen him withstand everything America was doing to his land and people. If anything, letting China see his burns, see that the gruesome wounds didn't stop him from leading his country, should be a determent to him.

And he needed to be unflinching. He knew if he allowed his spine to bend, if he broke under the weight of this war, he would lose China's support. No matter how much he might care for his people, no one wanted to sink resources into an ally who couldn't stand on his own two feet, or believe in his own victory.

So he did still have to be strong around the other Countryhuman. But he didn't have to be strong *for* him. If he was afraid, if he had doubts about his army and leadership, that was his problem. So long as he had none about North being capable of taking this.

He didn't answer China, keeping his head turned to the side, just enough to make sure he could see that his hands were empty, and keep the urge to get away from him down.

The other country smiled to himself, then leaned forward slightly, making North tense. But he only sniffed delicately at his skin, then straightened, stepping away and letting him breath again.

"It's hard to tell with all the scabs and unpleasant fluids," he began. "But I would say you have a minor infection. Not that I'm the doctor in this bunker."

'Ssi-bal.' He knew it.

"I could have some burn cream shipped in," China suggested. "Since I know you won't want to take from your own stores."

Like he wanted to take from the Chinese's any more.

"I'm fine," North clipped, fastening the bandages back around his torso, making sure the gash stayed hidden.

"Going the antibacterial pill route?" China hummed knowingly.

He should get his General to look at it. But...

He would just make sure to keep his supply of boiled water in the Jonsung office fresh, and clean it more often.

"I do have a little bit of antiseptic up my sleeves," the Chinese man said. "I could clean your back for you."

It sounded more genuine than his offers to wash his back when he went off to bathe. A shiver still ran down North's spine, raising his hackles.

"Freak," he deadpanned.

"Some people are nicer on their birthdays. Not you, evidently."

"Maybe because it isn't my birthday."

The Korean buttoned up his shirt to his chin, quietly exhaling as he adjusted to the extra pressure against his throat again, the white collar pressing against the pad of bandages. He'd kept the extra layers on, even if it felt like he was suffocating. He was bleeding too much not to.

"Your audience really tore you open, didn't they?" China remarked, making him stiffen.

North knew he had seen the thick mess of flesh and blood clinging to his bandages. He had hoped he would continue not mentioning it.

"I'm fine," he said again. "They didn't do it on purpose."

No one had been rougher with him than a few desperate embraces or firm pats on the back. It was just that even a simple caress would tear his skin open, when there were so many hands doing it.

"Do you ever think maybe when your skin has the consistency of overdone pork belly, perhaps you *shouldn't* let yourself be manhandled by hundreds of people?"

"Keep your mouth out of our celebrations," North muttered, putting his boots on. He didn't bother with his uniform jacket.

"I wasn't trying to stick it out," China assured him (unconvincingly). "I just have to wonder why you'd let them do this on every holiday when it leaves you looking like this. Especially when I was under the impression you didn't enjoy being touched."

North hunched at the lilt in his voice.

He didn't know if China would understand that feeling that enveloped him earlier. Even if he would, he didn't want to talk about it. It felt... private. The sort of thing he could only share with...

"I don't," he told him, finishing tucking his pants into his boots. "But it raises morale. And I owe it to them."

"Oh?" China audibly arched a brow. "And here I thought you didn't believe in debts."

He didn't.

"It isn't a debt," he replied. "I don't owe my people for anything they've done for me. I owe them because I am their Countryhuman."

Just like they didn't owe him for anything he did for them. No matter what he gave them, where he lead them, it could never

compare to that one simple fact- North would not exist without them. Korea could not exist without its people.

North still had to make up for those first nine years. He always would. But his people had nothing to make up for. Even if they had, they wouldn't have had to. He existed for them.

He turned, and was met by China standing too close to him again, his head tilted in that predatory manner he sometimes had, with that unnerving glint in his slender eyes.

"Aiya," he laughed as North took an instinctive step back. "Don't look at me like that. I'm just interested in your point of view."

"Be interested from farther away," North ordered, marching by him for the door. "Now do you have something to show me or not?"

"Who delayed us by suddenly stripping?" China padded after him, smiling at the harsh shushing noise the Korean made as they stepped into the hall.

North led the way outside, even though he had no idea where the surprise was going to be. But as soon as he stepped foot into the night air, he froze, the smell hitting him like a wall, thick, fragrant, making his mouth water and his stomach churn like this morning.

Ssi-bal.

"Was someone cooking?" he demanded of Chagang, standing on watch next to the door. He had to quickly turn his head, wiping the liquid that tried to escape the corner of his lips away.

His province nodded, but before North could say anything else, China grabbed his sleeve.

"Come along," he chirped. "My gift is time sensitive."

"Don't touch me." North swatted at his hand, shooting a look over his shoulder at Chagang.

'If I don't come back, kill China.'

His province solemnly saluted.

Satisfied that if he was going to be murdered tonight, he would at least be avenged, North followed the other country into the trees.

I got to meet some interesting people these last few days. I love people <3

North: I don't like being touched.

being pet like a cat by hundreds of people and clearly enjoying it

North: This is just part of my job, I don't actually like this.

A note- 'eating (his) mind' is a Korean way to say 'made his mind up.' 마음을 먹다. Except 마음 has a many-sided meaning, which is why North changes the one thought he has in the first half of the chapter. Not elaborating more. Ehe.

Also to show that the part about Americans dedicating their bombs is true:

This one isn't on the bomb itself , but there are pictures where it is (common practice in war; only look up Israeli bombs to Palestine if you want to feel bloodlust; also Makuya cultists must die). According to the website I got this from, it was also this man's birthday, which is why he's the one posing. Does it feel good to celebrate your birth with the death of thousands? Does it feel good to mark the day your country won freedom from a colonizer by subjugating another? Sickening. I genuinely cannot express how furious this picture makes me.

To Be Human

The air under the canopy was cool enough for North to feel. He could use the excuse that he'd left his jacket behind because he didn't need to be in full uniform out here, but really he just hadn't wanted the extra choking layer. The slight breeze rustling the leaves offered a bit of relief for the way he was sweltering under the bandages, even if it just reminded him that the trees would soon start to turn orange.

China was silent now, forging ahead with purpose, a swift shadow in the dark. North, slightly hobbled by fighting his body's urge to limp, found himself staring at his back, that stupid thought that had been lingering in his mind since Liberation Day creeping back in.

China always spoke politely with him, even when he definitely *wasn't* being polite. Mandarin didn't have speech levels the same way Korean did, but North always heard his words in hao-che, unless they were around someone who didn't know who he really was. Then they would come through in high courtesy, the proper level of respect a 'Chinese political officer' should have for the foreign Countryhuman he was shadowing. Even if it was spoiled by the sardonic lilt he almost always had. When he did speak Korean, it was usually around others, so he also used hasipsio-che. The only time he really spoke it when they were alone had been early on, when he'd been teasing North for forgetting he could speak it, and so knew its nuances. He had used hao-che then, as he should (even if North would have preferred he matched his high courtesy, which he had been *trying* to use). And when he was singing didn't count. He shouldn't know North was-

Anyway, that was to say... He didn't use hae-che with North. Even though North was using hae-che with him, when they weren't around anyone but his provinces.

He didn't like that.

It wasn't like he *wanted* China to use it. He just... didn't like that he

wasn't when he was. It made it feel like North was being overly familiar when the other country was the one that had a boundaries problem. And it made it feel like they were on unequal footing.

He couldn't dismiss it as a language barrier problem. He'd heard Chinese soldiers talking with each other in Mandarin, and sometimes their words came through as hae-che. He Sengqi had spoken with their platoonmates almost exclusively in it. And since he knew the Chinese country could hear things in Korean, he didn't think he was getting lost in translation.

Did China not want him to use in- that low of a speech level with him? He hadn't said anything about it, but he also hadn't said anything about the brusque haera-che North had used for so long. Nothing about wanting him to stop anyway.

The idea irritated him, and he glared at China's back as they navigated through the undergrowth.

He could be as annoyingly touchy and invasive as he wanted, pushing North past his limit more than once while refusing to leave, going through his stuff whenever he wanted, and using his name the way he did, but he drew his line at hae-che?

It made North prickle with embarrassment to know that his provinces could hear that their speech levels didn't match. Like *he* was the one following China around, clinging to *his* uniform, and not the other way around. He was just using it for convenience, but he couldn't make that clear to them because he knew South Pyongan would have some smartass comment. *'Suuuure* you are.' And then he'd have to acknowledge he had started using hae-che with them, too, which he was *never* going to do.

He should just switch back to middle courtesy for him, like he used for the Chinese provinces. If China hadn't said anything about him using it in the first place, surely he wouldn't say anything about him-

North hissed as the arch of his foot came down on a root, a bolt of pain shooting up his leg as the burns along it split. He shot another glare at China, only to find him looking back at him.

"Aiya, am I the one that tripped you?" he asked. "You are death-glaring me right now, yes?"

"I didn't trip," North snapped, not denying the glaring.

"Mmm*hmmm."*

North waited until he wasn't looking to set his foot down again, making sure the throb of pain in the blistered sole didn't make him stumble. Gritting his teeth, he walked stiffly on, boring a hole into China's back.

What did he care if the other country didn't like him using hae-che? They were *his* words and it was *his* language- he was allowed to use whichever speech level he wanted. If it made China uncomfortable, then good, it wasn't like he didn't do that to North on an almost daily basis. He wasn't surrendering. China could speak to him exclusively in high courtesy, and he would be getting hae-che right back.

It was stupid to be thinking about it anyway. It wasn't like he- He didn't-

Heat rushed down his arm as something somewhere exploded.

They were just words. He had more important things to think about. He shouldn't be obsessing over speech levels when he could hear bombs falling over the mountains.

They grew farther and farther from the bunker, China telling him it was 'just a few more minutes' every time he demanded to know if they were going to be walking until dawn.

"Not much farther now," his comrade said as they neared the eastern point of Jangsan.

"Are we walking all the way to the Amnok?" North griped, carefully stepping over a gnarled root. "Is the surprise you finally leaving my country?"

When China didn't give a comeback, he looked up, finding the woods ahead of him empty.

"China?" North demanded, alarm shooting through him. "China?"

Ssi-bal, was it an ambush?

North drew his TT-33, jogging towards the bushes the man had been heading for, heart pounding unsteadily.

He couldn't let anything happen to him, he was his-

As he burst from the bushes, a sudden light flared, a warm orange glow illuminating the woods. North flinched back, about to dive for cover, before he realized China was standing under the trees, arms stretched wide.

"Qiangqiang," he sang, shaking a match out. "Your surprise."

North blinked, taking in what was before him.

A small table was set up between the trunks, the undergrowth cleared away from it. The lantern casting the light was set on top, fire flickering behind the glass cage. Two floor cushions had been set on opposite sides. And on top of it was a large, upside-down bowl.

"What is this?" he asked warily.

"Your surprise, like I said," China responded. "You also have two seconds to put your pistol down before I add it to the tally."

North quickly shoved it back in its holster, eyeing the bowl with suspicion.

"What is under there?" he asked, even thought he thought he already knew. His words were getting wet again.

China smiled, leaning down and lifting the bowl up.

Immediately the same smell that had been outside the bunker flooded the woods with full force, making North's saliva glands twinge with the sudden gush that came from them.

Another bowl was revealed, rightside-up and full of noodles, thin

and glistening, topped with chips of garlic, stir-fried mushrooms, and what looked like slices of bitter melon. A lumpy brown sauce glistened over it, bright green scallions scattered across like jewels. Wisps of steam reached up to dance before the fireglow.

"Ah, that's good," China said happily. "It's still hot. I was worried your stripping might've given it time to cool."

North was too tense to snap at him. "What is that for?"

"You," his comrade said, taking off his uniform jacket and settling onto the nearest cushion. "It's your birthday dinner."

"No."

"A materialist should know that denying something's state of being doesn't make it not be that," China chided.

"No." North took a step back, throat tight, trying to look anywhere but the bowl of noodles sitting on the table like a grenade.

His comrade sighed, a sound that raised his hackles. "Comrade, there isn't any harm in having a full meal tonight. Your provinces ate the other half of your rations for dinner, so it isn't like you'll be taking more than your fair share."

"I don't want it," North said tightly.

"I had all the ingredients shipped from my country," China told him. "So you won't be depriving your people of anything."

"I don't want to deprive *your* people of anything, either," the Korean snapped without thinking, hating how his words came out slurred. He should have brought his rock.

"Well, the noodle is already here and made. So unless you want it to go to waste..."

"Give them to someone else," North ordered. "My provinces or yours, or the bodyguards."

"Ah ah," China wagged his finger, looking smug. "This is my gift to

give, and it will go to who I want it to."

North drew himself up, glaring down at him. "You are under *my* command, and that was an order."

"Korea has the authority to command China to give away his resources?" The other country shook his head. "Red Imperialism strikes again."

North bared his teeth at him. "I don't want it," he repeated. "You eat it."

"Unfortunately, the only options are you eat this, or it goes to waste." China unfolded his legs, climbing back to his feet. He leaned down, plucking the bowl up. "So if you really don't want it, I suppose I'll just have to dump it out."

North narrowed his eye. "You won't."

China's lips stretched. "I think you'll find there's very few things I won't do."

His hands tilted, the bowl sliding out of them.

North was already moving, his body refusing to try and call his bluff. He caught it before it could tip sideways, thrusting it back up into China's hands, so they were both holding the warm metal with their palms.

"Are you *crazy?!"* he hissed.

He tried to shove the bowl more firmly into the other man's grasp, but China kept his wrists limp, letting it tilt right back out, forcing North to snatch it from him, cradling it protectively as he shot a dagger at him with his eye.

"Oh good, you've accepted it." China smiled, sitting back down. "Time to eat then. By the way, I'm not above taking it back if you try to run."

North grit his teeth, *'thunk'*ing the bowl back down on the table with force. "You really want me to eat so badly that you would

waste food?"

"Don't you waste food yourself?"

"Never," North said vehemently. Not since that final year in the prison shack.

"Mm, I don't know." The other country idly drummed his nails on the table. "I think some of your people might consider it a waste every time you skip a meal. The farmers that grow the rice with the expectation that their Countryhuman will have some of it, the rations distributors that hand it to you."

"It isn't a waste," North growled. "It goes to people who need it more."

China raised a brow, openly looking him up and down. "I'm sure there are some who need it more. But it isn't as if you don't need it."

North fought the urge to cross his arms over his chest. He shouldn't have taken his shirt off earlier.

"Just one bowl of noodle, comrade." China waved the long, white sleeve of his undershirt at them. "It won't kill you. It will actually do the opposite."

It wouldn't kill him. But one meal could be the difference between life and death for countless people in his country right now.

But reluctantly, North sat, folding his legs stiffly under him across from China. His comrade was insane, and if he wasted an entire bowl of noodles, he would have to kill him.

He was grateful for the seat being a cushion and not a stool. It made slightly less pain pulse in his haunches.

He stared next to the bowl of noodles, at the chopsticks on the table, a long, silver pair elevated by a plain rest. That 'package' China had received this morning evidently included tableware, too.

The smell was even more unbearable now. Saliva pooled in his mouth.

China's gaze weighed on him, pinning his hand to his lap, making it even more difficult to think about lifting the chopsticks. His eye lifted slightly, and he found his comrade watching him like a hawk, leaning over the table.

Maybe he realized it was making North uncomfortable, but more likely he didn't, because instead of staring harder, he leaned back, reaching out to spin the oil lamp with a finger. The orange light rippled across the greenery around them, making the deep shadows dance around the pockets of impenetrable darkness between the trunks.

"So," China started conversationally. "Where did you and your little doctor run off to earlier?"

"Stop calling him that," North said, glad for the opportunity to stall. "And I'm sure you already asked him."

His comrade smiled. "I'm glad someone dear to you managed to pull through."

So was he. He kept finding his mind wanting to skirt away from Choe Kang-ok even now, still seeing her the way he had when he'd burst into the medical tent to find Kangwon preparing to carve his own skin off.

But she was okay. Mangled, burnt, and in severe pain, but alive. Thanks to Kangwon.

He knew he wouldn't have told China about what they had done to save her, since he had told him not to. And he wasn't sure if the other country had been snooping around in the hospital to find out.

No one else could know about their experimental procedure. Choe Kang-ok would tell anyone who asked that the napalm had charred her skin that rich russet, and have permission to change away from her fellow soldiers once she returned to action, hiding the more unnatural colours on her body. One day she might have to tell a husband, but North was certain SH would make sure she ended up with someone who could be trusted with that knowledge. Until then, it was best that no one else knew. They had never been able

to hide the blood transfusions, even if they had told barely anyone directly what they did. But they could try and hide this, for the sake of Provincehumans or Countryhumans who weren't as free as them. It wasn't information just anyone should know.

But China wasn't just anyone.

In a neutral voice, he informed his comrade, "Our skin can be used for grafts."

He couldn't tell if the news actually surprised him. He just arched a brow.

"More efficiently than human?"

"We think so." North wasn't sure if it had been the skin or the copious amount of blood they had pumped into Choe Kang-ok that got her through the shock of the napalm trauma, but Kangwon seemed to think that their cell regeneration had helped, at least slightly.

"Interesting. I'll keep that in mind."

He hoped he wouldn't keep the bandage on the back of his head with it.

"And thank you for telling me." Lamplight played over China's face as he smiled at him.

North looked down at the table. "China is an ally. What benefits your country benefits mine."

He clenched his teeth after the words left. Why did he always have to do that?

Before the silence could stretch too long, the other country effortlessly carried on the dropped conversation, talking about his people's land reform efforts back home, taking much longer to accomplish than the north of Korea's with all his land mass.

As he went on, North tried to avoid looking at the bowl sitting before him. But after his eye had flicked down enough times, he

noticed something.

His brow furrowed as he finally made himself examine it directly, ignoring the toppings to look at the pale wheat noodles, and after a second, he pulled them closer, lifting his chopsticks.

He dug the blunt tips (annoying Chinese-style) into the bowl, not mixing it, but picking up a single strand of noodle. lifting it up. And up. And up.

When his hand was over his head, the noodle was still connected to the bowl.

He looked over at China, who had stopped talking, and was watching him with a small smile and that too-innocent look on his face.

"Is this...?" North couldn't hide the bafflement in his voice. "Is this all one noodle?"

China's smile grew wider. "I told you- it's just one bowl of noodle."

North stared at the bowl in disbelief. The thick coil he'd thought were many noodles piled together was actually just one very long, *very* thin one.

"There's a tradition in my country that you need to eat long noodles on your birthday." China's tone sounded educational, but North could hear the amusement bubbling under it. "The longer they are, the more years of life you'll have. I also figured since you're so against 'wasting' food that you would appreciate if I made one extra-long noodle instead of several."

North looked between him and the noodle, still held between his chopsticks like a snake. "...If you didn't change the recipe, then isn't this just the same amount of ingredients as a bowl of noodl*es* would be?"

China paused, like he hadn't thought of that. "...Ah."

"What do you mean *'Ah?'*"

"Anyway, I hear your cooperative farm plans are beginning to come to fruition."

North huffed, but accepted the change of topic, spooling the *obscenely* long noodle back into the bowl, his comrade following it down with his eyes. "Yes."

They had started to organize them in spring. They were starting small, about thirty families each, leaving it mostly up to the local peasants to organize with some Party direction. They had already been essentially cooperative farming for some time now, setting up ox-sharing teams and labour-aid amongst their villages to work the fields.

"Mine are coming along as well," China said. "Our draft resolution is being tested on a few hundred small cooperatives. In another year or so, we might make it an official one."

North had been keeping an eye on his progress ever since he'd told him about the draft resolution back in December. Even with everything else, they needed to develop new techniques, learning through their experiences and those of other countries to see if any of theirs could be adapted for Korea. And the food situation would be the major problem to resolve if the ceasefire finally got signed.

"We've also already seen increased production in Wonhwa-ri and a few other areas," he told China, somewhat competitively. "It looks promising."

The village was poor, doing worse off for food than many places, though the situation should improve with the tax cuts they'd made. But after the General's visit with peasants from the area back in May, their increased cooperation had already seen gains.

Thinking about the upcoming harvest still tightened North's chest to the point of finding it hard to breathe, but Hae had been right this morning- it did look like it might be possible for most locales to fulfill the agricultural plan. *If* nothing disastrous happened.

Thinking of the Supung Dam and all the others in the north, especially around their bread basket in Hwanghae, North grit his

teeth, swirling the chopsticks through the bowl of noodle, mixing it with the thick sauce. It caused a squelching sound that made his stomach turn.

"We'll have to be careful," China mused. "It will be difficult to avoid the same problems our Soviet comrade is facing. We'll essentially be turning our revolutionary peasant class into large landowners."

Which would change their class interests, alongside giving them more bargaining power. North had listened especially attentively to CCCP whenever he spoke about his cooperative farms after Liberation, paying careful consideration to whether a similar model could work for Korea.

"The benefits are too advantageous to ignore." He kept swirling his chopsticks, not looking down, but feeling the resistance of the noodle as it wrapped around the silver. "Especially with how short my country is on materiel."

With the Americans targeting their draught animals, plows, and tractors, sharing resources had become more important than ever, just like it would be once the war was... done. And they were still behind technologically. As they discovered new ways to farm efficiently and increase yields, it would be easier to have a few good cores in each cooperative farm to educate en masse, instead of sending Party members out from their own farms to teach their neighbours individually, or at meetings.

He had discussed all those things with China last year as they spoke in their room. The other country nodded like he remembered.

"I suppose we'll just have to create more checks and balances, as they say," he hummed, still spinning the oil lamp, though the glass should be painful to the touch by now. "What will you do if it doesn't work?"

"Find a way to make it to," North said, and the other country laughed.

"Good answer."

"What will you do?" the Korean returned.

"Throw myself onto a sofa-bed and weep dramatically," China replied. "And then find a way to make it to."

North snorted, then ducked his head, glaring recalcitrantly at the noodle.

"My Chairman says we need to have faith that the lower and middle peasants want to walk the Socialist road," the other country said. "And that the Party is capable of leading them there."

North looked up at his tone, narrowing his eye. "And do you not believe that?"

"I do," China said with no deliberation. "As Communists, I think it's necessary to believe our people are capable of anything. I just think in order to be successful, you also need to have absolutely no faith in that at all."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Doesn't it?" China asked. "Look at our comrade to the north. He had unwavering faith that his kulaks would support the path of betterment. And instead they helped plunge his western regions into a famine. Too much faith is never a bad thing, but it can be if it's not tempered with skepticism."

North shook his head. "If we don't wholeheartedly believe in the path we're walking, then how are our people supposed to believe?"

"We do wholeheartedly believe in it," China said patiently. "But if you walk a road believing the destination is assured, then any side paths might seem like they'd serve just as well to get where you're going, and any setbacks will feel like someone just detonated a bomb on the highway. And it's never a good thing for the person at the front of the pack to be unable to see past a roadblock. "

"That wouldn't happen to me," North defended, not liking his implication.

"I didn't say it would. Just general advice." China ran his finger

over the open rim of the oil lamp. "For certain other Socialists, perhaps."

"Why would your people believe in their path if their country doesn't?" North demanded. "You can't truly believe if you have any doubts for any reason. And if they sense those doubts from you, then they *won't* have faith in the Socialist road."

China smiled, rubbing the soot on his finger with his thumb. "Then it's a good thing I'm a good actor. You should eat your noodle before it gets cold, by the way."

North shook his head again. Sometimes he thought China got him into these semi-philosophical discussions just to mess with his mind. To try to.

You couldn't both believe in something wholeheartedly and not at all. That wasn't how it worked. And if the people that were counting on you to guide you down your road sensed any hesitation, they would be too hesitant to move forward.

The noodle loomed on the table, waiting, made with Chinese ingredients shipped from China, when they could have gone into the stomach of one of his own people, or North's, if he truly cared. At least they would have appreciated it.

Even now, he was no closer to understanding him.

"I've been meaning to ask," China began in the same conversational tone. "Are you going to encourage competition amongst your farms?"

"Yes," North said immediately.

America liked to spread the idea that there would be no competition under Socialism, and society would stagnate because of it. It was one of his blatant lies that capitalists around the world were happy to parrot. He'd dealt with enough of the petit-bourgeois during the Occupation that were concerned that without competition, there would be no innovation, as if there had truly been innovation when any advancements that would make life

better for the average Korean were discarded in favour of continued exploitation and misery.

They didn't *need* competition to innovate, so long as they had a government that was actually invested in progressing society in a real way, instead of a dozen companies competing to see who could produce the most useless items and convince the masses they needed them, charge the most for basic amenities, and price their competitors out of business. If people knew that their creative efforts were going towards their country and themselves, and not just towards putting more won in someone else's pockets, they would be more motivated to create, and be given the chance.

But competition did help production. The drive to be recognized as a model worker, soldier, or peasant drove his people to come up with new inventions and methods of production, as they had done with vinalon, to grow more crops and fight harder. It was just important to balance individual competition with collective competition. He didn't want peasants willing to hoard good seeds or efficient techniques just to fill their quota more than their neighbours, or for factory workers to be willing to sabotage each other to get ahead, like they did under capitalism. If it wasn't every peasant against every peasant or worker against worker, but rather cooperative against cooperative, they would be fostering healthy competition within cooperation, all while everyone strove to produce as much as they could for the good of their country.

China nodded, satisfied. "Me too. I like to watch people compete to please me. Want to hear some of my ideas?"

Without letting North answer (or challenge that first statement), he launched into some of his plans for fostering healthy competition, one of which included the cooperative farm that overfilled their plan the most winning him as a prize. As usual, North didn't know what that meant, didn't know if he was joking, and didn't want to know.

He was used to listening to China ramble by now, and it was easy to focus on his words and tune everything else out, like the throbbing in his gash as he tried to avoid hunching from the pain, which would just make it worse, and the way his saliva glands and

stomach were aching.

Actually... It was *too* easy.

The part of North's brain that stayed on constant alert for threats noted that aside from nearby chirps from nightbirds, and the gentle rustling of beech leaves in the breeze, there was no other sound but China talking. He couldn't hear the convoys passing on the highway or the more distant bird calls that had sounded in the woods as they walked. And even though he could still feel the echoes of bombs falling, he couldn't hear them.

He glanced over his shoulder at the mountainside rising behind his back. The ridge of Jangsan's spine was lower here, but the outcrop above projected a metre or so, almost causing the rock to have a curved shape, like a wave. Maybe it was trapping the sound.

It made North twitch slightly, not liking that he might not hear someone approaching, though knowing China, he probably still could. But it did make it easier to keep his focus on the other country's words when he couldn't hear that infernal drone.

He kept his eye on him, along with most of his attention, using a small part of it to slide his chopsticks into the noddle and lift a section.

China's eyes flickered down, his mouth opening, then closing. Before North could fully lift the tangle of noodle, he interrupted himself to say, "Don't eat from the middle section."

North shifted, irked that he'd acknowledged what he was doing. "So not only are you forcing me to eat, you're trying to tell me how to do it?"

"Just a suggestion," his comrade said. "It's a superstition that you're not supposed to cut the noodles. You need to eat them from the end."

"I thought you didn't believe in superstition."

"I don't."

The Korean glowered at him, but set the noodle down, finding the end again and winding it around his chopsticks.

"Happy?"

"Very." China settled, launching back into talking about his country, somehow transitioning seamlessly from encouraging competition to stock breeding.

North tried to keep his attention on him, and managed it long enough to get his chopsticks close to his mouth. But he found it shifting to the food, harder to ignore when its smell was wafting right into his 'nose.'

It was thick and heavy, and his jaw ached from how hard his mouth was watering, that stupid physiological response, even though he had no interest in what was in front of him. His stomach clenched, making his burns twinge.

It wasn't hard. It was just a noodle with a few vegetables and some kind of black bean sauce. He had eaten jjajangmyeon before. And China couldn't judge him for eating when his people weren't when he was the one insisting he ate in the first place. He could tell from the silver bowl and chopsticks still gleaming brightly that it wasn't poisoned, at least not with something like arsenic. And the other country wouldn't poison him now, not so brazenly.

Unless he had doubts about the path they were walking down in this war, too. Unless he thought North was too weak to win and he wanted to-

He sank his teeth into the side of his cheek before his hand could drop the chopsticks.

China... cared about his country and his people. Even if it wasn't enough, it was enough that he wouldn't sabotage the war effort. Even if he thought North was weak and useless and incapable of- He wouldn't cripple his country that way.

It was just a noodle. He had eaten earlier, so his stomach should be better prepared for it. He wouldn't gag in front of the other

country, let alone throw up. It was just a noodle, and he couldn't free his country if he couldn't make himself eat *one damn noodle.*

It sat coiled around the silver chopsticks like a long, white worm.

His hand refused to move. It was childish, but as North sucked back his saliva, he had to close his eye and lean forward to be able to make himself take the bite.

His fangs closed awkwardly around the chopsticks. It had been so long since he'd had noodles that weren't fried as rations that his muscle memory didn't kick in for a moment. The silver felt solid under his teeth, something more substantial than rice or juk, and as it did when the rock scraped against them, North had to fight the urge in his jaw to bite down and grind the metal between them.

Then he remembered how to eat, and released the utensils from his fangs, closing his lips around them instead. He kept them angled up, his tongue reluctant to let the food touch it, even as his stomach felt like it was climbing up his throat for it. After a long second, he managed to slide the noodle off, biting down properly, prepared to fight his urge to vomit.

Instead his eye flew open.

The taste burst on his tongue, full of flavour. The noodle wasn't steaming anymore, but it was still warm, and had had time to absorb the sauce. He could taste the tangy garlic, bitter melon, and earthy mushrooms in it, even without having any of them in the bite, and... something else. It was rich and savoury, and even though his throat flexed, instinctively trying to reject it the way it had rejected the juk this morning, it actually tasted...

"Is it good?"

North startled, swallowing in his surprise as he realized China had moved without him noticing. And was now seated to his left, his face a few inches away from his.

He turned away, schooling his expression as he made sure the noodle wasn't going to come back up.

"Is there meat in this?" he bluntly asked once he was sure it wouldn't.

China clicked his tongue. "Aiya, I thought it was too blended into the sauce for you to notice."

Like North could not. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had meat. After small meals of salted jumeokbap and plain juk, it had hit his tastebuds like a bomb.

He looked down at the thick sauce, and the texture hidden amongst the black beans. The mouthful he'd taken sat heavier in his stomach.

"It's only ground rabbit, wild-caught," China told him. "Someone was paid enough to buy several chickens to catch it."

It didn't change that someone else could have caught it to eat.

"Do you like it?"

China was still leaning far too close to him, staring expectantly. Without blinking.

North had to keep his eye on the bowl, swirling the noodle around his chopsticks again. "Did you make it?"

China finally blinked at him, slightly owlishly. After a second he said, "No, I'm afraid I'm a terrible cook. I just sent for the ingredients and set the menu. My Little Sisters did all the real work. So if you have any complaints, please kindly criticize them."

North didn't know if that settled his stomach or not. "...It's fine," he muttered, taking another bite.

China leaned back, his teeth flashing. "Good," he said simply. "Happy birthday, Chaoxian."

'Mrr.' "Not my birthday."

His comrade smiled, reaching under the table, pulling out their dented brass kettle and tin cups. "This I did make."

Ginseng tea. North was familiar with the pale golden colour that came from the spout.

He accepted the cup China poured, squinting into the depths.

"It's not poisoned," the other country assured.

North wanted to deny that was what he'd been checking for, but couldn't. Ssi-bal, he could never just be appreciative, could he?

Not that China deserved appreciation. He hadn't asked him to do this for him. If he had, North would have told him not to. And then been even more annoyed when he did it anyway.

"Here." China took a sip from his cup, visibly swallowing. "Does that help?" he asked, wiping the rim with his sleeve.

"I don't want to drink out of something you did," North muttered.

"Well, since you watched me pour these, I suppose the taste-testing still proves it's good." China swapped their cups.

North picked his new one up, staring into it again. After a moment, he forced himself to drink, tossing his head back to make sure it would go down, hearing SH telling him it was tea, not soju in his head.

"Unless I predicted you would do that and poisoned that cup ahead of time," China said as soon as he'd swallowed, then smiled as North shot him a glare.

"If I die, I'm taking you down with me before I go."

"I would expect nothing less. I assume you'll use the teapot to bash my skull in?"

"I wouldn't waste tea," North said flatly. "I'll just use the last gift you forced on me to cut your throat."

China's eyes squinched, flicking to the tiger blade North had strapped to his hip before they left. "I think we both know you're not the sort of person that accepts people forcing things on you."

North looked away, taking another bite of noodles. Noodle. It was hair-thin, so delicate it must have taken a great deal of skill to make. Its fineness helped it go down, barely letting his tongue experience the texture, only the flavours it had absorbed.

He would have to thank the Liaos. Even if it was annoying, and he hadn't had anything to do with their Countryhuman forcing them to make this for him.

After a moment of hesitation, he picked up a slice of bitter melon, trying it. It lived up to its name, flooding his mouth with a strong, dry bitterness and providing his teeth with the texture they craved, giving them something to sink into. Combined with the taste of the meat sauce, it was...

Fine. It was fine. It was food, and would give him the boost of nutrients he... could use. It should be enough that he could give all of tomorrow's rations away.

He took another bite of bitter melon, and China said, "I'm glad you approve of my topping choice. I thought you would."

North ground the fruit between his teeth.

None of his provinces liked the taste of bitter melon, so it hadn't been seen in the chosonjip often. He only had it in the banchan Kim Jong-suk would make specially for him at meals, even when he told her not to do the extra labour, seasoned simply with sesame seeds and garlic. He hadn't had it since she died. Its extreme bitterness wasn't a taste most people enjoyed. Part of him wanted to say that China had gone to the trouble of selecting it for the noodle in the hope North would have to suffer through eating it more than he already was. But...

China was observant. He knew he'd noticed the way he had eaten the bitter namul they foraged on their mission to the Raktong without flinching. He'd remarked on it, even though North hadn't answered him. And he had caught him examining his tooth paste pot that time, surely realizing that all of the herbs in it were bitter, with nothing to cut the taste. And been asked if he intentionally added ginseng.

His comrade had chosen this bitter fruit that barely anyone liked because he knew North- could tolerate it.

When there was nothing left to chew on, he swallowed, turning another piece over with his chopsticks. Not looking at China, he asked, "Why did you have this made for me?"

"I would have asked for millet. But I thought you might like this better."

There was a knowing tinge to China's voice. After a moment, North realized what he was referring to.

Still not meeting his eyes, he said, "You know that isn't what I meant."

China's lips curved. "I got you a present last year, didn't I?" he asked innocently. "I couldn't be outcompeted by my past self like that."

"You already got me something this year."

The Chinese country knew what he was talking about. "So you did notice my refill."

The first night after they came back from Kaesong. North had opened the pot he kept his teeth-cleaning herbs in to find that what he had been running low on had been restocked, before he could start stockpiling for the winter.

"That wasn't a gift," China said flippantly. "We sleep two feet away from each other- it's in my best interest to keep your breath fresh."

It hadn't been the banga leaf or any of the other more easily found plants that had been added to. Only the ginseng.

"The dagger was useful," North said, resting his hand on the curved hilt. "This isn't."

"'I would call making sure my ally doesn't pass out from anemia or malnutrition useful, wouldn't you?'" China took a drink of tea, smiling at him over the rim. "Is that something like what you want

me to say? Not this year. I had this made for you because I wanted you to have a good meal."

North opened his mouth then swiftly looked away, stabbing his chopsticks into the noodle with force, aggressively taking another bite of bitter melon.

He should really learn to stop asking China questions when he always hated the answers.

"By the way, I've been singing at your theatre lately," his comrade said conversationally, making North stiffen.

"So?" he challenged.

"I was wondering if you wanted to come by to listen. I could give you a post-birthday performance in exchange for the show you put on earlier."

North relaxed. Good. He hadn't noticed.

"I don't have any interest in listening to you sing," he said, finding the end of the noodle again.

China smiled. "Is that so? Well, I'll be there tomorrow night anyway, if you change your mind."

"I won't."

He would be on alert. North would have to be even more careful than usual.

China nattered on about useless things, thankfully no longer watching North so closely while he chipped away at his noodle bit by bit. As... acceptable as it was, he still had to eat slowly, taking breaks when he felt his stomach churn. The ginseng tea helped.

He was halfway done, and on another break when there was finally a lull in China's chatter, allowing him to hear the soft murmuring of leaves again. He watched as the Korean nudged the noodle with his chopsticks, pretending he was considering another bite and not forcing his body to keep the meal down. And that he

didn't feel the weight of the gaze on him.

The lamplight flickered, fire licking at the glass walls around it with the quiet fluttering of moth wings.

"I'm interested," his comrade finally said, propping his chin on his hand.

North regarded him warily. "...In what?"

"What your exact reasoning is behind giving away so many of your rations."

Tensing, the Korean looked down at the noodle. "I don't give away that much."

"You do," China said. "At least half every time I've seen. And usually more. I have a suspicion you would have yourself on an office worker's amount instead of a soldier's, if that didn't mean you would have less to hand out."

"I don't hand anything out," North muttered. "It's mutual aid."

China ignored him. "Is it a desire to be seen as selfless and noble, I wonder?" He smiled as North's jaw feathered.

"There's nothing noble about it," he snapped.

He knew it was stupid for him to give away so many of his rations, especially when he was on the frontline. His provinces were right- the rations were calculated to be exactly the amount a soldier needed to keep going. By depriving himself of even a quarter, he was missing out on nutrients and energy that he needed.

But he could keep going even without those. His people couldn't. If he kept his government salary when he received it, he could buy supplies privately (once he was finished paying off that cow for Completely Reasonable Prices Kim). Some of his people couldn't work, either from injury or because their workplace had been destroyed. They had no money to buy food, and even with all their measures, it wasn't enough- the State couldn't summon meat or vegetables from nothing. It was why his people needed his rations

and his salary.

It had always been this way. When South would scarf down his stale grain and leave his bowl empty, how could North finish his while his brother's stomach was still growling? He had managed to eat what Kangwon had given him, knowing he had to heal as fast as possible to go save his people, even when the gush of juices from the rabbit meat had hit his tongue for the first time in his life and all he could think about was how much South would have liked it.

But after, when they had North and South Pyongan, and they had to forage and catch more and more to eat with each province they recruited, how could he eat when Hae was trying not to stare longingly at his bowl, or Sang was swirling a rock around in her mouth? How could he eat at the Secret Camp when the villagers stretched themselves thin to make sure the guerrillas had enough, or when the General had pulled half their rice from their packs and buried it under an old campfire in the hopes that the missing unit on their tail would find it before they starved to death? How could he eat after the Division when even when they had solved the food problem in the north, his people in the south were still forced to give up their harvest while their stomachs sank in?

There had been a day, International Workers' Day, when the Premier had practically kicked him out of Party Headquarters, telling him to go enjoy the fruits of their labour instead of working for once, sending him with a full dosirak from Comrade Kim Jong-suk. North had made himself eat the entire thing, because he didn't want her efforts to be wasted, and because he knew she would have directed SH to make sure he did. But he still ended up feeling like her efforts *were* wasted, because as he had sat in the warm spring sunshine by the riverbank, listening to his people celebrate across the city and his provinces splash in the Taedong, all he could think about was his brother.

Was he safe? He wouldn't be allowed to celebrate a workers' holiday, but was he at least able to see the flowers blooming in Seoul? Could he see the new growth on the trees that grew on Bukhan Mountain? Was he eating? Or was he locked up in the darkness again, eating weevilled millet or nothing at all while North feasted, like it had been when he had been in the cave with

Kangwon? The idea had made the food in his mouth taste like ashes, and nausea swirl in his stomach.

"If you don't think it's noble, then why do you do it?" China asked.

North observed the thin noodle trapped between his chopsticks, the oil on it glistening in the light of the lamp.

The worst thing about being starved wasn't the way you would start to shake after a few days, or the lethargy. Those could be fought off. The hunger was the worst of it. The empty howling in your stomach that stopped you from working or sleeping or even getting out of bed in the morning, stealing your thoughts and replacing them with a ravenous *need.*

And North couldn't feel hunger.

He could remember it from when they had first been formed. It had grasped at his insides with sharp claws, hollowing him out as he paced the floor of the shack, stomach aching, stopping him from thinking with its insistence that he pay attention to it, not his head or escaping or his brother, only momentarily relieved by the small bowls of rice three times a day.

But somewhere in those days after their rations had been cut for the first time, or maybe the tenth or eleventh, when they had received nothing at all, North had known he couldn't afford to give in to the feeling. If he fell prey to the urge to stay on the thin futon or curl up in a ball to clutch his stomach uselessly, then he and his brother would die. Someone needed to make sure they cleaned their teeth. Someone needed to make sure they exercised. Someone needed to make sure they drank, at least until the bucket had started to be taken, too. Someone needed to make sure his brother kept singing. Someone had to make sure they kept *trying.*

And South couldn't. He wasn't strong enough. North was. He still was.

His body would still complain. It would flood his mouth with saliva every time he even set his eye on food, it could make his stomach moan when he took the rock out of his mouth, and start to

shut down if he deprived it for long enough. He still had to shove down the lethargy and quell the tremors. He had to right now to keep his hand steady on the chopsticks. But he no longer heard that howl.

Hunger had become familiar. There was nothing for it to grasp at now. He was always hungry, and so he never felt it. Like the aching hip that China had slipped back into place.

His comrade couldn't slip this back into place. No one could. Not even the General.

North didn't starve himself because he was selfless or noble. It was the opposite. It was selfish and self-indulgent. He had the privilege to *choose* to go hungry, the privilege of having food to give away.

No one appreciated it, and no one ever would. His provinces didn't, his General didn't, none of his comrades in any of their armies ever had. Even the mothers whose children would finally sleep without complaining of an empty belly wouldn't, if they knew that he was giving up his rations. Their gratitude would be tainted by the knowledge that their gain was his loss. Instead of aid, it would become a debt.

But if he could spare someone from that gripping emptiness that he could no longer even feel, then why shouldn't he? He took no pleasure in eating, anyways. Even the noodle, as admittedly delicious as it really was, quickly turned to paste in his mouth as he chewed. A bit of shaking was worth it to make sure one more person wouldn't ever get used to hunger.

"I need to," North said, his voice low as he dropped the noodle. "I can't eat knowing my people are going hungry."

"Someone will always be hungry, somewhere," China said. North could tell he wasn't trying to argue or sway him. It was just one of those comments he made, unjudgmental and observatory.

"And I would rather it was me than one of them."

China examined him for a long moment. "I'm sure I would have

more friends if I were the type of person that felt any compulsion to sway you from that mindset. But I've been told I have an awful personality, so I won't be doing that."

"Whoever told you that was right," North agreed.

China's laugh was as low as the flame was burning, his glowing eyes staring at North from across the edge of the small table. The corners of his lips lowered the slightest bit, making the Korean tense.

"But I will say this," his comrade said quietly. "We're called Countryhumans for a reason. We have two halves to balance- country *and* human. They're both important. A Countryhuman that forgets he's a country is dangerous to the world. But a Countryhuman that forgets he's a human is dangerous to himself."

"I am Korea," North replied stiffly.

"En." China wasn't smiling at all now, his voice soft as he said, "But don't forget that you're human, too, Chaoxian."

North looked down, turning the bowl of noodle with chopsticks that shook slightly in his hand.

"And finish your noodle," China said in his regular voice, signalling that it was safe now.

North still didn't look up. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Please finish your noodle, comrade, I beg of you." China's smile didn't match his genuinely pleading tone.

North huffed in irritation and embarrassment, but brought the stupid noodle back to his mouth. Paste or not, it wasn't like he could give it away now. And... he didn't want his comrade's efforts to go to waste, either, even if he hadn't been the one to make it.

There was silence filled with the occasional small slurp as North tried to eat the ridiculously long, thin noodle as silently and gracefully as possible. China watched it slowly get sucked into his mouth, lips twitching.

"This is so ridiculous," North said around it, despairingly, after several minutes.

China opened his mouth, then his smile contorted as his composure finally broke, teeth flashing before he buried his head in his arms, shaking as he silently snickered, undeterred by the smack on his head.

The two men stayed in the forest even after North had finished his birthday noodle, talking quietly as the lamp burned low. They stayed until it flickered out.

Happy Liberation Day! I've been saving this chapter to post for it. ^^

Heheheh I've been waiting to publish this chapter forever. I think about it every time I have a noodle dish. Also the keen-eyed will notice certain intentional inconsistencies ehe.

This is a really specific thing, but part of the reason I initially conceived Hae as a very friendly, outgoing person is because of the concept of hae-che. They're different words in Korean (Hae is a word for 'sea') but since they're both hae out loud , I liked the idea of the person with the same sounding name as the very intimate, casual speech level being a very intimate, casual person. Friend speech! Hae is a friend! ^^

Also North doesn't question 'bowl of noodle' at first because neither Korean nor Mandarin need plurals. They're both saying 국수 (Well, China is saying miàn tiáo, and North is hearing it as guksu.) But to him China is just saying noodle because it's obvious what he's referring to. But that is Not The Case. Noodle, singular. Intentional.

Celestial Burdening

"You can't be fucking serious."

Korea didn't look back, still striding away, expecting North Hamgyong to follow.

"Dead serious," he said coldly. "As I have told you every other day. So long as I can't trust you to watch your tongue around our people, you will be remaining here in Pyongyang for deskwork."

North Hamgyong balled his fists. Part of him wanted to stand his ground at the muster point and refuse to move. But he knew if he did, Korea would just go to Moran Hill without him, and if he wasn't with him to blindfold him, he'd probably have him locked out or some shit, then get on his ass if he went to do something actually useful, just to prove a point.

So he broke, storming after him.

"I have shit to do," he stressed, stomping towards the river with him.

Fixing the railways that would've gotten fucked again last night, finishing dealing with the holiday complaints, going around to the mountain villages to make sure they were ready for winter, like they wouldn't just freeze and starve anyway no matter what they did. And he had that damn response to bring Jung from Jo. And while he didn't care about whatever the fuck was going on between them, he *did* care that the vindictive Worker's Party woman would probably lodge a compliant against him for 'not holding to his provincial duties' or some shit if he didn't.

There was too much to do in his province, as fucking always, to sit on his ass and do paperwork here for the fourth day in a row.

"And if I could trust that you would do it well, you would have left two days ago with the others," Korea shot back.

North Hamgyong bristled, anger churning in his chest. "I don't know what she fucking said to you-"

Korea whirled around, almost making him smash into him. He had his stone-cold bastard face on, like the wide-eyed, open look from Foundation Day had never even existed, like he would for another year. If they even survived that long.

"South Hamgyong said that you told a comrade in our army that his missing sister was likely dead," he accused. "Do you deny it?"

He could, but he knew Korea would just hunt the Pyeon guy down to find out the truth. He probably already had. He grimaced instead.

His Countryhuman's eye narrowed. "Then as far as I am concerned, you don't have a leg to stand on when it comes to arguing that you can be trusted."

Korea shifted on his, visibly stiff and irritated, like he'd been ever since Foundation Day. Ssi-bal, like he'd been for over two fucking years. It just got worse every time he let the crowd grope him. North Hamgyong bet they'd done a number on him under those bandages. And it wouldn't heal because the burns wouldn't until their land wasn't being bombed anymore and it wasn't going to stop being bombed any-fucking-time soon. But he'd still let them do it, gathering around him with that look on their faces, young, old, worker, soldier, peasant, like everything was going to be okay, like one speech had convinced them they could win by Liberation Day again, just like South Hamgyong, sitting on the edge of her seat with parted lips and a light in her eyes he'd never been able to put there.

'What an idiot.'

"How the fuck can I not be trusted?" he demanded. "I've been doing my damn job, I've been doing everything you tell me to. I say *one* fucking thing and now you're back to doubting me?"

"You told one of our soldiers his sibling was dead!" Korea snapped, then glanced around at the foggy dawn around the river. When the

only people he saw were North Hamgyong's guards standing far enough away to pretend they couldn't hear, his jaw feathered, and he turned his glare back on him.

"Pyeon Nam-yon's unit is on coastal defense in your province. What if the only thing keeping him there was the hope that his sister was still alive, and that by keeping the Yankees from our shores, he was keeping her safe?"

"Then we'd need to do a better job selecting model soldiers," North Hamgyong retorted. "If one person is the difference between him be willing to die for our country or fucking off and deserting, then we wouldn't need his ass in the first place."

He knew he'd got Korea there, because he curled his lip, his glower cutting deeper. Because obviously it wasn't really about morale or keeping an already model soldier loyal or any-fucking-thing like that- he was pissed because if North Hamgyong had ever said anything like that to *him* about the Southern bastard after they saw that picture in the paper, he would've killed him.

He hadn't even meant to say that shit. He *wouldn't* have if he hadn't been able to feel South Hamgyong shooting him those venomous little glares every damn second, daring him to. He should've just kept keeping his dumbass mouth shut, story of his miserable fucking life.

Korea's eye slitted, and he put his shoulders back. Though North Hamgyong had enough back problems of his own to notice his spine didn't straighten without a fight.

"And what is your excuse for calling South Hamgyong what you did?" he asked, cold like a dead engine.

North Hamgyong's jaw feathered. He could still see the shadow that flickered in her eyes when he'd called her a bitch, acting like she was solely angry instead of anything else. She hadn't even pretended to be hurt.

*'Should have just kept your mouth fucking **shut.**'*

And still, because he didn't have an excuse and he never learned his damn lesson, he muttered, "I bet she didn't tell you everything we said."

Korea's voice went tight. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Already regretting it, the province said, "Nothing."

"Don't fucking tell me 'nothing.'"

Korea's arm shot out and, before he could stop him, he was grabbing North Hamgyong by the collar, yanking him towards him, demanding in his face, "What were you talking about? What did you say?"

His guards had came rushing in to haul him away from South Hamgyong like he was a damn five-year old tugging at a Jap officer's coat, even when he knew he could put her down, but of course they didn't step in now. Korea was the one person they wouldn't defend him from. He bet their backs were even fucking turned.

"What were you saying about me?!" Korea snarled, flecks of spittle hitting North Hamgyong's cheek.

His eye was wide, blown open, and as much as North Hamgyong's tongue itched to tell him about their talk of cliff's edges, to fucking make Korea *see* and stop him from barreling off it, he still wasn't a total fucking moron.

"It wasn't about you." He tried to sound annoyed enough that he'd think he was being honest, attempting to bat his hands off of him and only getting his breathing restricted as his collar tightened around his neck. "South Hamgyong brought up me shooting her in front of our fucking bodyguards."

It wasn't a lie, and if she was happy to throw him under the trolley, then he had no problem with making sure she ended up on the tracks with him.

Korea's eye bored into his, like he was trying to shaft mine the truth from him. He didn't let go, but he let North Hamgyong swat

his hands away the next time he tried, stepping back.

"I will speak to her about that," he said coolly, like he hadn't just been spraying spit in his province's face. "But that is nowhere near the same level of misdemeanour as degrading a member of our government. What if a female Party member had overheard, or one of our civilians? Do you think they would be comfortable working with you on projects or coming to you for help?"

North Hamgyong's heart was still beating hard, his neck stinging where his uniform had cut into the burns on it.

"You just tried to fucking choke me out over *thinking* we were gossiping about you," he snapped. "What do you think our civilians would think about *that?"*

Korea's face didn't flicker, that icy expression firmly drawn back over it. "If I wanted to choke you, you would be choked. Now answer the question- do you think any of our women would trust you fighting for them if they heard that you have zero respect for them?"

"Just because I called South Hamgyong a bitch doesn't mean I don't respect women," he said, irritated.

Why the *fuck* did everyone always act like he was some kind of raging misogynist? She was the only woman he had a problem with. And it wasn't because she was a woman, it was because she unfortunately used to be his dumbass sister.

"They don't know that," Korea returned. "They don't know about you two and your idiotic spat. All someone would see was you calling one of the most influential women in our country a slur. And if you were willing to treat a fellow Provincehuman that way, there is no reason for them to believe you wouldn't treat *them* that way, and see them as even less."

"Okay, I fucking get it!" North Hamgyong snapped. "You already lectured me about this, and I told you I understand. Can you just go back to nagging me about Pyeon? Or better yet, *let me go back to my fucking province."*

"You are not going *anywhere* until you can show that you haven't forgotten one of the first core tenets I ever laid out for you," Korea said. "'Do not use anti-people language' is one of the simplest ones, but apparently *you* no longer know how to follow it."

That list of words Korea had laid out for them after South Chungcheong had called South Hamgyong a whore, and forbidden them from using. Byeongsin, ssangnom, ssangnyeon, chonnom (though that hadn't ever stopped South Chungcheong in private), michin-saekki, anything that could be used against the female Hamgyong or the Jeollas. Gaenyeon. It was basically the same words South Hamgyong had always scolded him for using, or would have if he did, just more relaxed. Korea didn't care if they said shit or damn, and he said ssi-bal enough. And they could use bastard or dog's son when talking about Japs or traitors. But it had been made clear that anything that mocked class, cripples, or women would get them forced to do more than their share of chores for a month.

North Hamgyong had known South Hamgyong would go crying to Korea about him calling her one of their bad words. And he'd still said it because *he* was a fucking byeongsin.

But even now when he was getting nagged and grounded like he was a child, and right after, when he'd wanted to hammer on his head with his fists until it cracked, it didn't entirely remove the satisfaction of watching her face twist, seeing her get a little closer to admitting the truth about how she felt about him to herself.

It made his stomach churn.

"I *do,"* he spat at Korea. "I wouldn't go around calling any woman that, and I wouldn't have said it if there were other people around!"

"There *were.* Your *bodyguards."*

North Hamgyong shot a look over his shoulder, finding that the two men were back at the muster point, you guessed it-conspicuously facing the either way, like a Yankee truck was going to come down the highway from Anju with its guns blazing.

He knew they'd heard everything South Hamgyong and him had

growled at each other. They'd been walking on eggshells around him ever since. It pissed him off almost as much as being manhandled had.

"They have opinions and beliefs like any other person," Korea growled, like North Hamgyong hadn't spent the past year with them, and heard all about their lives, even when he didn't fucking want to. "I don't want them to waver in their duty of protecting you because you've said something that makes them question whether you are worth protecting. "

North Hamgyong bit his tongue on repeating that he should choose better guards if he was worried about that. They'd just end up talking in fucking circles.

"Fine," he surrendered, throwing his hands up. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have fucking said it and I won't say it again, same with the shit I said to Pyeon. Happy?"

"No, I am not," Korea growled. "Not when I know that if you lose your temper, you'll just say something stupid again."

North Hamgyong snorted. "Like you've never lost *your* temper."

Once again, he had just tried to fucking choke him out.

The other man's eye flashed. "I lose my temper when one of you is being an idiot, not because I am a child that can't stop squabbling with my sister for five minutes."

'No, when you can't we just end up at war.'

Stupid fucking thought. They were at war because of the Yanks, not issues between Korea and his cowardly brother. He might be a spineless, pathetic traitor, but Korea liked him, for whatever fucking reason. He didn't feel the same way about his brother the Hamgyongs felt about each other, and that was the fucking *problem.*

And neither of them had any control over this. Even if Korea had came back from the south with the Southern bastard in April, they'd still be here now, caught up in Yankee stalling at the peace talks. America would still be fucking bombing them. Even if there was

only one Korea, he still would be.

He'd never stop.

"I am not your parent," Korea said when he only glowered. "I'm not going to make you apologize to South Hamgyong like you're children. But if you aren't going to take my advice and treat each other the way siblings, *comrades* should, then I am going to have to intervene when the war is over."

Ssi-bal. Was South Hamgyong actually going to get her re-education wish? If so, he bet she hadn't thought she'd be dragged into it. It would've made him smug, if he didn't want to get stuck in fucking book club with her and whatever tactics Korea wanted to use to 'fix' them.

It wouldn't work anyways. There wasn't fixing something if one person didn't want to admit it was broken.

And when neither of them wanted to. This fan belt had worn out a long time ago, forced to keep working even when the leather was a few fibres away from snapping. Now it had, months ago, thanks to him and his fucking mouth. You couldn't repair something like that, only trash it.

"I thought you didn't care about our personal drama," North Hamgyong said bitterly, cracked nails digging into his palms.

"I don't. *Unless* it starts affecting your duties." Korea glared at him. "And it is if you are going around telling our soldiers that they are never going to see their families again."

"That had nothing to do with South Hamgyong," the province argued. "I told Pyeon his sister was probably dead because she *is,* and it doesn't do any good for him to get his damn hopes up."

He couldn't help the way he lowered his brows, silently communicating to Korea.

"No," he said coldly. "You told him that to piss off South Hamgyong. You willingly hurt and discouraged one of our people to get back at your own sister."

North Hamgyong bared his teeth. "What does it matter? It's still true."

"You don't know that!" Korea snapped, a flicker of heat coming back into his voice before it smoothed out again. "And even if it is, you do not say it. Your job is to protect our people's hopes, not destroy them."

North Hamgyong's teeth ground together. Korea would ignore his silent warning, then parrot almost the same exact damn thing South Hamgyong had said a few days ago. Maybe her and their Countryhuman really did have a psychic connection, or at least more of one than *he'd* ever had with her.

What did he care? He had never asked to be her brother. *She* had found *him,* made him take care of her. And then when he couldn't, she'd locked herself up and chained him to the assembly line. He'd never asked for the job, never wanted it. But while he had escaped from the factory years ago, he couldn't escape from that one, even if South Hamgyong was pretending he could. It wasn't that fucking easy.

Nothing ever was.

"'Hope' won't make his sister any more alive," he said stubbornly. "It'll just make it worse when he can't delude himself anymore."

Why couldn't they *see* that? Yes, South Hamgyong pretending everything was fine had encouraged him to say that shit to Pyeon without thinking, but he still would've said it anyways. He was trying to *help.* It didn't do any good for the man to make finding his sister the one thing that was getting him through shit. Because she *was* dead, and once he accepted that, he'd have nothing. And then he'd off himself or some shit.

Korea stared at him for a long moment, jaw working. On the highway behind them, trucks piled high with supplies from the Chinese rolled into the city, moving while there were no planes visible in the sky.

"Do you know why you have four stars on your epaulets?" he

asked eventually, less aggressively.

Annoyed at the stupid question, and sensing another lecture, North Hamgyong replied, "Because I'm a general in the Korean People's Army."

"And do you know why our generals have stars on their epaulets?"

Fuck. Was he about to get demoted?

"Why?" he asked warily.

"Because each star weighs a billion tons," Korea said, gazing at him steadily.

North Hamgyong glanced down at the golden stars pinned to his gold thread-embroidered epaulets, two on each side. He lowered an eyebrow at his Countryhuman, encouraging him to start making sense.

"Four billion tons." Korea reached out, slapping his hands down on the boards, firm enough to make North Hamgyong flinch. He pressed hard, bearing down on him, crushing them into the burnt skin underneath. "That is how much weight you carry on your shoulders. That is how much the responsibility of an officer weighs. And that isn't even half of what the hopes of our people weigh."

North Hamgyong almost buckled under the pressure he was putting on him, spine aching as it bent. He was pretty sure the bastard was trying to force him to his knees. He tried to resist, even if it made his back scream.

Korea stared unflinchingly into his face. "And *you* are more than a general- you are a Korean Provincehuman. It is your job to carry their hopes, to carry *them.* And you cannot do that if you can't even bear your own."

North Hamgyong grit his teeth as he was forced eye level with him.

"It does not matter what your opinion on hope is," Korea said. "Our people need it. Without hope, there is no morale, there is no drive

to fight, and there is no future."

What had the General said when he said hope didn't win wars? *'No. But it gives our people the drive to fight it.'*

The three of them were *all* fucking psychically connected.

"You said you knew there was no other third choice, and you would rather die screaming than on your knees." Korea pressed harder, still trying to send him there. "Because you are a stubborn, nationalistic bastard. But not everyone is like that. We have worked hard to show our people that we are a country worth fighting for, that the future we want to guide them towards is one worth dying for. They are willing to put up with the bombing, face the enemy bullets, and die screaming because they have *hope.* Hope that we will win, that their deaths won't mean nothing, and that they will be able to build happy lives and reunite with their families."

His eye flickered, and pain lanced through North Hamgyong's shoulder as he forced him below his eye.

"Your job is to foster that hope, to nurture it, to show them that they aren't wrong for believing in us, and that giving their lives for even the chance of that being possible is worth it. Because without that chance, there are millions of people who would fall to their knees in despair and never get back up."

"Then they're cowards," North Hamgyong grunted, neck straining, and was rewarded with more pressure.

"No, they are *human,"* Korea said heatedly. "Our people are braver and more spirited than any others. I know you believe that."

Of course he did. Their people were the best in the world, traitorous bastards excepted.

"So why do you think they tolerated thirty-six years of Japanese oppression?" his Countryhuman demanded, and before he could say anything, answered, "Because they had never had anything to hope for. The emperor and kings and yangban, the old provinces and Joseon, taught them that there *was* nothing to hope for, that all

they had to live for was serving their monarchs and worshiping their country, and that they would see rewards for it after they died.

"They only stood up when they saw that wasn't true. The Donghak Peasant Revolution failed, but it showed that fighting back was possible, the Bolshevik Revolution demonstrated that it was possible to win, and the March First Movement proved that we could come together and make an impact." His jaw feathered. "It showed us that we had to stand up and fight."

"The March First Movement failed."

North Hamgyong hadn't left work for it. He couldn't. But plenty of the other men had, along with those from the timber processing factory and distillery, heading off into the Kanggye town square to wave their homemade flags and protest. Only to come crawling back when it didn't work, either getting their asses beat by the Japs at the plant, or worse- fired, put out of a fucking job in a two-bit town, doomed to either die when winter came or on their way through the mountains to somewhere else. Plenty hadn't come back at all, like he'd known would happen.

They'd been so damn excited, chattering about it in hushed voices on their breaks for a month in advance, so fucking convinced it would work, that all they had to do was wave some shitty scraps of fabric and shout their lungs out, and the Japs would run away with their tails between their legs. One man had been especially loud, even quitting the day before, certain that he wouldn't need to slave away processing ore in a couple days.

He'd come back three months later, when the protests had started to peter out, quiet and sullen, missing an ear, forced to grovel and beg for his job back. He'd offed himself the next day, hung himself in the manager's office.

Not North Hamgyong. Any childish naïveté had been long gone by then. March First hadn't meant anything to him, other than that they had ten months left. The other men had been crushed under the weight of their 'hopes' crashing down on them. But he'd just kept working.

"But *we* succeeded," Korea stressed. "And the March First Movement showed us that we could *try*. All of those things gave us *hope*. Even all those little useless acts of adventurism against the Japanese in the early years proved that they were mortal, that they could be fought against, and the leftist literature that made it into our country taught people that taking the chance to fight was worth it, that they didn't have to just go back to suffering under different oppressors."

"But they *are,"* North Hamgyong forced out, thighs trembling, the ache from his spine invading his tailbone. "We fought for so fucking long, and we're *still* being colonized."

People were still living like slaves under the Yanks in the south, their men starving and homeless and their women getting violated. They were living in the ground, surrounded by a sea of ashes and twisted metal. The Yanks had slaughtered almost as many Koreans in seven years as the Japs had in three decades, and fucked up their infrastructure far more because they'd actually had shit to fuck up.

"Because we are not *done* fighting," Korea hissed, nails sinking into his epaulets. "And if we don't have hope then we never will be."

"How?" North Hamgyong demanded, the agony radiating down through his back from his shoulders letting the word slip out. "How the *fuck* can you still believe we can win this?"

He had seen Korea almost lose it after the Supung Dam was bombed, he had been watching him degrade for the past year and two months, ever since their final chance to Liberate the south had slipped away, wearing at the joints like a motor that refused to be maintenanced or stop running.

And the worst part was that he didn't think it *was* bullshit when he told him he didn't believe they were fucked. Somehow, some-fucking-way, he really did believe they could defeat America and free their country, that somehow winning this war wouldn't just doom them to another hundred years of it. And that even if they did, they could take it.

And apparently North Hamgyong hadn't even been able to have

hope that he could save his sister.

"Because I *have* to," Korea said back, a different edge in his voice. "And so do you. You have these stars because I believe you are worthy of them. So stop trying to prove that you aren't. If you don't have hope, then have an officer's conscience and make sure our people do."

His eye narrowed, looking down on him now.

"You couldn't believe you could protect your sister, and now you're letting yourself lose her. Make up for it, North Hamgyong- don't lose our people, too."

Rage flared in him, and he struggled against Korea's force, trying to make his crying spine straighten. But his Countryhuman only applied more pressure, forcing him down.

He tried to fight, but he couldn't. And what was the point? If Korea wanted him on his knees, he would get him there, just like if America wanted them destroyed, they would be destroyed, somehow, someday. He *wanted* to keep fighting, he *was* a stubborn nationalistic bastard, he knew there was no third option, that there weren't really even two. But he didn't know how South Hamgyong and the others could pretend to believe that their only option was the one they wanted, or how Korea and the General did. He didn't see how they fucking *could* when every day their soldiers died in the thousands down at the front and their civilians did the same in the rear, when their railways and roads, their fucking veins, didn't go a night without getting completely, utterly fucked, when the Yank could recover from a nationwide steel shortage in a couple fucking *months,* and every week that ugly motherfucker Rhee was having their POWs tortured, forced to sign blood petitions, mowed down by Yankees and thrown into the sea, and shipped out to his other deathcamps to train the traitors and the cowards to kill their own comrades, chipping away at the number of people they would get back if the Yankees ever fucking signed the ceasefire. And he knew they wouldn't.

They were trying so *hard,* they had *been* trying so damn hard their entire lives, all of them. The men and women on the factory lines

pumping shit out so they'd never have to go back to slaving away for fourteen hours a day for half a fucking yen, the peasants drowning in sweat under a sky filled with death machines so they wouldn't go back to starving, the soldiers and guerrillas getting mowed down at the front and behind enemy lines, every enemy soldier they managed to kill met by ten of theirs in single airstrike, every position it took a hundred men and a week to claim stolen back in a night as it was soaked in napalm and white phosphorous. They were all trying so hard and it changed *nothing.* It was useless.

So what was the point in having hope when you knew you were just going to be crushed by it?

North Hamgyong bared his teeth, lowering his head as he sank under the weight on his shoulders. Korea's gaze only got colder with every inch of distance he forced between them.

His legs quivered, filled with pain as his spine began to lose the fight, feeling like a rod of hot foreign steel in his burnt flesh, about to snap at a break line below his shoulder blades. Just when he thought it would-

"Comrade Korea!"

Korea took his hands off him like the molten agony had burned him, too, snapping into attention as someone hailed him.

North Hamgyong couldn't straighten right away, still feeling that heavy weight bearing down on his epaulets. Even when his spine felt like his again, he still could.

'Ssi-bal.' He tried not to pant, or have his aching legs give out as he rubbed his tender shoulder. *'Fucking bastard.'*

He glared at Korea, but his Countryhuman was focused on the man hurrying towards them. North Hamgyong's guards had actually been doing part of their job, checking his identity before letting him approach. It looked like a senior colonel from the 'hidden' military headquarters (North Hamgyong was an engineer- there weren't many places around Pyongyang that were ideal for constructing bunker complexes). Four stars gleamed on each epaulet for eight in

total, more than a general's, but also smaller.

"Comrade Korea." He stopped before them, saluting. He either hadn't seen their Countryhuman trying to compact one of his provinces like a hydraulic press, or was doing a damn good job at pretending he hadn't. Or...

North Hamgyong's jaw clenched at what he saw lurking under the officer's professional expression.

"At ease," Korea said, voice flat again. "Report, comrade."

"Comrade Choe Yong-gon is requesting you at Headquarters, Comrade General," he said, glancing at North Hamgyong.

"Tell him I will be there in under an hour."

The man glanced at North Hamgyong again, then said, "He's requesting you immediately, comrade."

Korea glared at North Hamgyong, like it was *his* fault he wasn't going to be able to personally chain him to a desk. "Fine."

Before he could order him to go waterboard himself in the river until he got back or some shit, the province cut in, "I felt heavy bombing in my province last night. Give me a status report on that."

The colonel looked at Korea for permission, pissing North Hamgyong off, even though he knew he still didn't want them knowing about behind-the-scenes shit. Though he didn't know what the point was. If Chongjin was captured again, then it meant it was over for good.

Not that it wasn't just a matter of time.

"No locations or upcoming operations," Korea said with his nod of permission.

It looked grudging. North Hamgyong bet he didn't want him to feel vindicated by how fucked over they were getting, but also didn't think it would look good if he steamrolled his right to ask. At least that meant he probably wasn't getting demoted.

Even if he had never asked for this burden, either.

The colonel gave North Hamgyong a salute. "It was mostly supply buildings in the Hwanghae area- Sibyon, Singgye, Namchonjom, Sohung. And Kiyang and Kunu-ri in South Pyongan province. F-80s hit the mines there, burned down over thirty buildings."

Korea's expression didn't change, but North Hamgyong could see the way he got even stiffer. It made his own teeth grind, especially knowing they wouldn't be hearing from the Hwanghaes or his least favourite cousin that wasn't North Chungcheong for at least another few days. They couldn't waste telegraph paper.

"So it was just the f- railways and power roads in my province?" he demanded.

Fuck. No major targets, but it had still kept him up half the damn night.

The colonel nodded. "Yes, Comrade General. And our vehicles. It was a bad night for our convoys."

"How many?" Korea asked.

"Seventy-seven reported, but at least a dozen more missing. We're waiting to see if they were waylaid or destroyed."

They were on the open riverbank, with nothing around to punch. It didn't stop the urge from swelling North Hamgyong's fists, making them clench.

Ssi-bal. If it was seventy-seven reported so far, the final number would probably end up being a hundred.

It took so much goddamn work to produce trucks, processing the raw materials and producing the parts, then assembling them. The Tokchon Motor Plant was working overtime underground to try and keep their army supplied, and it still wasn't enough. And the only other option was to buy them from the Soviets and other Euro Socialists. North Hamgyong knew Korea wasn't going to let them look at the amount of debt they owed them anytime soon, but he knew it must be enormous. They couldn't afford any more, not if

they ever wanted to have enough money to produce their own automobiles in the future.

He bit down on his urge to curse so hard that the taste of copper filled his mouth.

"There's a frontline report waiting for Comrade Korea at Headquarters," the colonel said, his own voice carefully militant. "But there hasn't been much progress. The PVA still hasn't managed to retake the height west of the Bukhan River from the Rhee army's Capitol Division. There's just too much air support."

North Hamgyong didn't see any use in poring over the tactical maps, and Korea had them limited to basic ones anyway. But he knew any height west of the Bukhan would have to be the main one between it and the Kumsong River, and maybe the nearby ridge.

A bridgehead. The puppet army had been sent across to capture a bridgehead, and hold it.

He gave Korea a dark look out of the corner of his eye. *'Any day now.'*

His Countryhuman pretended not to see it. "I will confer with Comrade Deng Hua on our course of action," he said. Looking at North Hamgyong now, he said, "Head to-"

"Wait." North Hamgyong narrowed his eyes at the colonel. "What else is there?"

The man shifted slightly on his feet, proving that he hadn't been imagining the uneasy look he was hiding. North Hamgyong should know what that looked like- every single one of his cousins that wasn't Hae was hiding one. He was sure the southern ones were, too.

'If they're even alive.'

Korea swung his head back to the man. "What else do you have to report?"

He dipped his chin slightly. "Comrade Choe Yong-gon wishes to

give you the news in person."

"No," Korea said before he was even done talking, the same jagged edge that he'd had when gripping North Hamgyong's collar back in his voice. *"Now."*

The colonel's lips flattened, his shoulders dipping under some invisible weight before he put them back, jaw squaring.

"The enemy bombed the Supung Dam again."

North Hamgyong's teeth came down so hard he could've felt them splinter. Without thinking, he whirled to look across the river, like he could see if the lights were out when no idiot would be wasting electricity under the shortage in the first place. Like there were even houses left standing to have windows.

He swung his head back, burnt knuckles splitting.

Korea's expression was flat, not saying anything. So it was on North Hamgyong to demand, "Did it break?"

"No," the man said, but the way he said it didn't exactly fill the province with fucking rainbows and sunshine. "The planes came in last night around 23:55, around thirty B-29 heavy bombers. Aircraft hunters say they cut the searchlights with fragmentation bombs, and jammed our radars somehow. They dropped a few hundred payloads, mostly high-explosive and incendiaries. And the napalm. But they only hit a glancing strike on one of the turbine rooms, and a few dozen on one of the transformer yards. According to the missive, none of the generators were hit."

Not that that fucking mattered. They barely had any working. And the couple they did weren't enough.

"Three hit the dam itself, but it held," the colonel continued, unable to hide the relief in his voice, even if that darker thing was still there. "Anti-aircraft teams scattered their formations and stopped any real damage. They even shot one down."

One. Out of thirty. And that was *good* news.

"All the other bombs went wide. Most of the damage was collateral." The man's voice sobered again. "The only infrastructural damage for the plant was a cable, but six huts that local peasants lived in were blown apart, along with one of the warehouses used for storing the POWs' rations. And..." He removed his hat, holding it to his chest. "Two civilians were wounded, though they're expected to survive. And one died."

"Bastards," North Hamgyong swore. How was he supposed to hold the word back when the Yanks had made six families homeless and killed someone just to miss their fucking target?

"And... there's more." There was a slight waver in the man's tone. "When the first bomb hit the dam, the workers were unable to assess the damage in the middle of the raid. They weren't sure if it had cracked, or if the structural integrity might have been compromised enough to if another hit. So they did as you ordered."

'You.' A small word, not even said like an accusation. It was just the truth, one of the orders Korea had given before he'd left the dam after it was bombed the first time, a precaution that had made North Hamgyong grind his teeth every time he'd looked up at the enormous concrete wall that held back million of tons of water, thinking about the damage it could cause. Even though he knew the damage that could come if it wasn't given would've been a hundred times worse.

Korea knew it too. But still, at the sound of that insignificant word, North Hamgyong saw a look he knew too fucking well flash across his eye, a rusty nail directed inwards.

"They drained the reservoir," the province growled, and the colonel nodded grimly.

"Yes, Comrade General."

"How bad?" Korea was blunt, completely emotionless.

"Not as bad as it could've been," their officer said. "Since it hit near the top, they apparently didn't have to drain much. And with some of the generators still out of operation, the river downstream was

still low."

North Hamgyong knew he was damage controlling. They'd been getting enough rain these last few weeks that even if it'd been lower than usual, it hadn't been *low.* And with not all the sluice gates operating at full capacity, there would've just been more water in the reservoir to release.

Like he'd fucking known he would, the man finished heavily, "But we lost a few ri of farmland."

"I see." Korea's voice was still dead flat. "Thank you for your diligence, comrade. Go inform Comrade Choe Yong-gon that I will be right there."

The colonel saluted and left, leaving them alone by the highway again. It was quiet now, the trucks all disappeared into the city. The only sound was the distant hammering and shouts as workers tried to fix the railroads and bridges again, and that aggravating fucking drone.

"We're fucked."

North Hamgyong's words sounded dull, even to him, the way shit sounded when your ear drums were screwed after a long factory shift. Korea didn't respond.

"We're fucked," he repeated, louder, as he turned to him. "The rice harvest isn't in yet. All the paddies we spent all summer growing got drowned, and all the other shit we just planted will have been fucking wasted. If we don't drain the fields in time, we'll lose a chunk of the autumn harvest, too."

It'd mostly be rations for the POWs, so it shouldn't have mattered. But North Hamgyong knew they couldn't starve them, no matter how much he suggested it. The Yanks could starve their prisoners, beat them, torture them, treat them like animals. But the moment they tried to do the same, even just to get enough food for their own fucking people, the entire 'international community' would come down on them like a fucking anvil, like they were their stupid fucking religion's antichrist.

"The dam didn't even break. We just flooded our own fucking fields for *nothing."*

North Hamgyong knew he was just hammering that rusty nail in further, but he wanted his Countryhuman to scream back at him, to rage and hit him instead of staring emptily into space.

Korea didn't snap the way he wanted, just stared forward and asked dully, "What should I have done then?"

North Hamgyong didn't know. There wasn't anything he could have done, even if that wouldn't stop him from beating himself up over giving the order. If the dam had broke, far more than a few ri would've been wiped out, and it wasn't like the workers could know if it would break or not break until it did. And by then it would be too late. They would see just how that would end the next time the Yankees came back, or the next.

That was the problem. There wasn't anything they *could* do differently, there wasn't any way to stop the Americans, or America.

"We will fix it," Korea said, still flat, still staring at something that didn't exist.

"We can't fucking 'fix' the crops," North Hamgyong said, frustrated. "We can't even fix the fucking plant!"

"We got the generators operating again in two weeks."

"Two of the generators!" the province cried.

As hard as they'd worked all summer, they hadn't managed to restore all of them, they were too badly damaged.

"Two are still fucking dead, and they haven't stopped hammering our other power stations for five fucking seconds." The cords on his arms strained from how hard his fists were clenched. "We are going into winter with less than fifteen fucking percent of our electricity working. All those fancy heated floors we spent ages installing in the shelters and hospitals aren't going to do shit if we don't have the power for them. People are going to freeze, they're going to *starve,* Korea."

Like they always had.

The dreary grey sun was suddenly too bright, piercing his skull like a round. The ground plunged away beneath his boots like it did at least once every damn day, exhaustion, hunger, and pain falling in on him, his spine bending under the weight, feeling like a useless hunk of metal again.

He didn't want to do paperwork and he didn't want to go back to his province, to run around solving problems that would stop mattering the moment the Yank got tired of dealing with them and unleashed the atom bomb. He just wanted to sleep, to pass out on the unyielding ground and close his eyes until this was all fucking *over*.

But he knew from experience that things didn't get better when you slept. You just woke up to a life that wasn't yours anymore and a moron sister that was getting raped every day and thought you should be grateful for it. Nothing ever got better. It only got worse and worse, and when it finally seemed like it wasn't, it was only setting you up to smash the hammer down on your skull, to punish you for being such an idiot that you could ever dare think that maybe life didn't have to be about suffering. You only ever got to build factories so someone else could knock them down.

He wanted to scream and punch something, to shake Korea until he admitted it was all useless, that there was only one option and that they were all going to die screaming.

Instead he pounded a fist into his thigh, and the explosion of pain made his legs finally give out. He fell into a squat, baring his teeth as he buried his face in his arms.

'Fucking pathetic.'

But he always had been, hadn't he?

"Do you want to know what hope is?"

North Hamgyong would have snapped that he didn't fucking care what hope was, that it was useless, that it didn't exist and that if he

heard one more word about it he was going to shove the muzzle of his Tokarev in his mouth. But Korea's tone made anything he could have said die on his tongue.

He looked up. The other man was still facing forward, the side with the eyepatch to him, making his expression unnervingly blank.

"You can't understand how I can still believe in victory," he said flatly. "But you can understand working in a factory. You know what it is like to be chained to the line, to slave away until your fingers bleed and your muscles tear, to have your ribs kicked in by the Japs, and to get back up when it's over and keep working. Because if you don't, then the person you care about will suffer for it."

Korea turned towards him, eye somehow glassy and burning at the same time.

"Hope is something that breaks your spine," he said, the words seeping poison like puncture wounds on an arm. "It cracks your bones and crushes your body until it is all you can do to keep moving forward. And you do, even if it would be easier to fall to your knees."

North Hamgyong looked down at his, gritting his teeth under his Countryhuman's dark gaze.

"You can't conceptualize believing that one day things will be better," Korea said. "Fine. But I know you can conceptualize a burden. *That* is what hope is. That is what these stars are."

He grabbed at one of his own epaulets like he was going to tear it off.

"A burden." His fingers curled around the star pins, then let go. "One that we have to carry, because if we don't, then our country and everyone in it will suffer for it. I *know* you don't want that."

Of course he fucking didn't. He didn't want their people to suffer anymore, he didn't *want* Pyeon to never find his sister, he didn't want to *feel* this way. He never had.

"So get up," Korea ordered, glaring down at him. "Get over your stupid fucking issues with your sister, get over *yourself,* and stop being a fucking *weakling."*

North Hamgyong planted his palms on his thighs, baring his teeth as he tried to push himself up. His arms throbbed, biceps feeling like hunks of meat around a wooden skewer that was about to burn through. His skin split under the pressure, hot blood soaking his legs. His spine was a metal shaving that would snap if he tried to uncurl it, but he still tried, bending inch by inch, until with a grunt of exertion, he surged to his feet.

"Happy?" he rasped, white-hot agony coursing through his entire body.

He didn't think Korea had ever been 'happy,' not since 1945 at least. Annoyingly optimistic, aggravatingly fucking hopeful. But not happy.

He obviously didn't smile now. Just gave him another thousand-ri glare.

"If you ever want to give up, kill yourself first and do it quietly," he said like the merciless bastard he was. "It would do less harm to our people."

North Hamgyong didn't bite back. Korea's eye wasn't piercing, it was still unfocused. And pus still clung to his words. As much as it pissed him off to admit, it cowed him.

"Go work on the tracks until I come for you," his Countryhuman ordered, mechanical as a machine. "I'm calling South Hwanghae back, and we are going to North Pyongan. We will get South Pyongan on the way. Our peasants need to understand that we wouldn't have drained the dam if we didn't think it was the better outcome. And they need to see us on the ground working to fix it."

'To fix what I have done.' He wasn't trying to communicate, but North Hamgyong could still read it on his fucking face before he turned, walking stiffly away.

"If I hear you said a single word to our workers that I don't like, I will have you stripped of your rank and locked up until the war is over, and I can re-educate you," he said without looking back. "Korea doesn't need someone who is too weak to carry his own burdens."

North Hamgyong squeezed his eyes shut as his Countryhuman's footsteps left.

He *wasn't* weak. He had spent all those years slaving away with that tiny, useless body of his, doing two times the work of the real men with not even the breaks, trying to pay off the stupid debt South Hamgyong had trapped herself in, to make it so she had to take one less pig, and he'd never fucking faltered. Even when he had to muffle his sounds at night as his muscles throbbed and his joints ached like they were about to snap, and he wished they were both fucking dead, he still got up in the morning and did it all again. He had spent twenty-six years marching over every ri of their country, eating powdered meat or lichen or nothing at all, fighting the Japs every step of the way, and even once they could pretend the fighting was over, he'd led the charge on heavy industry, going sleepless for five years so he could take every class he needed and drive all over the north to rebuild their factories and make sure the people working in them were no longer working like slaves. And he'd dealt with the goddamn 'tactical retreat.' He hadn't let those bastards take Chongjin, and he'd kicked them out of Hamhung.

He'd shot his own fucking sister. Even if he hadn't been man enough to do what he needed to save her from the Yank, he'd still done it.

He wasn't weak. He just didn't work like a vehicle you could fill up with hope. It wasn't real, and he didn't know how South Hamgyong and the General and Korea could talk like it was, like it was something you could choose to pick up and carry with you, even if the last one had a different view of it than he'd thought.

But he for sure as hell did know what a burden was.

North Hamgyong screwed his lids shut so tight that he felt the edges crack as the burns drew in.

Then he set off to fix the veins of their country for the millionth fucking time, back straight and shoulders bowed.

North Hamgyong and his friends 'that bastard Jo Tal-gong' and 'that vindictive Worker's Party woman Jung Kye-suk.' And Han Gang-seok.

Real life note- so the Supung Dam was bombed again on the night of September 12th, 1952, but the thing about water being released and flooding the land may not have happened. I've seen several sources say that farmland flooded that day because 'the dam was damaged,' which seems to be objectively not true because the Soviet reports say it wasn't, and no North Korean or Chinese reports mention it (and they would've had to for the rebuilding). Some also say there was flooding because the North Koreans/Chinese lowered the water levels in case of damage, since the dam was hit, but I've never see any non-American sources say this, and none of the military reports at the time mention it (though the Americans did think they'd managed to destroy more of the plant facilities than they did at the time, and tended to inflate their numbers, so it's not like they're hugely trustworthy; it just seems to me like they'd try to paint the North Koreans/Chinese lowering the water levels as evil, like 'the commies wiped out their own farmland!!' It *wouldn't* be evil, because the outcome of the dam being genuinely cracked and having the Supung Reservoir violently gush out would be much more disastrous, but I could definitely see the Americans trying to spin it that way). I think there's a chance that the people saying that might have gotten this mixed up with another event that will eventually happen, and the ones that say 'the Communists lowered their own water' are trying to lie to cover up what actually happened. I don't mean that in a conspiracy way- the upcoming event is objectively something America did by their own admission, even at the time.
I'm choosing to use the lowered water levels on the chance they did happen, and because I think North *would* tell workers to drain the reservoir to prevent a full-scale flood in case of damage. He's paranoid (for good reason), and with how terrified he was when the electricity first went out, before he

knew the dam itself hadn't been destroyed in June, he would be looking for any chance for even slight harm reduction. Just so you're aware that while this attack did happen, with the Americans trying to completely black out the DPRK again just before fall really set in, the flooding didn't necessarily.

Also if you watch a lot of old North Korean films, you might see the easter egg I put in this chapter. ^^

Take Your Silver Spoon

South looked around warily, staring into the shadows of the side street he'd just come from, heart pounding. His eyes traced the slumping outlines of the ragged hanok, a far cry above the shantytown huts on the very edges of Busan, but still a mark of a lower-class neighbourhood. The darkness lurked between the ramshackle buildings like something alive.

He didn't see the looming shadow he expected to. But with a deep breath, he turned and pulled open the thin wooden door on the house at the address he'd been told to go to just this morning, slipped through the window he'd made sure was cracked.

The person inside flinched when she saw him, like she'd been expecting the police enforcing the curfew to come storming in. She didn't relax even after he shut the door with a gentle *'snick'* that seemed far too loud in the silent night, only hustled past him, snatching the sheet pinned beside the entrance and sweeping it across it.

If the outside hadn't been enough, the inside said the house definitely belonged to poor people. It was one small, open room with scuffed wooden flooring. It looked like maybe dividing sheets had been used to partition off parts of it before, but now they'd all been taken down and hung up on the walls, hiding the windows, like the place was ashamed of its empty innards. The woman bustled around, rechecking these, pulling at the fraying edges, adjusting them in ways South honestly couldn't even see, and thought she should've done before he got here, if it was that important.

Trying to muffle sound so they couldn't be heard from outside? That should be okay, right?

South glanced around the threadbare room. He was pretty sure he could still feel a draft. It wasn't like Busan was getting cold yet, so far down in the south. But it was getting cold*er*. Winter was once

more closing in.

'Thank God.'

No more rolling around on the floor while he cooked alive, or stripping off all his clothes to become one with the table or counter. With America gone, he *could* go lie outside without having to overhear... anything. But the weather had been bad lately.

And the provinces were still there, their houses looming around his on almost all sides, windows watching like judgmental eyes, the boarded over set the most damning of all. Even though he knew they shouldn't be able to see him over his wall...

The weather had been bad lately. It was better to just stay inside.

There was nothing in the house to see by the light of the dim electric lamp on the floor. Either whoever had lived here had taken everything with them somewhere, or hadn't had anything in the first place.

But everyone had something, right? South had seen some pretty poor places back after Liberation, but even they had clay pots or rice straw mats, and even him and North had had the desk and thin futon. That probably meant the people here had packed up and left, even though there should be nowhere safer than Busan.

He wondered if they'd been Communists.

He turned to the woman as she checked the door sheet again, examining her.

She was older, middle-aged, with thick, slightly frizzy black hair that was pulled back in a headscarf. He could see lighter roots creeping out from under the dark blue fabric, even though she still looked way too young to be going grey. When she turned to South, the lamplight turned the wrinkles around her eyes and carved at the corners of her mouth to gaping shadowy crevasses. Stress then, he guessed.

'Join the club.'

He was lucky his skin wouldn't age that way. Then again, North *did* have that little divot between his eyebrows. Maybe he should stop scrunching his face so much when he cried. He didn't want to end up like him.

The woman was staring at him warily, her hands wringing around each other over and over, like dogs chasing their tails. Maybe she expected an officer to jump out from behind him or something.

Oh, that might help.

He pulled down the hood of the cloak he was wearing, fully revealing his flag.

"Hey," he said, trying not to sound awkward.

And finally, she relaxed. For the first time in months, *years,* when someone saw him they relaxed. She didn't narrow her eyes or curl her lip or give him a disaffected glare or regular hateful one. She didn't look at him with what he was starting to feel was pity, or worse, through him. She didn't look at him like he might cut out her other eye. Her shoulders slumped, and the lines at the corners of hers got a little less severe. And he could actually see them.

"Mr. Korea," she said, not resentfully the way the provinces did, the rare times they actually said it. She sounded... relieved, like some long journey was over.

South's heart panged.

Remembering his manners, he removed his cloak entirely, leaving him in the nice black suit America had sent him for Rhee's reinauguration. He spread the cheap fabric over the floor, folding it so it was slightly more plush.

"Here you go, ajumeoni." It was okay to address her that way, right? He didn't talk to many women, and all the ones he'd met at the club were young, his age. Physical age, he guessed.

Wait, was it rude to call a woman that could be a few years younger than him 'auntie,' even if she looked older? North had always just called them 'comrade' while they travelled, no matter

what age, and South had copied him, not knowing what it really meant. No one had seemed to care, but obviously he couldn't use that now.

He wished he could ask someone what was polite. But the provinces would probably just lie to make him look like an idiot.

He patted the cloak beckoningly, trying to mask his nervousness. He should've had a drink after all, just one, enough to dull his nerves and make him act normal.

The woman hesitated, then sat. But not before pulling the makeshift cushion to the other side of the lamp, so she was facing the door. She might've relaxed a bit, but she was still clearly on guard.

It made him think of North after Liberation, and how no matter where they went, he always sat somewhere he could see the entrance, watching for whatever threat he thought was going to burst in when they were in a peasant's house in the middle of nowhere.

Or maybe he had been watching the exit, just waiting for another chance to run away, and leave South behind.

He clenched his jaw, lowering himself across from her, adjusting himself slightly on the hard wooden floor. He still had that awkward burn on his back that stretched down to his butt, and he had to sit more straight than was comfortable to stop the weird burn gash from complaining. He really didn't want to get blood on this suit. A chick at the club had said he looked good in it.

"What's your name?" he asked, hoping that wasn't too direct.

The woman shifted uneasily, glancing behind him. He guessed 'relaxed' really hadn't been the best way to put it. She was still quivering, like some sort of electrical current was running through her, and her eyes kept darting around the room, waiting for something to emerge from the shadows in the corners at any moment. She just seemed to think he wasn't a threat. That was good.

She pulled her hairscarf off, draping it over the lamp, dimming the light even more, until it probably couldn't be seen at all through the sheets over the exits. It pulled the shadows closer until they were almost suffocating, and cast a cool blue tint over them. It made his skin glow ethereally, like some kind of spirit, and greyed her out as if she was already dead. Then she leaned forward, lowering her voice.

"Kim Ok-ju," she whispered, like it was a secret.

That probably meant it was her real one then. And that she trusted him enough to share it.

"And you..." South took a surreptitious deep breath, trying to calm his pulse. "Wanted to talk to me?"

Kim Ok-ju nodded, her eyes flicking around again. "I found out where you were staying a few days ago, but I couldn't approach until those guards left." Her roving gaze suddenly returned to him. "Why did they?"

South kept himself steady as he said, "I noticed you hanging around, so I told them to take the night off. I have people." Did that sound too menacing? "You know, that... don't agree with Rhee."

She put a hand over her mouth, her eyes squeezing shut, tears welling at the corners.

"Are you alright?" South asked, alarmed.

After moment, she nodded, wiping at her face. "I'm sorry. For so long I wasn't sure. I didn't know if-"

She let out a shaky breath. Then her expression steeled, and she looked at him, looked into his eyes, making his heart skip.

"There are things happening in our country that you need to know about."

South listened as she told him all the Communists arrested in Taejon before the war began, about her husband, how he had been thrown in prison for protesting the 1948 elections, how when after

the war had broken out and she'd heard prisoners were being released, she had followed him and a chain gang of men and women out of the city and into the hills of Taejon. How she had watched as the prisoners were made to dig their own graves, and how their bodies were shoved into them after.

That was... really morbid. But he guessed it made sense. Killing someone was hard enough- he couldn't imagine having to dig their grave, too.

"My In-guk was murdered," Kim Ok-ju said lowly, the words soaked in years-old grief that hadn't faded, and couldn't dull. "By Rhee's army."

South's throat felt thick, swollen. It took a couple tries to swallow.

"You're sure it wasn't N- the Communists that did it?" he asked, trying to sound steady.

Her hands balled on her thighs. "I *know* what I *saw*. The National Defense Army, *our* army, murdered my husband and thousands of other people. They rounded them up like cattle and buried them in the hills. The only Communists in Taejon when it happened were the ones in the graves."

She raised her eyes, her lips pressed flat. "And the Americans took photos of it."

A manila folder. Trees, houses, trucks, streets, church, soldier, grass. 'You're not going to find something that's not there.'

"Of course," South soothed, stomach churning uneasily. "I believe you."

"It's still happening," she said desperately. "People are disappearing, anyone who tried to speak out against the election, or stand up against the conscription. They killed my friend, Shin Du-su, for being in the Worker's Party! They cut him down in the street just for being a Communist."

She suddenly stopped, sitting bolt upright, her eyes darting around like a prey animal's. South froze, straining to hear what she had.

Some shift of fabric or the clink of a gun against a buckle. But there was nothing except the distant *'tu-da-da-da'* of a helicopter.

Kim Ok-ju's voice came quieter as she curled up on herself, clutching at her breast with her hands. "I was so scared. Comrade Korea told you me it wasn't you, that we could trust you, but I was too scared to ever come. I was so scared I couldn't."

South's nails scraped at his legs. "You talked to North?" The name slipped out.

She nodded tearily. "I showed Comrade Korea the graves when it first happened."

South's lips twitched down. She didn't seem to notice.

"He told me after that you couldn't have known," she whispered. "B-But... I couldn't make myself try and meet you until now. But I knew I had to after- Mr. Shin was a good man." She raised her glimmering eyes to him. "He was kind. Even after what he went through, what Rhee's soldiers did to him, he never stopped looking after me, and everyone else. He got people food, he tried to help deserters from the army, he stood up for us. He was a *good man,* and he didn't deserve to die for it."

A good man. It must be nice to have someone think of you that way.

He could tell she really had spoken to his brother. His sickness was inside of her, that too-familiar fire swallowing her eyes. It was the way North had looked at him by the Raktong as he told him this exact same thing, and about the Hangang and Yeosu and Seoul. And Jeju. How he looked at him in the prison shack after March First. Like she was begging him to do something about it when it had already happened. Like there was anything he could even if it hadn't.

Kim Ok-ju's tears welled, catching the lamplight, illuminating her brown eyes and making her look human again.

"And neither did my In-guk," she rasped, and then her face

crumpled in, and she started to sob, raw, gasping sounds that South knew came from the bottom of her lungs and hurt on their way out.

And despite that look in her eyes, despite knowing what she was, he found himself reaching out, wanting to comfort her, to hold her, and have her hold him.

Then the door burst open, kicked so hard it tore off its hinges, and his hand fell back to his side.

The curtain was torn down, heavy booted feet stomping in. Kim Ok-ju screamed, leaping up and away, smashing back into the wall of the small house with nowhere to hide.

As the officers surrounded them, guns drawn, her wide eyes flew to South, gleaming with fear, begging him to help, to do something he had no ability to do.

He looked away. Her face fell, hope shattering as she looked at him, *saw* him, and realized what was happening.

"No," she whispered the word, sounding more like a scared little girl than a grown woman.

"Hands in the air!" one of the men barked, his own on his gun, pointing it at the woman. "No sudden movements!"

"Her name is Kim Ok-ju," South said quietly, in case the police hadn't heard it from outside, still staring at the floor.

"Kim Ok-ju." The officer's voice filled the room. "You are under arrest for aiding and abetting a criminal."

"I-I didn't do anything!" she cried. "I d-d-didn't-!"

"You admitted to associating with Shin Du-su," he replied coolly. "A Northern agent responsible for multiple thefts of military property, harbouring known fugitives, and acts of insurrection and sabotage."

"He wasn't an agent!" she cried, and the fear drained from her eyes, replaced by that sickness again. "He was from the southern

branch! He was my *friend* and *you murdered him just like you murdered my husband!"*

"Grab her."

He tossed his head at the other men, and they moved in, seizing the older woman by the arms.

"No!" she cried, twisting and thrashing like a cat, trying to scratch their eyes out. "No, please! Please! *Korea!"*

South didn't look up as she was dragged by him. He didn't need to see the expression on her face. He had seen it thirty-three years ago, from across the room as that corpse stared up at him from the floor of Seodaemun, gore smeared around the hole in its head. He had seen it three years ago, as a single eye glared at him, the other erased by a sea of blood.

Kim Ok-ju screamed, a desperate, terrified plea that cut short as something was slammed into her head with a *'crack.'*

It was just something the police had to do. If they didn't, she'd keep screaming. And people were trying to sleep.

South stared at the dim light under the headscarf, the steady electric glow blurring before his eyes. As a truck engine rumbled outside, and silence fell again, another set of footsteps sounded behind him.

"Thank you for the assistance, Mr. Korea," a smooth, oily voice said. "It made it much easier to get a confession from her."

South inhaled, then climbed to his numb feet, smiling at Kim Chong-won. "Yeah, no problem."

He'd been nervous at first, when the man had came to him and said a suspected Communist sympathizer was apparently looking for him, and they needed his help to draw her out. But that had been easier than he'd thought.

"This was much more fruitful than we expected," the other man mused. "She was in close contact with an influential traitor. She's

sure to know where the rest of his web is. At the very least, she will have names."

'What are you going to do to her?' South bit down on the question. He didn't want to know. And the woman was a criminal anyways.

"Glad to help," he said, dusting off his pants. He stopped short of saying 'Anytime.' Even if this had been easy, he hadn't exactly enjoyed it.

Kim Chong-won shifted his narrow eyes to him, consumed by black in the dim light. "Do you have any questions about her claims, Mr. Korea?"

South saw a truck rolling by in the dark streets, full of dirty grey uniforms. And those same eyes, meeting his in the shadows.

'They rounded them up like cattle and buried them in the hills. And the Americans took photos of it.'

"No," he said.

Kim Chong-won bored into him. "Are you sure?"

"She admitted that guy broke the law," South replied. "He just faced the punishment for it. It's not like public executions are illegal or anything."

No matter who Shin Du-su had been, he hadn't been a good man. He'd been a criminal, helping the Communists. And it wasn't like North would treat someone working for Rhee any different.

And he knew that wasn't what the colonel was really talking about.

"And she said she talked with North," he continued, hands in his suit pockets. "I bet he told her to say all that stuff about Taejon. And even if he didn't-"

He shrugged.

"They were prisoners for a reason. It wasn't like the army would've

killed any *people.* Just Communists."

He hoped the man got what the joke meant. Kim Chong-won stared at him for a long moment. Then he seemed to, because his lips curved, and he picked up the lamp and removed the headscarf, flooding the room with light that seemed much brighter now, but still couldn't chase away the shadows.

For once, his smile almost reached the pits carved in his granite face.

"Then I think you should get home and rest, Mr. Korea." He examined the headscarf, then tucked it into his pocket. "The missus might like this."

He really was just a guy, with a house and a wife and a job, one that involved doing what he had to to keep the country safe. South wondered how he'd ever been afraid of him.

And he wondered if he asked in a friendly, conspiratorial way, *'Were* you in Busan that day?' he'd chuckle, throw his hands up, and admit 'You got me.'

He didn't. It didn't really matter anymore.

He turned to leave.

"Mr. Korea."

For some reason, he still tensed, looking back.

"Your cloak."

South chuckled, taking the ugly fabric he'd given him earlier, draping it over his arm. "Thanks. And good luck with the talks."

The man dipped his head, voice loaded with meaning as he said, "There will be peace when it is time for peace."

Kim Chong-won wasn't in charge of Busan anymore, not after that court-martial he'd learned about a little while ago. There had been some trouble with some Reds being executed, and the man had

almost gotten blamed for sending his guys to stop an investigation team from looking into it. But he was just doing his job, so even though some other men got punished for it, he'd been released.

South knew the hundred or so civilians hadn't been innocent. They were Communist sympathizers, helping North's guerrillas cause trouble in South Gyeongsang. And if you held hands with a Red long enough, it would stain yours.

Still... He was glad America hadn't told him until recently, after he'd hear the rumour at the nightclub. If he heard about it last December...

But he hadn't. And he knew Kim Chong-won was just doing what he had to so they could win. The court even agreed with him.

But while he was still a colonel, and with the police, he wasn't responsible for maintaining order in the port city. He probably shouldn't be here dealing with this when he had Panmunjon stuff to worry about.

South didn't bother questioning why he was. He just waved goodnight and left.

He felt eyes on his back as he walked away.

The open air was a relief. The sheets inside the house had made it feel stifling, not so much heatwise, but breathingwise. Even if South could still smell the stench of poverty out here- unwashed bodies and dried dung burned for fuel- at least he could take a full breath.

He wondered how small Kim Ok-ju's cell would be. If there would be windows.

The street was dark and silent, purposefully so. She had been screaming loud enough to echo over the neighbourhood. People had to have heard. But no lamps had been lit inside the gaping black windows, and no faces peered from them. No one had came to see if someone needed help.

South pictured the families inside, holding their breaths in the dark, eyes wide open, hoping it wasn't their door that was broken

down next, the way him and North had used to when their jailors' voices would rise in the night.

He almost jumped as his guards melted out of the shadows where they'd been waiting, poised to protect him if the woman had been an assassin.

"I'm good," he said, holding up his hands to show he was uninjured. "America doesn't have to fire you."

None of them laughed. It really sucked when you were trying to figure out how to be funny for the socialites at the club when everyone around you had all the humour of his brother.

Actually, even North had used to snort at his jokes. That's how you knew it was bad.

With a twinge, South said, "I want to walk around a little before I go back. Is that okay?"

Kangwon's voice echoed in his mind. *'They're your guards.'*

Exactly. And they were there to keep him safe. And since despite all the mop-up operations he'd been told about, there were clearly still Communists in Busan, even managing to sneak through the military checkpoints all the way from Taejon, he couldn't just order them to let him walk around aimlessly in the middle of the night if they thought it wasn't safe.

He didn't even have anything to do anyways. He just wanted to take a stroll until he was tired enough to forget about... what had just happened. It wasn't that important. He was just being a wimp.

He was already resigned to being denied, but then Smith actually said, "Acceptable."

South blinked, surprised, but pleased. He stopped himself from thanking them, though. They were his guards, so it wasn't like he had to be grateful they were letting him do something he wanted to do.

But he was glad. Even though he was so *thirsty,* when he thought

about heading home to his small room, still unbearably hot, to sit in silence and pain while that cry resounded in his mind-

*'Please! **Korea!**'*

The night was nice. Cool enough that he wouldn't have sweat pouring into his burns and salt-curing them, but not so cold yet that he'd end up shivering. The only thing that would make it better was a drink.

"You don't have any alcohol on you, do you?" he asked the men with him, in Korean and English.

"No sir," came the answers.

South flushed, turning away from the judgment he saw on their faces, Gyeonggi's accusatory words flashing through his mind.

'You're becoming an alcoholic.'

He *wasn't.* It just felt better to be drunk than sober, which the province should sympathize with since he'd made such a big fuss over how much Seoul being burned hurt. And he needed a lot of alcohol now to reach that level of drunk. He didn't *need* to drink, he just needed to stop *hurting.* That's what he'd been *trying* to say when he'd shouted at them that he wasn't an alcoholic in front of everyone. It just hadn't came out right.

God, that night had been such a screw up.

South tried not to cringe at the memory as he headed off without purpose through the darkened streets, guards at his heels, and completely failed.

He knew he shouldn't have Commanded South Chungcheong to sing. He knew she'd hated it. The glare she'd given him after had said it clear enough. It had been worse than if she threw her actual knife at him.

But it was so aggravating, because he didn't know *why* he shouldn't have Commanded her, or why he'd had to in the first place. He didn't understand why the provinces didn't want to sing

and dance, to eat good food and have fun, to be *normal.* He wanted it more than anything in the world, but all of them seemed perfectly happy to stay the way they were, to cling to the fucked up shapes life had hammered them into. Just like North.

He knew brainwashing was real. If it wasn't, how could they ever think like his brother?

He wasn't saying North had done it on purpose. He was just like that, able to convince you that suffering was the best option, that it was necessary, even when it wasn't.

Ribs cracked, eye swelled shut, just wanting to lie down and sleep, to stop hurting for once, ***please,*** *and his brother looking even worse, a trickle of blood falling from his mouth with his words.*

'Get up. One of the guards just left to file a report- this is our chance.'

South was sure North believed all of the Communist propaganda he brainwashed his people with, because he was brainwashed. He'd been brainwashed by Kim Il-sung and CCCP and the other commies he'd met, so he spread their lies on purpose. But he couldn't blame the other stuff on brainwashing. He'd been that way even back when it was just them, always wanting to get up and try again, even when they were both battered and bruised, trying to escape when he knew they couldn't, refusing to eat even when they finally had enough, exercising even when he...

And he knew it hadn't faded after he'd left because he'd turned down the seconds offered to them by peasants, or sometimes rejected meals altogether, and barely slept on their way across the country. Even when they had thought they were free, that they shouldn't have to suffer anymore, he had still been pushing himself to his limit.

It was like... like North *enjoyed* suffering. And he wanted them to suffer with him.

South had a flash of his brother, facedown on the floor, crooked jaw straining to get the words out through the mess of blood and saliva. *'I'll take his punishment, too.'*

Okay, he... couldn't say that. He didn't want South to suffer. He'd never used to, anyway. It was more like he didn't think life should be enjoyed. It was probably why he liked the idea of Communism so much. A world of concrete blocs and grey clothes where everyone lined up for a bowl of rice a day probably sounded great to him.

It still didn't matter either way, but he didn't believe what Kangwon had said about it being nothing like that, about them still having music and dance and culture. They just had those things now so everyone would get tricked into thinking it wasn't that, then when there was only one Korea and no one had another choice, the government would take them all away. And North wouldn't do anything to stop them because he didn't care about stuff like that. South knew he'd never been as enamoured with the idea of the life in a palace they could have had as he was. He would be fine with a world without fun or feasts, a world where they threw themselves at every threat they saw until their bones shattered, even if they didn't need to.

South just wanted to save the provinces from that. He wanted them to learn that there was more to life than fighting, he wanted to teach them how to *live,* like America had done for him.

But none of them cared. They *wanted* to be hurt, to starve. Even the Gyeongsangs and Gyeonggi, who had actually been accepting the invitations to go out with him over these past few weeks, were only doing it to try and infect him with Communist ideas, trying to talk about politics even with the Commands, not taking to the dancefloor when anyone asked, and picking at their food, even though it had to have been better than anything they ate with North, or maybe even ever. Even if they weren't as bad as his brother, who had used to dramatically swallow every bite like it physically pained him, South could still see the reluctance whenever they sat down in front of the arrays of banchan, or juicy steak, or fancy cakes.

That wasn't right. When he had gotten out of Japan's clutches, he'd been elated with the first meal the Provisional Government gave him, and every other one after it. He had burst into tears with his first bite of pork, the only meat he'd ever had in his life, and

inhaled the noodles so fast he'd thrown up, unused to anything heavier than rice or the occasional vegetable he'd been given a few years after North's bad behaviour was gone. And even though it was embarrassing, he hadn't even really minded because it meant he got another bowl.

And then he'd cried because he was finally seeing noodles in person, and his brother wasn't there to rub it in that his arms really were noodly.

But he'd still been so thrilled to finally have good food. He still was. He wanted the provinces to be, too. Yes, people were still starving. He knew that North Chungcheong was right, and that if he went up the crooked row of simple houses and knocked on the doors, he'd probably be able to find someone who hadn't eaten in a few days, maybe even a week like he'd claimed.

But why did that mean *they* should have to starve, too? If they had food, shouldn't they eat? It wasn't like depriving themselves filled anyone else's stomach. No one here could afford the type of food South got anyway. The ones that could were the ones that already had enough.

The provinces should be happy he was willing to share the money the government gave him, and the supplies America sent, and that he was willing to keep *trying*. He had every right not to when they'd been so ungrateful on his birthday, and on Liberation Day, too. They should be happy they got to eat rich food and drink expensive wine and listen to exotic music and dance. South Chungcheong should be happy that she'd got to sing for everyone, and that they loved her. She should be thrilled that people always asked him when she would be performing next, and that there were so many guys that told him they'd been disappointed she hadn't joined him on stage on Liberation Day.

But when he'd gathered the courage to pass on their compliments yesterday, she had just stared at the floor, then blankly asked if that was all.

He didn't get it. He *loved* performing for everyone. The look in their eyes as they were fixed on the stage, focused on him and no

one else, and the way they clapped and cheered after was even better than when America would have him put on little shows for his old girlfriend. All the wealthiest, most powerful people in Busan, and even foreigners, all cheering for him, *looking* at *him.* Buying him drinks after and actually wanting to talk to him, to tell him he'd done a good job, and that they couldn't wait to hear him again with bright smiles.

He'd like to see North do *that.* He might be able to whip a crowd into mania the way he had on the radio, convincing them that dying was a good thing, but South could make people *happy.* And his brother was a terrible singer.

It had felt amazing, right up until he realized that the provinces were all staring at him with wide-open, bloodshot eyes, and that South Chungcheong was gone.

They had been the center of attention, they'd had the entire room fixated on them, receiving nothing but praise from the crowd, especially her, even though she wasn't actually that good at singing. And yet when she came back into the room, she had looked at him like she wanted to disintegrate him.

'If you do this, then you will ***never*** *be my Korea.'*

She had said it so seriously, her eyes trying to spear his soul, like she had never meant anything more. He'd been taking her to have a good time, and she'd been acting like he was walking her to the gallows. And after, when he had hurried back to the table, the others had all glared at him the way Hwanghae had, like he was supposed to know their bodies would take the Command so literally, or like they even cared what happened to South Chungcheong.

He had just wanted to take them out to have a good night, *one good night* in the middle of this stupid war their precious North had started, and it had just made them hate him more, like everything did. Couldn't they see he was trying? Couldn't they see he just wanted them to get to know him so it wouldn't be so hard when him and North became Korea? He just wanted them to like him, to finally be a family, the way they were supposed to.

'You believe setting us around a table and making us eat your foreign food will make us a family. It does not.'

It *did.* They *were* a family. He was Korea and they were Korea's provinces.

*'You aren't **our** Korea.'*

Gangwon had been so nervous the entire night, from the moment the got in the car, avoiding his eyes and chewing his nails down to the bloody quick, being as obedient and quiet as Jeju. But he'd still said something like that, forcing it out through his stutter and the Commands trying to stop him, because that was how much he hated South, how much their brothers had infected him during his time in the north.

South apparently couldn't even whip someone right.

They just didn't get it. He didn't want to replace North, he wanted to *become* him, and he wanted his brother to become him. They would be better that way- North would finally be able to have fun, to stop starving himself of it and everything else, and stop encouraging the provinces to, and- and South would know how to get along with them, to be confident, able to get them in line with a single word, make them behave without Commands.

He wasn't like Joseon, he didn't want to use them as concubines or send them off to the far corners of the country to only see them once a year for taxes. And he wasn't like North, treating them as nothing more than soldiers or- or tools. He just wanted a family. He wanted a *home.*

Warmth stung his eyes, little beads of it that burned in the crisp air, and he quickly wiped his arm across them.

'Dammit.' That kept happening, even when he felt fine. He'd have a great night, sing lots of songs, talk to lots of people, go back to the house stuffed with food and music and praise, and the tears would just start coming. He'd been blaming it on the alcohol, but he was far, far too sober now.

The ones he dashed away were just replaced by more liquid from his eternal well. He couldn't wipe them fast enough, and he could feel the pressure of a sob creeping up his throat. He knew he was too far away from the manor to make it before it broke free.

"Hey." He turned to his guards.

Ku Cheol-moo and Seok Ki-cheol had disappeared at some point, probably scouting ahead or something. Smith and Wesson's jewel-coloured eyes watched him impassively, watching always *watching.*

He tried to sound casual, but it came out way too choked as he asked, "Do you think I... could have a minute alone?"

He knew it was useless, but he didn't want to break down in front of them. He'd been doing so *good,* and he didn't want them to see him lose it again, to hear the whispers outside his door at night and have to wonder if they were talking about him, mocking him, saying he was a pathetic loser, that he wasn't man enough to deal with this, that he was still the same useless kid he'd always been and America shouldn't have left him alone. He already had their eyes on him almost every minute of every day, why did they have to be filled with silent disdain, too, judging him just like those windows?

He trembled, eyes burning, throat constricting around that sob, knowing he was about to burst into tears in front of some of the people he hated to most.

But then, amazingly, Smith and Wesson exchanged looks, and the former said, "Of course."

South blinked, his tears shocked back for a second. "...You mean it?"

Wesson gave him an unimpressed look from under his brows, and he flushed.

"I mean, yeah, obviously. Thank you." He didn't catch it in time. "So, I'm just going to... be over here?"

He took a hesitant step towards a nearby alley, looking back at

them. They didn't move, and even though he waited for the other two to rush out of wherever they were and tell him it wasn't smart, they didn't.

He felt a tentative flicker of hope. Maybe now that America trusted him enough to leave him alone, he could get some time to himself, once and awhile.

And that would prove his guards were for his own safety and comfort, not just protecting his pal's investment.

"I won't go anywhere," he promised, before he ducked inside the alley.

It wasn't really a proper one, more of a small corridor between two leaning houses, two narrow for him to spread his arms out all the way between the cracked clay walls. But it let him put some distance between him and the men as he went most of the way down it, giving him some privacy.

South let out a shaky breath, a weight lifting off his shoulders at being out from under their eyes, even if the one inside him only got heavier by the second. He slumped to the ground under it, just remembering to put the cloak under him before he did. Then he hung his head between his knees, burying his face in his hands, and let the tears flow.

God, he was so pathetic. And so *lonely*.

Even going to the club almost every night, finally getting to chat with people, wasn't enough. It should be, but it wasn't, and he didn't know why. All the military officers, politicians, diplomats, and their wives were so nice to him, saying his singing voice was amazing, and he was so cute, and he was doing a good job fighting North (even if he wasn't really). Praising him and flirting with him and talking to him about things normal people talked about.

But they never asked him how he was doing, or if he was eating enough. And they never looked him in the eye.

Kangwon had. South Chungcheong had used to, even if it seemed

like he'd got his wish that she wouldn't anymore.

Kim Ok-ju had.

South's nails dug into the edges of his face.

He shouldn't call her by her name. He bet she'd only called him by that one because she wanted something from him, just like that woman he'd disarmed in Pyongyang a lifetime ago.

*'Please! **Korea!**'*

He wasn't her Korea. North was. He'd heard it in her voice when she said his name, the way her lips hugged the vowels, and in the 'dongji' she tacked on, spoken so much more reverently than the 'nim' she used for South. She was a Communist, and she deserved whatever was coming to her. So had Shin Du-su, and whoever Kim Chong-won managed to get out of her. They all did.

So why did he still have to feel bad about it? Why could he still hear the desperation in her voice, see the betrayal in her eyes, even if he hadn't looked? Why did she sound like his brother had looked that night in the woods, even if all his voice had held was stunned fury?

*'What the **fuck,** South?'*

He wondered if she had thought he was a good person, before the police burst in. If any of the provinces ever would, if they knew about this, and everything else. And after what he'd done to Gangwon. If... If anyone would.

'I really don't think you're a bad person. But there's only so many bad choices you can make before that becomes who you are.'

He missed America. Even knowing he was selfish and cruel and domineering and- everything else. He was still his only friend, the only one that would tell him he'd had to do this, that it was for the best. He would have him smiling again with a few words, and he'd feel stupid for ever feeling bad at all, he knew it.

And he'd call him low or a chop or some other weird American

slang for crying over someone who wouldn't cry over him.

He still missed him. He got that he should be happy that he was gone, that it got him farther away from Gangwon and what he knew about Red China, and meant he trusted him enough to leave. But why couldn't someone trust him enough to *stay?*

He wanted North, but he couldn't even wish he was here anymore. He hadn't been able to for awhile. He couldn't tell himself he would hold him and tell him everything would be okay the way he'd used to. He had taken another step over the line, and knew he would look at him the way that woman had, echoing her the way she echoed him. He might do worse.

It didn't stop him from reaching into the empty space inside of him and grabbing that cord in his hand, holding it tight.

It had pulled on Liberation Day, hard enough that it felt like something inside of him was in danger of being torn out of his chest, almost making him spill his drink on the Minister of Something-or-other that was congratulating him on Rhee's victory in the election, and it had happened again a few times since. But not for a few days.

He had almost wanted to pull back, he had, just because it was their day. But...

He didn't want North to misunderstand. He didn't want him to think he was asking him to come here or calling for him to save him. *He* was the one that needed saving, not South. He didn't want anything from his brother, other than for him to just *give up already.* And then to hold him, to forgive him, to Reunify with him. To *understand.*

More than anything, he still just wanted to hug him again, one last time, before they stopped being them.

But with every passing day, his hope for that faded. He knew North. If he had to give up, it was just going to make him even more stubborn where he could be. Especially if he knew about tonight, or if the provinces got to him.

Or America with those recordings.

Even when he was forced to give up the fight, he would fight *South* until the last. And the idea of that, that not only would he be on his own after, but that he wouldn't even be able to get one last embrace from his brother, even one he was fighting to escape...

He couldn't help the low sob that left him, tears pattering down into the shadows between his legs.

"Are you alright, mister?"

South yelped, fear shooting through him as he jolted sideways, bumping into the wall. His heart thundered wildly, prepared to be attacked by a Communist, someone who had seen what he'd done to Kim Ok-ju and came to-

But it was just a kid.

A little girl crouched in the alley a few feet away, barely visible in the dim moonlight that made it into the small space. She must have approached from the other end, and he just hadn't heard her over his wallowing.

*'Jeez, good thing she **wasn't** a commie.'* Or else *he'd* probably be red right about now. Like his throat, because...

Yeah, he wasn't going to use that one in the club.

"Hello?" the girl prompted. "Are you okay?"

South glanced at the mouth of the alleyway, waiting to see his guards come rushing in. But he guessed they hadn't heard him. He could hear the distant murmur of voices, Seok Ki-cheol's and a deep one he didn't recognize, probably a police officer who was wondering what they were doing out here, or something.

He really hoped they didn't tell him it was because their Countryhuman was over here crying in an alleyway.

"Uh, yeah," he said, his still-racing pulse bringing the stupid stutter back. "It's just kinda... been a long day."

It wasn't like he'd actually done anything but wait in the house for tonight, his nerves driving him up the walls. But he'd been doing a lot of pacing to try and forget how badly he needed a drink. Combined with the constant pain and hunger he felt from the stupid sympathetic reactions his body had, that was more than enough to exhaust him.

"Ohhhh." The girl nodded sagely. "There *are* twenty-four hours in a day. That's a whole lotta hours."

"Y-Yeah." South looked around, realizing that a creepy dark alley at midnight probably wasn't a normal place to find a very young girl. "What are you doing out here?"

"Huntin'," she chirped happily.

That was... kind of a scary answer. South nervously looked at her hands, wondering if she was a Red after all. But he didn't see any weapons in the tiny palms pressed flat to the ground. And she was small enough even he could probably take her in a fight. *Definitely* take her in a fight.

Not that he was thinking about beating up a kid. Just that he could. If he had to.

He squinted at the girl, trying to see her better in the dark. She was tiny and scruffy, with one of those hideous mushroom cuts that he really couldn't understand why mothers gave their daughters, but grown out past her ears. It was messy, like she hadn't brushed it today, or maybe in awhile. And the short kids' hanbok she was in looked like it had seen better days. The skirt draped over her knees, which were bowed out like a frog's, looked a little tattered, and he thought her jeogori didn't just appear grey because it was dark out.

"You looked real sad, mister," she said before he could say anything, sidling up to him with a little hopping motion. "What were you crying about?"

It looked like a couple of her baby teeth had fallen out, which made her voice come out even lispier than North Gyeongsang's. It was kind of cute, but it also reinforced to South that he had just

been caught weeping in a back alley by a girl who probably didn't even know her Hanja yet. Or maybe even her Han'gul.

That wasn't embarrassing at all. Nope! And kids were famously known for being *great* secret keepers.

'Awesome.'

"I just..." South obviously couldn't tell her the real reason. "My friend left, and I... really miss him."

The girl blinked curiously. "Did he die?"

"No." Even if sometimes... "He just... left. And I wish he would come back." South slumped back onto the cloak. "Even if I shouldn't. I know he's the not greatest person, he's done some... bad things. He *believes* some bad things. But I still miss him. I wish he'd never left in the first place. And I don't..."

He hung his head between his knees again, ending in a mumble, "...Even know who I'm talking about."

He let out a shaky breath, feeling his throat swell shut.

'That's it, South- cry in front of the kid again, real cool.'

He rubbed a hand across his face, damp again, and finished dully, "I'm just upset."

Like usual, no matter how hard he tried.

"Would a blowjob make you feel better?"

South froze, not immediately comprehending what she'd said.

"Huh?" he said stupidly, looking up.

The girl blinked at him innocently. "Y'know- a blowjob." She opened her mouth and made a gesture with her little hand that made his stomach churn.

He knew what the English word meant. America had joked about

Grace giving him one before, and explained what it was when South asked (even though he had quickly realized he didn't actually want to know). He just couldn't reconcile that it had just came from a young girl that definitely *shouldn't* know what it meant.

He gaped at her, completely dumbstruck.

She pouted when he didn't answer. "C'mon, mister, don't be stingy. You're the Coun-try-hu-man, right? You can afford it. It's only, um..." She put a stubby finger to her lips, looking his suit up and down, then decided, "A thousand won. Or I'll take less if it's Yankee money, since it goes a li'l further."

She blinked her big, innocent eyes at him. "So do'ya want one?"

"Do I want-? *No I don't want a blowjob!"* South hissed, face red, looking around for someone more qualified to deal with this than him, which was literally *anyone*. "You're like, nine! Where are your parents?"

He reached for her instinctively, and she squeaked, hopping up and away.

"Not without paying!" she said, stomping her foot crossly.

"I said I don't want-"

But before he could finish, she was already taking off, back into the darkness of the alley.

"Hey, wait!" Without thinking, South jumped up, rushing after her.

He heard someone behind him, and only just had the presence of mind to shout, "I'm not running away, I'll be back!" before he had to focus all his attention on not faceplanting.

He chased the girl through narrow streets and alleys, weaving around trash heaps and startling awake the few people still sleeping outside while it was warm enough to, following her bobbing mushroom cut. He didn't know how long he ran for, but it couldn't have been too long because he was *not* fit enough for that.

She darted around a corner and he skidded around it with far less grace, almost smashing into a panel of wire fencing set between two houses. The girl was squirming through a small gap, tearing free just before he could catch her ankle. She scrambled up, not looking back as she kept running, stubby legs pumping.

"Wait!" South cried helplessly, falling to his knees like there was any chance of him fitting though the same hole. "I'm trying to help!"

She didn't answer, and in a few seconds, her footsteps faded into the night.

South frantically patted his pockets, finding the cash he'd had in the suit since the reinauguration party, tossing it through the hole. The coins scattered across the dirt, the crumpled bills tumbling alongside.

"I'm leaving money here for you!" he called, hoping she could still hear him, then slumped forward, forehead to his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

'Help.' And how was he supposed to do that? He didn't even know what he'd been planning on doing once he caught her. Adopt her? It wasn't like he knew how to take care of a kid. But maybe he could find someone else who would, or take her to an orphanage or- or *anything* that wasn't what she was doing.

*'Do you know what I witnessed this night as I walked the streets? An American soldier paying a **child** in a brothel to have sexual intercourse with him.'*

He'd thought South Chungcheong was being dramatic. Sixteen was one thing. It was still gross, but it was *better*. That girl had been an actual child. Who the fuck would actually-?

God, she really couldn't have been older than ten. She'd said that word so easily, and the shrewd look in her eyes as she set her price almost made him feel just as sick. Had she already...?

Did she really think he was the type of person that would say yes to that? Was that what people thought about him?

"Well, well, look who's out here slumming it with us beggars."

South jerked his head up at the deep voice, only to see a group of four men slinking out of the shadows, crowding around the mouth of the alley.

It wasn't his guards.

Immediately his pulse kicked up. The gang looked rough, their clothes worn and hair tangled like the girl's, but their bodies far more muscled. He knew from one look that he could *not* take them in a fight.

He also realized that he didn't know where he was. He'd only been paying attention to the girl in front of him, and hadn't even realized he'd ended up out on the fringes of the city, where the poor hanok transitioned to those shantytown huts, and the stench of livestock and poverty was even stronger.

"What's wrong?" the same man sneered, looming in the mouth of the alley, blocking his escape. "Cat bite your tongue?"

South swallowed, slowly standing up, trying not to appear too nervous, even though he very much was.

"Hey," he said casually. "Nope. I'm just out for a stroll."

"A stroll?" one of the others asked, looking around. He sounded out of breath, like he'd been running, too. "Like anyone *wants* to be out here."

"Yeah." South chuckled, hands clenching in his pockets. "I actually don't really want to be. I got a little lost. So if you don't mind..."

He sidled forward a little, the kind of pointed movement most people would have moved aside for.

The men didn't budge.

"Not so fast," the deep-voiced one, a guy with a dingy workshirt and a kerchief around his forehead, said, and South stopped, not wanting to get closer.

"I think since you came onto our turf, you should pay a toll, don't you?" the man asked.

"Yeah," another one, a burly guy that could probably crush South with one hand, agreed. "I mean, you don't gots to be here. We have no choice. It's only fair to pay up."

"Are you...?" South blinked. "Are you trying to rob me?"

"It doesn't have to be a robbery," the lead man said. "It can just be a toll. But if you don't want to pay..."

He pulled something from his pocket. Something that's sharp edge gleamed in the dim moonlight.

"It can easily *become* a robbery."

South's breath hitched.

He was lost, with no sign of his guards, and surrounded by four crazy people. Of course this would happen to him.

He tried to channel North, putting his shoulders back and straightening up, attempting to sound authoritative as he said, "You do realize who I am, right? You're seriously going to try stealing from your Countryhuman?"

But of course, if he was more like North, a lot of things would be different. The men didn't flinch.

"Who else has the riches to steal from nowadays?" the out-of-breath man said. He was twisting his sleeve at the cuff almost nervously as he looked around. "No point in stealing from anyone around here."

Dammit.

"I don't have any money," South tried, making the burly man snort.

"Right. You're tossing it around like chicken feed, but you're just as hard off as us in your leather shoes."

South glanced down at his dress shoes, then back at the money he'd scattered in the dirt. "That was all I had. You can keep it, but I r-really don't have anything else."

Sorry to that little girl, but he was the one that needed help now.

The fourth man finally spoke up, his eyes narrowed. "Typical fucking richie. More money than this entire neighborhood combined, but you act like you can't spare a single coin."

"I-I don't really-"

"You come down here into the fucking slums you and your goddamn pals put us in and act like it's a fucking sightseeing trip," the man growled, pushing past his buddies. "Then you go home to your mansions and pheasant. Well guess what- *we* can't fucking leave."

South cringed away, but the lead man dragged him back before he could reach him.

"That wasn't the deal, Kang," he muttered.

Kang bared his teeth at South, looking too much like his brother for his comfort, even with his dark complexion and square jaw.

"You do have something," the main man said. His gaze returned to South, giving him a calculating once-over like the girl had, but in a way that made him far more uncomfortable.

"Your clothes."

Fear trickled through South's insides like ice water as he suddenly remembered thrashing in that Japanese guard's grip, hot breath in his 'ear.'

'Now let's see how pretty you sing when we're alone.'

Please please please don't let that be where this was going, *please.*

"M-My clothes?" he stammered, dropping any attempt to pretend he wasn't afraid as he shrank back, arms wrapped around his chest.

"That fancy foreign suit costs more than most people would see in a year." The man jerked his chin at it. "And I haven't worn a pair of real shoes in months."

South's eyes flicked down to their feet. They all had cheap straw sandals on, except the angry man, who only had greased rags wrapped around them.

"Take them off."

He swallowed. "C-Can I not? I have more shoes at home, I could- I could take you there and give you all a pair."

"You have enough shoes to give away," the angry man growled. "And my family doesn't have even a single pair. Does that seem fair to you?"

It did, because most of them had been gifts, or bought on lent money. But he was smart enough to realize the man wouldn't like that answer.

"No," he said hurriedly. "And I'm sorry, but I don't really have anything to do with that."

"You don't have anything to do with it? You're in charge of the damn country!"

The burly man stopped him before he could go at him again, levering his own glare at South.

"Strip, boy."

South stood in place, shaking, highly aware of how trapped he was. He knew he couldn't make it past the four when even the short run had tired him out, and screaming in a neighbourhood like this could just draw out more people like them, if anyone came at all. He could try and cram himself through the wire fence, but it had been a tight fit for the girl, let alone a grown man. He knew they would catch him and drag him out. And when he thought about being on his stomach, back to them and trapped-

His chest tightened to the point he couldn't breath, his ribs

creaking as he hugged himself tighter, wishing he could just crush himself into nothing.

"Take them off," the leader ordered in a low voice. "Or I will."

They were looking at him, but it didn't flush him with pleasure like it did when he was on stage. It just made him feel small and weak again, as he was forced to remember what it was like to be vulnerable.

An embarrassing whimper came from South's throat as he gave in, unbuttoning his suit jacket with shaking hands, sliding it over his shoulders and leaving him in his collared undershirt. He felt too cold and too hot, sweat soaking his underarms and neck, and shivers wracking his body as he held the black fabric out.

The nervous man snatched it, his own grimy hands quivering as he looked over his shoulder.

Where were his fucking *guards?* Wasn't this what they were for, stopping him for getting mugged and probably humiliating their entire nation while he was at it? They could stalk him every single moment of every single day but they couldn't even keep pace with him when he ran off the *one time* he needed them?

This was what he got for being a crybaby loser that couldn't just man up and go home. That woman had been a commie trying to trick him with his brother's lies, she deserved to be arrested, she deserved to *die.* But his stupid guilt that he shouldn't have been feeling had gotten him into this situation. And he was still too much of a weakling to get out of it.

North would. He'd killed over four hundred people in Seoul, practically on his own. He would turn these guys into bloody mist, for once something South wished he could do, too.

Who did they think they were? Just because they were poor, they thought they deserved his clothes? These had been gifts, and even if they hadn't been it wasn't *his* fault they couldn't afford them. Maybe if they worked overtime instead of prowling the streets looking for people to mug, they could.

South kicked his shoes off more aggressively than he needed, nails digging into his arms.

"Pants and belt, too," the burly man ordered, and his anger tempered with fear again.

"No," he said, still feeling defiant, and not wanting to be left in his underwear. "These are mine."

"Enough shoes to hand over four pairs, but only one pair of pants?" the angry one scoffed. "Right. Fucking drop 'em."

"I'm not giving you my pants," South insisted, even though the words had to fight to make it out.

Kang's eyes flashed. "You have everything in the fucking world, but giving away even *one* thing is too much for you. My sons are sleeping on the streets in fucking rags on empty stomachs while you waltz around in a Yankee suit that could feed them for months! *Take off the fucking pants, Korea."*

South's jaw clenched. To only be called that now, when he was being ordered to strip in a dingy alley in a slum-

"No."

Kang's face darkened, and he pulled his own blade from his pocket, longer and sharper than the first. "Then I'll cut you out of them."

"The deal-" his buddy tried.

"Fuck the deal!" Kang snarled, and lunged.

It was a familiar feeling, though one South hadn't experienced for years. But the old reaction came back like it had only been minutes. Under the threat of the large man barreling down on him, nowhere to go, he froze, small and afraid, and cried out a name.

'WHAM!'

Kang's body jerked sideways like he'd been shot with a cannon, his

head slamming into the wall with an even worse sound than Kim Ok-ju's had made. Hope and fear surged within South, mingling together in an ecstatic, sickening cocktail, before he realized it was just his guards.

Ku Cheol-moo had bodyslammed the guy with full force, leaving him sprawled on the ground, unmoving, and Smith and Wesson moved in, guns drawn. South could hear Seok Ki-cheol on the street, ordering someone to go back inside.

"Stand down," the Korean guard barked, rubbing his shoulder.

The leader was staring at Kang with wide eyes, face pale. "You killed him."

"Stand down."

"You sai-"

"Now!" Ku Cheol-moo snarled, and the three beggars turned and ran, leaving South's clothes behind.

"Mr. Korea." Smith turned his gaze on him. "Are you alright?"

His green eyes were no warmer than usual, but for once the sight of them flooded South with relief. He couldn't help but reach out, clutching at his sleeve, tears in his eyes.

"I want to go home," he begged, and again as his hand was pried off. "I want to go *home."*

"Get dressed," Smith ordered. "We'll get you back to the manor."

That wasn't home. But it was the only place he had to go.

South couldn't look at Kang as he shakily put his dust-streaked clothes back on and shuffled out of the alley, fighting the urge to cling to the nearest uniform, keeping his hands trapped in his pockets instead. He couldn't look at the wide-open, vacant eyes above the twisted mouth, crooked teeth still bared even in death, or the hateful expression, like he was angry he had died before he could make sure South did, too.

It was far too familiar.

(And Dig Your Grave)

I didn't include the little girl for shock value, but because there are American anecdotes about the war where they talk about how prostitution was rife in Busan, and one specifically mentions a nine-year-old or so girl that he saw offering blowjobs. I'm using it to show explicitly just what happens when a government doesn't care about the masses, and the sheer level of the sexual violence Korean girls and women faced from American soldiers. These orphans grew up with no education or support, and had to do whatever they could to survive the war. And once it was over, with the Rhee government's lack of programs that would be considered 'Socialist,' like free education, housing, or healthcare, or the right to employment, they were left with no other option than to do the only thing they knew how to- service foreign soldiers. It's how tens of thousands of South Korean women ended up being raped and abused in the camptowns around American military bases afterwards, or essentially sex trafficked, marrying those soldiers so they could move to America. And many of the orphans that *didn't* fall through the cracks and have to resort to prostitution still ended up shipped out to foreign countries, sold to wealthy couples so they could feel like they were saving a 'poor heathen child,' cut off from their culture and taught to hate the people that had been fighting for their country's freedom.

This is about South's throwaway 'a hundred or so civilians were killed' comment. You might have heard of this as part of the larger Geochang Massacre.
In February 1951, a township called Sinwon in South Gyeongsang was suspected of supplying guerrillas in the South. Kim Chong-won had six hundred villagers rounded up at the local elementary school, performed screening to weed out friends and relatives of soldiers, then shot the rest, including children. One young boy that survived the firing squad reports

that he had to help burn his mother's body before he was allowed to flee. They were buried in an unmarked grave, and the Southern government refused to acknowledge it. It was a direct operational order to deprive the Communist guerrillas of 'resources,' and that included people who could come to support them.

When an opposing assemblyman called for an investigation (privately, so it wouldn't be heard about overseas), they threw him in jail, and when an investigation team went to the town to investigate in April, they were ambushed by 'Communists,' according to Kim Chong-won. For their reputation, the Southern army was forced to court-martial him in December 1951, once the case got more attention. While it was proven that the 'Communists' were actually Kim Chong-won's men, and the government had to admit that around 180 civilians had been murdered by them as well, the assemblyman said the real number was up to the seven hundreds, with hundreds being fifteen or younger. The trial also only focused on this one specific part of Geochang County, not the other locations where massacres happened. And while several deputy ministers were forced to resign once it went international, the division commander that oversaw the massacre wasn't punished at all, and Kim Chong-won faced no real punishment. He was given only three years in prison, and granted amnesty by Rhee and released in less than a year, along with the others, and reinstated as a police officer (in this story, he was pardoned completely because America pulled strings, as he didn't want South seeing Mr. Totally-Didn't-Oversee-The-Massacre-of-Prisoners get jailed for overseeing the massacre of civilians, since back in 1951, that could still shake his loyalty). Though he wasn't at Panmunjom in real life, he did go on to become the national chief of police, and was a key part in Rhee's dictatorship.

Even after the war, villagers from Sinwon couldn't visit their families' graves for fear of being labelled Communists. They were also blocked from holding political positions as relatives of 'Reds.' After Rhee's fall from power, they finally went to set up gravestones. And then they confronted the town's wealthiest man, as he'd been the township representative at the time of the massacre, and was present for it. He was a Rhee

informant who had sold out his own neighbours to die. When they tried to force an apology, he attempted to flee, so they burned him alive. The central government was furious to hear about this, as those from Rhee's liberal bloc that had kept their positions were afraid that they too would be made to pay for their crimes. But the police they sent to crush the Sinwon villagers were driven off. The civilians couldn't stand against them forever, so after a week they surrendered, but all took responsibility for the execution, demanding that either none of them were punished or all of them would be. And to avoid another scandal, none of them were, and an investigation was promised. The survivors formed a Bereaved Families Association to demand it , and get recompense. But soon after, Pak Chung-hee's administration arrested many of them for being 'anti-state.' They also destroyed the memorial the villagers had erected. For thirty more years they had to keep completely silent. It wasn't until 1996 that the names of all the victims they could identify were published. It wasn't decided that they could receive financial compensation until 2022. And it was only decided that they *could*.

This was only one of the townships during the Geochang Massacre, and doesn't even count Hamyang or Sancheong County, and all of the townships there.

Dog Eat Dog

South burst into the house, not even stopping to take his shoes off as he careened down the hall, past the kitchen. As badly as wanted a drink, he wanted something, *needed* it more.

He burst into the office, lurching for the telephone America had installed for him before he left. He tripped over his unsteady feet, and would've hit the ground if the desk hadn't been there. He went sprawling across it, the sob that had been building in his throat the entire way here finally tearing free as he fumbled for the handset in the dark. His fingers closed around the smooth plastic, and he gasped in relief, jamming his finger into the rotary dial, trying to remember the turns he needed as he spun it blindly, the number he'd memorized burning inside him.

He cried out half in frustration and half in another sob as he screwed it up like he screwed everything up, and had to restart. When he finally got it, he slammed the receiver to his 'ear,' hearing the click as the operator automatically connected him to the one number this phone was for, and the hollow dial tone *ring, ring, ring.*

"Come on," he begged, eyes burning. *"Please* pick up."

He had to. He had to because if he didn't, South didn't know if he could keep himself from pulling on that cord, no matter what North thought it meant. He wasn't strong enough not to, and he knew he wasn't because even after everything, as that man had closed in, his first instinct had been to cry out, not for his guards or America, but for his brother.

'Ring ring ring.'

If North had heard him, would he have came? Would he have protected him? Or would he have agreed with that angry man that looked and sounded so much like him, that he deserved to be punished for having more shoes than he could wear while others had none?

'He said you were kind.' Would he still? Would he still think South was worthy of protection?

He shouldn't have to question it, he was his brother and he'd never had to question it in the shack, that North would always protect him, that he'd always take his punishments for him and give him his meals and watch out for him while he slept, and he shouldn't have to now.

He hadn't *done* anything. That commie had deserved to be punished, just like Gangwon did, that guy in Seodaemun had to die for North to live, Seoul had to burn, his brother had needed a warning to stop sending his guerrillas across the Parallel, and he'd just wanted South Chungcheong to *smile.* He hadn't done anything except for what was necessary, what he had to do to survive, for *them* to survive.

'Ring ring ring.'

North shouldn't hate him, he *couldn't.* He was his *brother.* But all those sights and sounds crowded his mind, trying to convince him he was wrong, voices speaking over each other, overlapping until his head was filled with a raucous clamour and he felt like he was going to scream.

Whispered, broken screams, the lash of a whip, then closer, vibrating up his own arm, choking cries, hateful eyes; 'Take care of my brother.'; 'If you do this, you will ***never*** *be my Korea,' 'You and Japan are on the same side,'; 'I'm up for anything,'; rats in cages; 'Orders, sir?'; 'Kill them;' Gyeonggi's screams ringing off the walls, smoke and charred meat thick in the air; slurring, whisky on his tongue and buzzing in his brain, the words falling out, 'I know something that'll teach him his lesson,' blood on the knife, on his hands, on his brother, enough blood to drown them both and it wouldn't come* ***off;*** *'I'm sorry!' 'If you were sorry, you wouldn't'a done it'; 'Burn it.'*

'Please! ***Korea!****'*

South's eyes squeezed shut, holding that cord tight in his heart. ***'Please.'***

'I really don't think you're a bad person. But there's only so many bad choices you can make before-'

The phone clicked, and that obnoxious voice he missed so much drawled, *"Yello?"*

For a moment, South couldn't speak. He wanted to cry, wanted to beg America to come back, to not leave him alone like everyone else had, demand to know why he had when he'd promised he wouldn't.

But he knew he couldn't. He had to prove he could do this. And America couldn't come back. Stupid elections, stupid Grace, stupid China.

So instead he rasped, raw and desperate, "Am I a good person?"

America didn't question who was calling. Who else would call him at whatever hour it was there, tears in his voice?

"'Course you are Southie. Why wouldn't you be?"

"I-" He bowed his head under the onslaught of memories, crushing his face into the unforgiving surface of the desk. "I just feel like I mess everything up."

"Aw, c'mon, kid." He heard a creak as America sat down. *"You don't mess **everything** up. And everyone makes a few mistakes, even me, probably, once in a blue moon. You don't think I'm a bad person, do you?"*

South couldn't let himself hesitate before he answered, "No," the word falling flatly into the phone line between them.

"Exactly," his friend said, satisfied. *"You know I'm a great guy, and I think you're a good kid. So that means you are."*

He'd known he would say that, he had wanted to hear it so badly. But it didn't make him feel as good as he'd thought it would.

"You shouldn't beat yourself up with questions like that, Southie," America chided from across the sea, still with a slight twang. *"Do'ya*

think someone like North ever spins out over whether or not he's a good person?"

"No," South muttered.

With all the blood on his hands, he should. But he knew his brother didn't care about stuff like that. He never had.

'How did it feel?'

Eyes fixed on the blood on the stones, knuckles whitening even further around the windowsill, like he was already thinking about killing again. 'Good.'

South was the only one that did. He was the only one that had to be plagued with this stupid, terrible feeling that lodged inside him like a burr. He didn't feel guilty about Gangwon anymore, so why should he have felt guilty about a woman who the only thing he'd done to was offer her a place to sit, and let her spew her commie talk at him? *He* hadn't been the one to arrest her. He bet North wouldn't have even felt anything if she'd been a Rhee supporter that *he* killed. He didn't feel guilt, just like Japan.

South wondered if he'd ever even felt truly guilty for leaving him.

"Exactamundo. And I'd hope you know you're at least better than him."

He was. He'd thought it before, hadn't he? South had always been the good one, the one that didn't want them to get hurt, that didn't like killing or fighting, the one that hadn't started this war. He was the one that never would have left his brother, no matter what 'more important things' there were. He didn't *have* more important things.

"I know," he said quietly. "Do you... Do you ever worry about stuff like that?"

"Nope," America answered with confidence. *"'Cuz I know I am. And I know* ***you*** *are, Southie. I told you- you're one of the good ones."*

South nodded, forgetting he couldn't see him. "Yeah," he whispered, the reek of cigar smoke and blood in his 'nose.'

"What made you wanna call me up and ask that in the middle of the night to ask something like that?" his friend asked. *"It's gotta be what- oh-one hundred over there?"*

The Korean hesitated, then reluctantly told the other man about what had happened, from luring out Kim Ok-ju to being cornered by the men.

He fiddled anxiously with the telephone cord after.

He hadn't told America about what he had been asked to do, because he'd been hoping he could pull it off, then tell him about it casually the next day, like it was no big deal, and prove he really could be trusted to handle things.

*'Did a great job at **that,** didn't you, South?'*

'Die.'

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it," he blurted when America didn't respond right away. "I just-"

"It's hep, kid," his friend soothed. *"Your boys told me about the plan beforehand. I'm the one that gave the go-ahead."*

Of course. 'His' guards.

*"But I'm gonna be honest- I don't really see why any'a that would make you flip your lid about **you** being a bad person,"* he continued. *"Sounds like you did a great job with the commie broad, and you aren't the one going around making guys strip at knifepoint. And it's not like you took jailbait up on her offer."*

South had flushed at being praised for the... sting operation? Was that what Kim Chong-won had called it? But he winced at the last part.

He hadn't told his friend exactly what the little girl had offered. It made him too uncomfortable, and he didn't want to think about her, where she was now, or if there were more girls out there, doing what she was. If there were American soldiers paying for it. Or his. Rhee's.

"And it's not like she was being held in a brothel," his friend continued. *"There isn't anywhere for you to storm into all heroically and shut it down. She's making her own choices."*

*'Do you think that sixteen-year-old child **wants** to sell herself? Or do you think she **must?**'*

"The only thing you could'a done would be arrest her," America said. *"And I think she's better off on the streets than she is in a jail cell, don't you? At least she can get some clams for it out there."* He didn't wait for an answer. *"You tried to give her cash without expecting anything in return, which is probably more than any other fella would've given her. Well-"*

He cut himself off. *"Bad joke. Anywho, you did what you could. Hell, you even offered to hand out free shoes to the bastards mugging you. Even if that would'a been plum stupid, and way more than they deserved, it still proves you've got a good heart."*

Yeah, it did. He bet North wouldn't have been so nice. Even though he liked poor people, it wasn't like he'd accept them trying to rob him. He would've beat them up. And he bet America would have killed them.

And he had done everything he could for the girl. He'd even left the money in the dirt, just in case. She probably was selling herself because she 'must,' but that wasn't his fault. Private prostitution might be legal, but not for girls that young. There wasn't any law he could change to stop her because she clearly didn't care about the ones that already existed. And nothing like what South Chungcheong had claimed was happening to female commie POWs was happening to her. She was making her own choices, even if they were awful, even if she was only making them because she had to.

Sometimes that was just what you had to do to survive.

"If you ask me," America said in his 'ear.' *"The real bad guy here is poverty."*

"Yeah?" South mumbled, still with his forehead pressed to the

desk, like he could contain his thoughts that way.

"Yep." There was a thumping sound, and the Korean knew his friend well enough to now he was kicking his heels up on his desk. *"It makes folks do crazy things. Robbing your own Countryhuman?"* There was a disapproving headshake in his voice. *"Would never happen over here, let me tell ya that."*

It shouldn't have happened *here,* no matter how poor someone was. The punishments for committing a crime against a Countryhuman were even harsher than the normal ones. Since they still had the same penal code Japan had, harming South was considered high treason. Even if the one guy hadn't been spewing things that sounded suspiciously Red, even just attempting to steal from him could be punishable by execution.

He hadn't read the entire code because it was too long. But he'd read the parts that had to deal with him and North, back when he'd still had hope they could talk things out. He'd felt so safe reading that section, knowing that him and his brother would have that kind of protection, that for once the people that would be punished would be the ones hurting them.

He guessed he shouldn't really be surprised someone had broken it. It had never stopped Japan, after all.

"Lying, cheating, stealing, whoring, murder," America listed jovially. *"There's nothing people won't stoop to if they're desperate enough. And poverty, she's the great desperation-maker."*

'My sons are sleeping on the goddamn streets in fucking rags on empty stomachs!'

Yeah, that was what he'd seen in that guy's wild eyes, the same thing he'd seen in North's those last years as he threw himself at their guards, the determination eroding away like rock, replaced by that sharper, rawer thing- desperation.

"That's why Communism will never work," his friend said casually. *"North and Red China, and CCCP, even if all their big talk about peace and paradise and equality was true, it'll never happen. They want to*

create a world where everyone's a have-not. A world where everyone is like those men."

South shuddered, drawing closer to the desk, even though it pressed into his burnt stomach.

"But humans aren't wired for that," America told him.*"They're greedy, selfish, and when it comes down to it, they only care about themselves. You can't even blame 'em for it- it's just their nature."*

South didn't care if it was in their nature, he could and *would* blame them for trying to rob him.

"Even the hoity-toity commies that think they're better than that break when they're put to the line. When it comes to them or someone else, they'll always choose themselves." America asked, *"Wouldn't you?"*

He would, he guessed. Unless it came to North.

Then again... If they couldn't Reunify mutually, it *was* him or North, wasn't it? One of them would come out on top in Korea. And he couldn't let it be North.

But it wasn't like he was choosing himself over his brother. There wouldn't be any reason for South to exist without North. He just wanted Korea to be someone that could actually enjoy life, for both their sake's.

And it wasn't like North hadn't already chosen something over him. And it hadn't even been himself.

"Yeah," South said quietly. "I... would."

"See? If even a good guy like you would, anyone would," America said confidently. *"That's the problemo- the commies want a world where everyone's just as poor as them. And that'll lead to a world chock full'a people who are just as* ***savage*** *as them, willing to do whatever it takes to have just a little more than their neighbours."*

A world where you couldn't walk the streets without someone trying to shake you down for your money or steal the clothes off your back, or run into a kid offering blowjobs for food or jewellery

or whatever would become valuable once his brother eliminated money like he wanted to.

South knew North would never want a world like that, even if he'd be happy with cement blocs and gruel. But he also knew he had never been able to see that escaping the prison shack was hopeless. If he didn't want to see something, then he wouldn't.

"Humans are animals, South," his friend said, his voice dipping low. *"Money just gives them the opportunity to pretend they're not. To wear Balenciaga instead of pelts, and eat caviar instead of flesh. And if you take that away..."*

Then all you had was a world of beasts.

"That's why we're fighting to keep everybody capitalist." He lightened again, and there was a drumming, heels on a desk probably, shoes on, of course. *"We want everyone to be able to get rich and pretend they're better than monkeys. There'll always be one or two with sticky fingers, a'course, that's just the way humans are. But in a world of havers, there's a lot less uncivilized riff-raff."* He lost his twang for an exaggerated, slightly mocking British accent on the last words, then returned to it. *"Just look at your country versus mine."*

South could hear North's voice in his head, one of the thousand things he'd babbled about after Liberation, after he had asked why they didn't like capitalism (after asking what capitalism was), if it made people rich (one of the few things he'd absorbed from his explanation). South had known a few wealthy people from their country in China, and they were the only reason he never had to struggle for food or anything during the war.

He'd said something like, *'Because it **doesn't** make people rich- the labour of the masses does. It's impossible for everyone to be a capitalist- the only way they can accumulate capital is through the labour of others. And everyone else, the people that **do** the work, gets left behind.'*

His brother could believe the kind of drastic change Communism needed was possible, that the world could function without money or... whatever else Communism involved, that people would be perfectly happy to be poor and would all get along, but he couldn't

imagine that it was possible for everyone to get rich in the system countries like America already had working fine. South thought he just wanted to be right.

"In the future, the only folks that'll still be poor in Korea will be the ones that choose to be, 'cuz they're too lazy to work, just like over here. And, well-" There was an audible shrug in America's voice. *"They deserve it then I say, I say."*

"Yeah," South said, his thoughts about those men committing crimes when they could be working coming back. "They will."

"And when it comes to that Red dame-"

"I don't regret that," South said quickly. "She was a Communist. She deserved it, too."

She had only came looking for him, only looked him in the eyes, because she wanted him to do something for her. And she just proved America's point. In the end, as she was dragged away, she'd betrayed her morals, calling out for him to save her when her brother was the one she really saw as Korea.

Desperation made people vicious, willing to do anything, and poverty made people desperate. South could never agree with a system that reduced everyone to that, made them no better than animals. And anyone that did, whether they were dangerous or just dangerously stupid, had to be put down. He had accepted that part a long time ago.

A couple rats could empty out a granary in no time, and leave everyone to starve. The only solution was to shoot them dead.

"Then let me hear ya say it, kid."

Knowing the volume he wanted, South drew in a breath, then announced loudly to the empty office, empty house, "I'M A GOOD PERSON."

Ack. It was still a little embarrassing.

"That's'a boy," America praised. *"Then let's just hope they catch the*

guys what done that to ya."

"Mr. Smith said he has people looking for them," South muttered, warmth in his cheeks fading.

He almost hoped they didn't find them. What if they did, then they had to go to court or something, and he had to show up and recount the embarrassing story to a jury? The commie press would have a field day if they heard, and he could honestly see some people thinking it was so humiliating that they wished North was their Countryhuman instead. If they did catch them, he hoped they just shot them.

"And one of them died."

He'd asked what would happen with the man, worried that he might get blamed for it somehow. Ku Cheol-moo had just smirked.

'There's plenty more trash on the streets. No one cares when some gets cleaned up.'

"Don't feel too bad, kid," America said flippantly. *"Some people just don't know how to show a little restraint. You reap what you sow and whatnot."*

He had felt a little bad, since the guy had said he had kids at home. Well, 'home.' But if he hadn't wanted to make them fatherless, then maybe he shouldn't have been going around threatening people with knives. Hopefully they at least still had a mother. And that she was smarter than her husband.

"For what it's worth- and that's a whole lot- I think you did good tonight." The words made South heat up. *"A little embarrassing you had to put on half a striptease, but hey- you win some, you lose some. And at least you won the commie. Not too shabby for your first special op."*

It wasn't, was it? He *had* succeeded.

'Please-!'

And it was good that he had.

South straightened slightly smugly, still leaning over the desk.

"And the little snags after, well, they wouldn't be happening if North hadn't started this war."

South sobered, eyes downcasting in the dark.

"Your going-away present didn't work."

He flinched, realizing that could sound like he was blaming America. But his friend sounded unbothered as he said, *"I think we both had an inkling it wasn't gonna."*

Yeah. Just like he had known bombing the Supung Dam again wouldn't, after he'd heard about it last week. And sure enough, the Reds still hadn't surrendered, only pushed harder for America's negotiators to stop taking recesses.

And China was still here.

"But don't worry, kid- winter's coming. And according to you, that sets our chances of getting a surrender up by at least ten percent."

South didn't know about percentages. All he knew was that if his brother was going to give up, he wouldn't be doing it in summer. He only had in the past because the season had been drawing to a close, fall threatening to start creeping through the cracks in the shack again. And he knew that now only the dark cold of winter could force a surrender.

His nails scratched against the desktop. He swallowed, breathing in deep, then silently exhaled.

"You'll have to do something big."

He didn't need plausible deniability. This was war. They were only talking about things they needed to.

Even if North might think differently.

"Don't you worry your spherical little cranium about that," America assured him, his smirk leeching across the wires. *"I've got something*

planned for next week, a little b-day present for Red China. And if that doesn't work, well..." He laughed, low and gleeful. *"Let's just say they'll both regret being so stubborn*."

South's stomach churned uneasily. His tongue felt like sandpaper, parched and cracked.

"Good," he said, the word coming out almost as confident as he'd wanted. "Thanks."

"Anything for you, Southie."

South's grip relaxed on the phone, tendons aching from clutching it so tight for so long.

America hadn't forgotten about him, he wasn't losing interest. Distance hadn't made him stop caring for him, even if his care was... the way it was.

He hadn't abandoned him. That was what mattered.

He wasn't his brother.

There was a sound in the background, another voice saying something in a similar twang to America's.

"Yeah, babe, be right there," his friend said, muffled, then clear again. *"I've gotta go, kid."*

"Yeah, no problem. Thanks for picking up." South rubbed his arm. "It really... means a lot."

"I told you you could always call. Oh and by the way, next time I'm there, remind me to teach you how to shoot."

"Sh-Shoot?" South stammered, squeezing the phone again.

"Yeah, a man needs to know how to use a firearm. It might stop you from getting caught up in any more jams like tonight, too."

North had tried to teach him how to use a gun, briefly. But every time South had tried to hold the sleek, deadly pistol...

Eyes wide and terrified as they looked up at him. 'Please don't.'

'BANG.'

His brother had seen it. He had known why he shook so badly, even if he didn't say anything. He said South could learn later, and he would protect him until then.

And then he'd left again, leaving him defenseless. Just like back then.

But he knew America wouldn't accept waiting. If he wanted him to learn to shoot, he would be learning to shoot.

"Yeah," he said, hoping his friend could hear the smile he tried to put in his voice. "Looking forward to it."

He guessed it could be useful. Even if he planned on never going anywhere except the nightclub until the war was over. And if he did, his guards would be coming with him. Alone time wasn't worth getting mugged for, or worse.

"Do you know when it will be?" He tried to sound casual, but America saw right through him.

"Getting lonely?" he asked knowingly.

South flushed in shame. "No," he said, unconvincingly.

His friend chuckled. *"It's fine, kid. I'd miss me, too. Hell, I'd be offended if ya didn't."*

"Rhee's been elected," he said hopefully, trying not to sound like he was whining. "It's been more than ten to fifteen business days."

"Yeah, but my elections aren't over," America said regretfully. *"I'm nonexistent-ears-deep in politicking here, kid. Trust me, I'd love a vacay, but I'm booked up 'til November 4th. And then a few more weeks to get things in order with the new guy."*

"Who's going to win?" South asked hesitantly.

"Asking for insider trading, Southie?" he teased. *"I'm sorry to say, but since I don't have your Rhee over here, I won't know who's gonna come out on top until they do."*

South laughed, throttling the phone. "Yeah, I guess that's true."

"But you heard MacArthur is out?"

"Oh, really?"

"Yep, around the same time I left your place." America clicked his tongue. *"Didn't do so well at the Republican National Convention. Old hoss came almost dead last for nominations. His speech wasn't too popular."*

South remembered the droning, too-long speech in Seoul, as black smoke eddied in the skies, and gunshots echoed over the city.

Yeah, he could believe that.

"But hey, what can ya do?" America asked, sighing. *"Dougie's a uniform at heart, not a suit. Ike'll be more comfortable in office."*

South didn't know if he should be relieved or not. MacArthur had made him uneasy right up until the last, and the idea of him in charge of America's atom bombs was... scary. He didn't exactly want a nuclear belt dividing the country in half even more. Or the damage that would come once they were Reunified. And he *definitely* didn't want America going to war with China until this war was over and Korea was one.

But at least he knew MacArthur would keep fighting.

He was tired, he should just go drink until he could blackout and rest. But instead he said, "They're- My politicians are saying... some of your candidates are saying they're going to end the war here."

He bit his lip, heart pounding.

"They will," America said, making it stop. *"And that's a good thing, isn't it, Southie? We're the ones that want peace. It's the Reds dragging this out by being stubborn."*

South paused, then relaxed.

"Yeah," he said. "Right."

"I'll be by in December, around Christmas, if they still are," America moved on. *"Little sooner if my next present shows quick results."* His tone grew more serious. *"But South, if it doesn't, no matter who takes office, I promise we will end this war. I* ***will*** *bring peace to Korea."*

Peace, when it was time for peace.

And it would only be time when North was on his knees.

"I know," he assured. "I trust you."

He trusted that he would never let Korea go.

"And I trust you, kid." His pal's tone returned to normal. *"By the by, you having any luck with those provinces of yours?"*

"Yeah," South said. "They're coming along great."

They would, someday. The Gyeongsangs and Gyeonggi might be trying to get to him when they came to the club with him, but he could try and get to them, too. And South Chungcheong hadn't glared at him on Liberation Day, or even when Rhee got sworn in again. She'd just kept her eyes down. She had said he would never be her Korea, but he would be. Just like him, she had no choice.

And neither did the northern provinces. America would win, South would give them their punishments, better than he'd given Gangwon, and once they were broken of his brother's brainwashing, they would be a family.

He *was* a good person, better than North, better than America and Rhee and Kim Chong-won. And they would see that. Kangwon would see that no matter *what* choices he made, South still had a good heart.

"That's keen," America said, and a chair scraped back as he stood. *"Oh, and by the way, Southie- you want to talk to North?"*

South froze. The words had been so casual, like he was asking him if he wanted him to bring applejack next time he visited, instead of speak to the brother whose voice he hadn't heard in person in two years and a month.

"You would... let me do that?" he ventured, wondering if this was some sort of test.

"I haven't been stopping you," America said, sounding surprised. *"I just said it was probably best if you didn't, and you agreed. You've gotta remember I'm not in control of you anymore, South."*

No. Just his army.

'They herded them like cattle.'

*'They herded the **Communists** like cattle,'* he corrected. And it wouldn't have had to happen if North hadn't started this war and stained them Red.

"It wouldn't be face to face," his friend explained. *"Not when we can't trust our Northern pal not to try anything."*

South thought of the look in his eye by the Raktong, like he was thinking about knocking him out and kidnapping him.

He didn't think he would decide against it this time.

"Yeah, definitely not," he said, rubbing his arm.

"But the Reds have been a real thorn in the side about you two having a chat, so I'd like to throw 'em a phone call to get them and our birdy friend to shut up. You up for that, cool cat?"

A talk with North, hearing his brother's voice again, not spewing fire and brimstone to a crowd on the radio, but talking to *him.*

The cord throbbed inside the aching emptiness inside him, yearning, and he plucked it, just lightly enough that he could feel where North was. The vibrations quivered along it, running northwest.

"...Not yet," he said, pulling away from the feeling. "I'm not..."

He trailed off, ashamed.

"It's fine, kid," America sympathetically reassured him. *"I told you I get how much influence he has over you."*

"I wouldn't-"

"And we both know how persuasive he can be."

South looked down into the dark at his feet, a void he couldn't see the bottom of.

*'Get **up,** South. We need to get out of here, we need to try again, no matter how much it hurts. We need to be **free.**'*

Yeah. He knew.

"Let's wait until after your... present," he said, trying to sound like the idea of talking to his brother didn't make him roil with equal amounts of nerves and excitement. "Once he's been hit by whatever, maybe I can convince him to surrender."

*'Please just give up. **Please.** For me.'*

He could be persuasive, too, even if it was only when it came to his brother.

"Good idea. I've always said you were a smart one."

America's tone said he'd ruffle his head if he was here, and by the ache he felt, South knew he would have to practice steeling himself for when he heard North's voice, but couldn't touch him.

There was another person in the background of the call again, and his friend called back.

"Okay, kid, that's my call to leave for real. Lunch is on, sloppy joes." He audibly rubbed his hands together, though South had no idea how he did it when he should be holding the handset.

He also didn't know who Joes was, or why he was sloppy. He didn't want to think about the word 'sloppy' in relation to lunch at all, actually.

But he still said, "Enjoy it."

"Enjoy your late-nightcap," America returned, predicting him with ease. *"Have a glass for me."*

South's lips thinned, but he easily assured him he would. Then he was left holding a dead line in a dark office.

He didn't know how long he stood there for, listening to the hollow drone of the disconnect while the connection inside him ached. It couldn't have been long. He was too thirsty.

Eventually he put it down. There was only silence after the *'snick.'* An endless, empty silence.

He would be able to talk to North soon. In a week and four days, at the least, he would be able to...

He didn't know. Try and convince him that freedom wasn't worth suffering for, that they could have it even with America here, that this war had gone on for too long already and couldn't go on for another year, let alone a thousand. To tell him it wouldn't be so bad, being Korea with more of him, that he would take them to clubs and parties, eat good food and wear nice clothes, and be happy, the way they were meant to be. To make him *give up,* and hope that this time it stuck.

To show them both he was still a good person, and maybe, just maybe, hear him say that he knew that, and that everything was going to be okay.

North had never came back for him, never even tried. He had left South alone, at Japan's mercy, and gone on to eat songpyeon and celebrate holidays, to see the country and all the sights they'd once talked about seeing together, to get drunk and *laugh,* all without even knowing if his brother was alive or dead.

He had built a family without him, one he didn't even appreciate.

South wasn't like that. He was the good Korea, he was the good *person,* and he wouldn't leave his brother to suffer under Communism. He wouldn't let him be just another animal in a world full of them.

North had never come back to save him. But South *would* save his brother.

—

America dropped the phone back onto the hook, smirking. He took one last drag on his cigar, puffing the smoke rings at the high vaulted ceiling of his private Washington residence, smaller than the White House obviously, but no less ritsy.

Ten, eleven, twelve-

Gah, no dice. Still stuck on twelve. But it didn't kill his mood- he wouldn't be stuck for much longer.

He stretched in celebration, cracking his spine. God, it was still nice to have a ceiling he didn't bump his head on standing up. He got that gooks were short, but they seriously had to start building stuff with taller people in mind if they wanted to draw in business. And he knew South did want to draw in business. He would, too- America had big plans for Korea, plans he knew his Southie would be more than appreciative of.

After all, he got how important it was to get rich quick.

America grinned, stubbing his cigar out and following the scent of cooked beef to the spacious dining room.

That little girl had been a stroke of luck, the cherry on top of the sundae he hadn't even known they'd been looking for, hammering the point in even deeper- humans were dogs. They'd do anything they were told to for money, roll over, bend over, tear someone's throat out with their teeth. It was why you couldn't trust the unwashed masses, and at the heart of why you couldn't trust commies. They were heathens that were disobedient enough (and stupid enough) to show their fangs at the hand that fed, instead of

the mutts in the ring with 'em. They thought they could climb right out of it without earning the right.

But the only way you got out of the pit was with cold hard cash, and climbing over the bodies of your fellow hounds. America had grasped that truth at the tender young age of around a century, when he realized that all of the crops and ores leaving his ports were making British business owners richer, which gave the old man the ability to open more ventures, settle and control more countries, and demand even more from his. If he ever wanted to be in control, *he* had to be the one that controlled the moolah.

It was cliché, but it was the truth of the world- money was power. And humans would do anything for power.

The commies always said he hated poor people, but that just wasn't true. He loved 'em! The world couldn't go round without them. After all, who else would do anything you asked in exchange for just enough greenbacks to buy a bag of rice?

Sometimes you didn't even have to pay them. The rice itself would do just fine.

America grinned, circling his arm around the waist of the little dish plating up his lunch, sweeping aside her freshly-dyed blonde hair to plant a kiss on her rosy cheek. She wasn't quite as much of a looker as Gracie had been, but she wasn't half bad. And her brand of kooky was a little less 'loaded gun in the night.' Plus her gams went on for *days*.

He was sure he could get a Korea that made a great businessman. Southie was making good progress, but he wasn't quite enough. He didn't see him ever being the type to sit through a board meeting and make layoffs or cutthroat financial decisions. But once he got a bit of decommified North in him, that ruthlessness would serve well.

And South would make sure it served who it was supposed to.

America took his seat at the grand table, in front of his dish and across from his other one, who giggled coquettishly and said she

wasn't hungry when he asked where her plate was.

He'd been fooling around with her long enough to know she was a poor liar. He had no idea how she actually managed to convince her mom she was staying at a girlfriend's house. The broad must be too focused on her drink to care. He could even see the stain at the corner of her pouty lips where she'd missed a bit of sauce. She was a shy eater, one of those chicks that wanted guys to think she ate sunshine and only had one hole down there.

That was fine, but they'd have to work on the sneak eating. Even if he didn't see it, it didn't mean the calories didn't count, and she was already bordering a bit on pudgy. Those Irish genes, y'know?

And they would definitely have to work on the lying.

America tore into his sloppy joe, ground meat and red sauce dripping out the other side, plopping onto the plate with the sound of organs splattering, making him miss the camps.

He'd have his fun again soon enough. Red China's birthday gift was just the test, one last little benevolency, 'cuz hey- what was America if not benevolent? With not a single target left in the north, just *mayyybe* Northie would do the chivalrous thing and surrender, and he could skip to the second phase of the most recent iteration of his plan for total victory with ease.

Buuuut he had another little inkling he wouldn't. And then the chink would receive his *real* birthday gift, a few days late. Surprises were the best kind of present, after all.

It would be more of a blow for the Nork than him, but it *would* be a blow. And the chink had taken enough of those, with the power getting knocked out in his northeast the first time the Sui-ho Dam had been bombed, the food insecurity in the south of his country, and how he'd been hemorrhaging soldiers for almost two years now. And right about now, Red Chinese politicians were probably starting to whisper about the wisdom of wasting resources when they were still clamouring for Formosa.

Red China might've been too stupid to take America's offer to

abandon Korea last year, and stupid enough to flaunt his little 'temporary visit' on August 15th, alongside Big Red. But he had seen the look in his eyes at the trial- he was crafty, calculating, even for a commie. He had to be to get judged 'innocent.' He knew it was a dog eat dog world, and you know what they said about chinks and dogs.

He wouldn't hold out for Korea much longer.

This next push wouldn't stop that dog from trying to climb out of the pit without deserving it. But it would scare him back to the side, so America could beat the Korean one down with a stick for good.

And once he was gone, and America held all of Korea, he would go to the Norks and oh-so-kindly offer amnesty and, more importantly, a goodly sum to any commie politicians that could provide proof that the Red Chinese Countryhuman had been in their country for more than a day.

And they would take it, because they would realize that no matter how badly they wanted the world to align with their delusions, it never would. It wasn't *their* world- it was America's. And if you wanted to get by in it, then you needed all the money you could get your filthy paws on.

The other countries already knew that, just like they knew the consequences of letting the dogs turn their teeth on them, especially a dog like China. He would get his war, *finally*, and be one step closer to fulfilling his destiny.

'Just a couple more weeks.'

He couldn't *wait.*

Local guy (personification of a country) doesn't understand the concept of the abolition of money being the abolition of poverty, and that the lumpenprole and proletariat only exist in relation to the bourgeoisie. There can be no poor people if there are no rich people. More at ten.

Sometimes when I see my cat I get so excited I start shaking and I need to sit down and take deep breaths. I wish he was made of jelly so I could hug him as aggressively as I want without hurting him. I think he'd like this too, since one of his favourite games is to lie down while I play the drums on his side very hard and fast, and gets mad if I try to stop.

Finally... The next chapter... It is almost here... Nishishishi

I Want To Believe

The worst thing about having your body shut down around you was that it wouldn't let you sleep to forget about it for even one *fucking* moment.

North Hamgyong went rigid on the cot as another wave of pain swept through him from head to toe, shocking down his spine like it was hitting each individual segment with a damn hammer.

Ssi-bal. He'd been working like a fucking dog for the past two and a half weeks, day and night, to get the fields around the Amnok River drained, trying to salvage the paddies they could, and get the other fields replanted with autumn crops. He'd been digging ditches, hauling earth, and lugging around handplows with Korea, Hae, South Pyongan, and the Chinese provinces non-fucking-stop, and now that he was finally back in the bunker for one night, he *still* couldn't get any damn rest.

And he knew this would be the only chance he'd be getting. They still had flooded areas to drain, rice to help harvest, fields to turn over, and embankments to build because Korea thought a few dirt walls would help stop the fucking tsunami that would happen if the dam broke for real. As soon as China's National Day was over, he would be shipping them right back to the Amnok, probably with everyone else this time.

And that included South Hamgyong.

North Hamgyong grit his teeth, pressing his face into his sweat-stained pillow, that she'd conveniently forgotten to wash the last time it was her turn to do laundry.

It had been bad enough working next to Hae and her stupid cheery smile while they were knee-deep in water, surrounded by peasants with hollow cheeks and empty eyes who'd just had to watch a quarter of their fucking harvest get wiped out, and haunted soldiers that almost dropped their tools every time a plane flew by.

And Korea's fucking *presence,* not saying a word after he'd rallied the work teams, just seizing a shovel and starting to attack the earth like it was the Yank himself. If he had to dig useless drainage ditches while his back screamed and his hands bled with South Hamgyong spouting slogans in the background, he was going to lose it. And he didn't want to give her the pleasure.

His knuckles clenched in the thin fabric of his bedroll as his leg spasmed, a cramp wracking his thigh, digging into the muscle like a knife and twisting like one of the other Hamgyong's jabs.

What was the point of draining the fields if they could just be flooded again whenever the Yank wanted? What was the point in trying to stop a flood when they knew they couldn't? What was the point in working himself to the bone with Korea when they knew it wouldn't be enough?

What was the point in tearing your body apart to carry a burden when you had never been strong enough to carry any other?

He pressed his face into the pillow until he couldn't breath, muffling himself as his body cramped and throbbed and burned.

"Is anyone up?"

He ignored the whispered question, burrowing deeper into the fabric, until his lungs started to ache as much as the muscle around them.

"Is anyone awake?"

When he didn't respond, the voice said, "North Hamgyong."

He shoved his upper half up, glaring into the darkness of the bunker. "If you knew I was awake, why bother fucking asking?"

"I was being polite," Kangwon said, keeping his voice low so he wouldn't wake the others. "Do-?"

"I'm not taking you to piss."

"Please?" his cousin asked shamelessly.

"It's not like you have to go all the way to the latrines," North Hamgyong griped as another cramp wracked his leg. "Just do it on the edge of the clearing."

"I think SH is out there."

She shouldn't be. She had the last shift tonight. He knew what that meant.

And now he *really* fucking didn't want to go outside.

"And you can't sleep anyway," Kangwon added. "I've been listening to you roll around."

Fuck. He better have only heard the rolling.

"You're fucking *forty-two years old,"* he hissed over the sound of Hwang's whistling snores. "Or twenty-four, whatever the fuck. Either way, you're too goddamn old to be afraid ghosts are going to get you the moment you step into the woods."

"I'm-"

"You're not fucking worried the Yanks or their puppets are going to get you," he interrupted in a fierce whisper. "There are sixteen armed guards keeping watch on our perimeter, a security checkpoint and resthouse nearby, *and* anti-aircraft positions on the mountain. You're afraid a ghost is going to crawl up your dick while you're taking a piss."

Kangwon was silent for a moment. Then, "I'll give you a massage when we get back."

North Hamgyong glowered in the direction of his bunk. Then forced himself up, sitting on the edge of the cot so he could knead functionality into his leg again.

"What are you waiting for?" he demanded. "Get up."

The coward scrambled down from the cot above Chagang's, radiating smugness.

Bastard. North Hamgyong hated to give him the win. But between the germ warfare and the sheer amount of casualties beating Kangwon down, him doing post-Liberation Day shit in his province, and his cousin being glued to the hospital on Foundation Day before leaving for his own, and now this bullshit with the dam, it had been over a month since he'd received any relief for his back. And he was feeling it.

"And it isn't a massage," he muttered.

"Right," Kangwon whispered back. "It's just me rubbing your muscles until the knots are worked out. Weird, I feel like there's a word for that."

"Medical. Treatment," North Hamgyong hissed.

Massages were for bourgeois bastards that hired women to feel them up so they could get off. Unlike him, they wouldn't lose sleep and mobility if his cousin didn't rub their backs at least once a month.

"Obviously." There was a rustle as Kangwon lifted his foot to put on his boot, then North Hamgyong flinched as he fell into him.

"Sorry," his cousin murmured. "Lightheaded."

"Maybe you should've thought about that before draining yourself dry." He let the shorter man brace himself on him as he slid his boots on.

"I did," he replied. "Still had to do it."

"What kind of bastard is perfectly fine donating so much blood it makes him anemic, but can't take a damn piss by himself?"

"I can piss by myself," Kangwon lied easily. "I just like the company."

Whatever. At least he wasn't semi-delirious, the way he'd been on Foundation Day. It seemed like he was just draining himself mostly dry now, not all the way.

North Hamgyong followed him from the room, rubbing his shoulder. His cousin had made the pain worse by leaning on it. At least he'd make up for it with the- *not* massage. Then maybe he could get some damn shut-eye.

Kangwon didn't turn on his flashlight until they were in the hallway with the door shut, though it turned out they still had to be careful not to wake anyone up.

North Pyongan was leaning against the wall at the end of the hall, under the fucking creepy art South Hamgyong had hung on it- a Yank soldier howling as he was melted to the bone by his own side's napalm. His cousin was dead asleep, with his Chinese province's head on his shoulder. Their hands were linked on the floor between them.

Kangwon caught North Hamgyong's look and made a disapproving face.

"What?" he scoffed. "It's disgusting."

"You could try being happy for our cousin," he said quietly, reaching out to carefully adjust North Pyongan's cap so it wouldn't fall off.

"Why?" he retorted. "He's delusional. Even if she's not using him, Korea's never going to let them work out in the long run."

He had no idea why he was tolerating it now. He wasn't some great romantic, not in that sense of the word, anyway. Which probably meant something fucked up was going to happen to their lovesick cousin in the future.

Kangwon shrugged. "I think most people in love are probably at least a little delusional. Might as well be glad they're getting a bit of happiness from it in the middle of all this."

'Love.' North Hamgyong's jaw feathered. *'Bullshit.'*

He should wake North Pyongan up so *he* could be the one to get dragged out into the woods in the middle of the night.

But while they'd been labouring away, he'd been doing the real hard work- travelling down the Amnok to apologize to his peasants, and explain why the dam had been drained. North Hamgyong would rather break his back for real than have to look his people in the eye and say 'Sorry your livelihood got fucked and you're going to suffer even more this winter than you already were.'

So he'd leave him asleep with his woman. Grudgingly.

"And Comrade Liaoxi's great," his cousin added, glancing at her. "You know she's a hard worker- she's helped you with the Supung twice now."

She was. Both of the Chinese had put the noses they didn't have to the grindstone with them and both of their soldiers and technicians to try to fix the power station and flooding. But that didn't change what she was.

"She's a foreigner."

His cousin gave him another look. "There's really nothing wrong with foreigners."

"Yeah?" North Hamgyong challenged. "What happened to that germ warfare report?"

He knew what had happened- it had just been released, the entire Commission presenting their tests and interviews and studies, their *proof* that America was using biological warfare on them. And you know what they got back? Crickets. The foreign press all around the world had already moved to suppress it, led by the Yanks, of fucking course. The most they'd got was some activist types declaring 'That's bad!' before proceeding to not do anything about it.

It didn't matter if the Chinese obviously weren't joining in on the suppression. They were foreigners, and one day, if they became enemies, they would have no problem censoring anything *they* did to Korea.

"We don't know it won't get a response yet," Kangwon said. "CCCP

is bringing it to the UN for us tomorrow."

But his voice was subdued, and his gaze dropped to his boots as he went quiet. The sound of him picking at his nails almost echoed in the oppressive bunker.

'Stupid.' North Hamgyong balled his fists, stomping past Korea's door.

Their Countryhuman was in there, having come back barely an hour after he left, which meant the General had kicked him out of Jonsung Complex again, probably trying to make him get some sleep.

It was useless. He bet he was lying in there, fangs bared at the ceiling, just like he'd been. It'd be better to just let him work himself into passing out.

At least the Chinese bastard was gone tonight. Korea had left him at the Supung Dam, for some reason. The teal Chinese province had said her Countryhuman had told her he was finally being exiled from their country for good.

North Hamgyong hoped that was true. He hoped Korea kicked her out next, and her rhyming sister.

But he doubted it would happen. Hope was-

'Tch.'

He tore open the door, stomping past the two people that were flanking it, both of them startling.

"Fucking shoot me," he spat at South Pyongan, who'd drawn her pistol. "You'd be doing me a favour."

"Well then I definitely don't want to do that," she drawled, spinning her firearm around a finger before holstering it. "Where are you two off to?"

"A walk," Kangwon said at the same time he said, "Kangwon's taking a piss and can't do it without someone to protect him from

the ghosts."

South Pyongan nodded sagely. *"Ahhhh.* Piss ghosts. Classic."

"Don't be so vulgar," South Hamgyong sighed.

"I'm not afraid of ghosts," Kangwon denied. "I just don't want-"

"Yeah yeah, move along, Ghost Boy," the Pyongan interrupted. "I hear piss ghosts target liars."

South Hamgyong gave her a dry look, then said, "Be safe, Kangwon."

She said it pointedly, looking only at him. North Hamgyong's teeth ground, but he didn't give her the satisfaction of a reaction. But he *did* glare at Kangwon as he caught the look that passed between him and South Pyongan.

"Yeah, we'll be safe," his cousin sighed, starting for the trees. North Hamgyong stomped after him.

"Don't let the piss ghosts get'cha!" South Pyongan called before the forest swallowed them up.

"I hate her," North Hamgyong grumbled.

"She's your sister."

"I wasn't-" He cut himself off, teeth sinking into his cheek.

Even if he had been talking about her, why would it fucking matter? Why should being his sister stop him from hating her? They were the ones that always used to get on his case for being protective of her, or 'possessive,' and told him just because he was her brother didn't mean he had any say over what she did, even when he'd just wanted to keep her safe. But then they turned around and acted like since they were 'family,' they should be holding hands and skipping everywhere together. And they were even worse when it came to Korea and his.

'Treat each other like siblings should.' If North Hamgyong had

wanted to be beaten, he could've asked if that meant he should cut out South Hamgyong's eye.

Fuck. Even South Pyongan had abstained from that vote over whether to kill the Southern bastard or save themselves, just because he was Korea's brother. So what? That meant he should forgive him for betraying their country, for hurting him? It meant *they* should? Why should Korea be okay with the nation-traitor crippling him because he was his brother, when that hadn't stopped him from doing it in the first place?

Why should North Hamgyong forgive South Hamgyong for trapping him in that cage with her when she didn't forgive him for making her do it?

"You two should talk," Kangwon said when he didn't answer, as they headed deeper into the woods.

"I have nothing to say to her." It wasn't like anything he could say could make up for what he already had.

'I wish I hadn't missed.'

It wasn't like he wanted to.

"I think there's actually a lot need to say to each other," Kangwon said gently. "I could mediate-"

"No."

Kangwon stopped, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Cousin, I know it's hard. But nothing's going to change if you two don't try and make it."

North Hamgyong grit his teeth. Like South Hamgyong hadn't been trying to 'make it' for decades now, trying to force something broken to work, smiling blithely down at it and ignoring the choking smog and shrieking as it died.

He might've been the one that snapped the last fibre holding the fan belt together, but *she* was the one that had worn it that close to breaking.

"I don't want anything to change."

"North Hamgyong-"

"Keep fucking moving." He shoved past him. "And shut your damn mouth if you don't want me to leave you out here."

He could feel his cousin's eyes on him, pityingly sorrowed, even though both the Hamgyongs were just finally getting what they wanted.

North Hamgyong only looked back when Kangwon had drawn slightly ahead of him again, outspeeding him with his need to pee.

The woods were dark, the undergrowth only just starting to thin out with fall. He couldn't see anything of the bunker, or of the woman he was supposed to call a sister.

How was talking supposed to hammer out any of the bullshit between them? They couldn't say the shit they needed to with Kangwon there, and if he wasn't, they'd just start screaming at each other again. The look on her face and her delusional fucking optimism would make him say some bullshit he shouldn't mean, then she'd say something she shouldn't either, then they'd be at each other's throats again, maybe even literally now, judging by the way she'd lunged at him before. Taking a hammer to the Hamgyong's problems had never fixed them- it just smashed them into the mangled mess they were now.

Besides, she didn't want to try anymore. He'd finally made her stop.

He shouldn't want her to keep trying. There was no reason for her to. He was an antagonistic, cruel, stupid bastard. She shouldn't have to keep trying for someone like that, even if he had been her brother. Even if she'd been the one to fucking decide that in the first place, and thought Korea should keep trying for his.

They weren't even related anyway. They were just two provinces that shared a name, because years ago someone had been stupid enough to divide Hamgyong in two, making it easier for them to

manage and harder for the idiots that would come to represent it. Provinces whose Countryhuman's sibling complex drove him to encourage the delusion.

South Hamgyong had only hunted him down and dubbed him 'oppa' because she wanted to play house, for someone to keep her safe without expecting the kind of shit a man who wasn't related to her would expect in return. She'd trapped him in this role he'd never asked for, only to turn around and say he had no right to play it, no right to keep her from fighting, or sleeping next to their male cousins, or facing off against more bastards who would be happy to do the same things her 'clients' had to her, no right to protect her. No right to be her brother.

Because he had failed.

The forest was dark, almost quieter than usual, as they headed to where the latest latrine had been dug, out near the western edge of the woods. The nightbirds were dull and muted, and the crunch of dead leaves under their heels was sharp, twigs snapping like bones with every other footfall.

North Hamgyong kept his hands in the band of his pants, trying not to eat shit from tripping on a root or rock buried under the leaf litter. Kangwon casually drifted closer and closer to him, like he was just slowing down for no reason. He gave up the act when something rustled in the bushes, grabbing his sleeve with lightning quickness.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered, voice higher than usual, more like Gangwon's.

The thought of their kidnapped relative just pissed him off more. "The fucking rock I just kicked?"

"Oh. Haha. Yeah." Kangwon let go.

"You lived alone in the forest for *nine years,"* North Hamgyong said, unimpressed. "Did you ever see a gwisin? Agwi? Changgwi? *Anything?"*

"No," his cousin admitted.

"Exactly," he emphasized. "And aren't ghosts supposed to show up because they died violent, sudden deaths? How many people have had that happen to them because of the Japs or Yanks?"

Too fucking many.

"Shouldn't we be crawling with them? But *I've* certainly never fucking seen one."

It wasn't like that guy had ever came back to haunt the manager's office at the factory, even if some of the other workers had worried about it. And that bastard definitely would've deserved it.

You didn't become a ghost when you died. You didn't go to North Pyongan's heaven or reincarnate. You just died, and then there was nothing.

The promise of that had used to be a relief. Now it just made his tendons strain.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be ghosts," Kangwon said, lowering his voice even more on the word, eyes flicking around the shadowy undergrowth like he was afraid of summoning one from the darkness. "There are other things, out in the woods."

North Hamgyong shook himself. Why the *fuck* did he have to say it like that?

"I haven't seen any demons or dokkaebi either." Except for Hae. "Now come on, get moving. I didn't come out here to sight-see with you."

He stomped off, Kangwon scurrying after him. He wanted to get this over with, so he didn't shove him off when he 'casually' grabbed his sleeve.

"Lightheaded still," he explained, and North Hamgyong glowered at him, realizing something.

"If you knew South Hamgyong was outside, why didn't you just get

South Pyongan to take you while she stood guard?"

His cousin didn't flinch at being called out. "She might not care, but she's still a woman. So I'd rather not."

"I'll believe it when I see it," North Hamgyong muttered. "She probably has the same parts as us."

Kangwon snorted, then covered it up with a cough. "Low-hanging fruit."

"Whatever. You know she'd just offer to let me kick her in the crotch to find out."

"So long as she got to kick you back," the other man supplied, and he nodded.

Which is why he wouldn't be telling her that joke. She already targeted a man's weak points when they sparred. Not that they'd been doing that lately. Even she was in too much pain.

North Hamgyong eyed Kangwon. He was shambling slightly, the shadows under his hooded eyes looking even deeper in the swaying beam of the flashlight. They peered out from the bandages he was swaddled in, flicking around the maze of thin trunks around them.

Despite how steady and regular his tone was, he looked fucking miserable. He might be using his blood loss to cover up that he was definitely afraid of ghosts, but that didn't mean he wasn't still anemic. His dark skin was washed out, and he didn't have his usual surefootedness in the wild, favouring a leg.

He should be a patient in a hospital, not rushing around taking care of them. But he was still pushing himself to the edge, wearing himself ragged dealing with and investigating the germ warfare, just to have it turn out useless, and taking care of the endless stream of people maimed by the Yanks bombs, enough so that North Pyongan had told them to be gentle with him, and to remind him they were there for him whenever they went to donate blood.

That wasn't North Hamgyong's crap. All he could do was try and talk him out of giving so much blood. They needed it, but they

didn't need one of their top doctors passing out in the middle of a surgery or going into a coma.

He didn't listen, just kept fucking forging on. He was like Korea in that way- an idiot. But it wasn't like North Hamgyong wasn't one, too.

'We're free.'

They all were.

After a short walk, they reached the latrine. It was still too deep in the woods to see light coming from the fields around them, but it was dug in a small clearing between the ash trees, where the canopy opened up just enough to see the sky above. The moon was almost full, but too low on the horizon to be visible, leaving the expanse an inky, impenetrable black, like someone had spilled engine oil across it. North Hamgyong's eyes strained, but he didn't see any shadows blocking out the few stars that glittered in it. Even though he could hear the drone, it was far away and tinny.

Kangwon's flashlight lit the slender grey trunks with harsh white light, making the shadows between them deeper as they drew back in the face of the beam. The leaves cast shifting silhouettes as they rustled in the cold breeze. The black made the oranges and yellows stand out starkly, along with the occasional splash of red, like blood.

The bandages cut most of the chill, but North Hamgyong still pulled the neck of his sleeveless undershirt up over his collarbones. It'd be time for winter uniforms soon. The manual labour had been keeping him warm for the past weeks, even farther north, where the wind swept across Supung Lake and down from the mountains, carrying a bite with it. But he'd never been able to forget that fall was creeping in. Every *'thunk'* as his shovel met the earth, every uprooted rice plant he'd pulled out of the flooded paddies had been another second counting down to winter.

"Hurry up," he said gruffly, swatting Kangwon's arm, trying to make him stop strafing the latrines with the flashlight like a sniper looking for a mark.

His cousin had been nervously staring into the dark, and he startled as he was hit, dropping the light, immediately plunging the clearing into darkness and making him yelp.

"Ssi-bal," North Hamgyong swore, then again, ordering, "Get off me," as the other man latched on to his arm with force, almost startling him.

"Sorry," his cousin said. "Tripped."

"Yeah right," the taller province muttered, bending down to pick up the flashlight, gritting his teeth as pain throbbed in his back and hips.

He clicked the switch on the light. It didn't turn on.

"Great," he huffed. "You broke it. Korea's going to kill me."

"I'm the one that dropped it."

"Yeah, and *I'm* the one on his shit list." Just because he'd mobilized him to the dam didn't mean he was off the hook for calling South Hamgyong what he had.

"I won't tell him," Kangwon promised. "I don't need it too often anyway. We have lamps in the hospital for when the power cuts out."

That was fine for seeing. But lamps couldn't power life support systems.

"Hurry up and do what you need to do." North Hamgyong turned away, smacking the flashlight on his wrist, trying to get it to work again.

Kangwon didn't move, lingering behind him. North Hamgyong heaved a sigh.

"I'm not holding your fucking hand while you piss."

"I wasn't going to ask you to," he said, with that aggravating 'I'm being reasonable' voice he used when he was pretending he wasn't

scared. "I just think you should pee, too. Having a full bladder is bad for your health."

"I pissed after dinner because *I'm* not an idiot."

"I'm used to having the toilet available in the hospital. And you could just come a little closer."

North Hamgyong glowered at him over his shoulder. "You want me to aim for you, too?"

"I'm still anemic," his cousin said patiently, even though he was shifting from foot to foot.

"I am not holding you while you use the latrine," he made clear. "And if you piss yourself because you're too scared to, I'm telling South Pyongan. See how you like being Piss Boy for the rest of forever."

Or however long they had left.

Kangwon stared at him with furrowed brows, but if North Hamgyong didn't let Hae's pleading face get him, he wasn't going to let a man's. He turned his back to him, pointedly.

"Fine," Kangwon sighed. "...Can you promise you won't sneak up on me? I don't want to end up in the latrine."

And there was the *real* reason he hadn't wanted South Pyongan to bring him. The blue woman would probably take off into the woods and hide just to freak him out.

"Do you think I'm five?" he demanded. "It's past midnight- I'm not in the mood for bullshit."

"Right, yeah."

Kangwon's footsteps reluctantly padded away, then paused. North Hamgyong determinedly didn't look back. The footsteps resumed, more hesitantly.

The latrine wasn't even that far away. He was on the edge of the clearing, just under the trees, literally less than five fucking metres

between them. He could genuinely hear the sound of his cousin unbuckling his belt and whipping it out. He could also hear his teeth chattering as branches creaked out in the woods. What he *couldn't* hear was-

"I don't hear you pissing," he called.

Not that he fucking wanted to. Why was he always the one that got stuck doing this?

"You know it's hard for me to do it around people," Kangwon answered, voice hushed. "And keep it down."

Like if ghosts or whatever were real they'd be limited by hearing. They'd probably sense your karmic debt or some shit. In which case he would've been better off bringing anyone other than North Hamgyong.

"Then you should stop being a damn scaredy-cat and man up," he said at the same volume. "Do you pull this shit with our soldiers when you do this in the field?"

His cousin's shameful silence said it all.

"Korea should send you to a camp."

"I don't make a big deal of it," Kangwon defended. "If South Pyongan isn't around, no one knows I'm afraid of the paranormal. Because I'm not."

And the reason he couldn't piss was because 'it was hard for him to do it around others.' North Hamgyong was *not* the one that needed re-education.

"You have twenty seconds before I leave you out here."

He could feel Kangwon's urgency spike behind him, but still no piss.

"Tch."

North Hamgyong throttled the flashlight in one hand, shaking it

violently as he smacked the bottom. After a hard enough blow, the batteries knocked back into place, and the beam once more illuminated the dying leaves.

"Thanks," Kangwon said with a relieved sigh.

"I just don't want Korea to make me dig the next latrines," he muttered, pointing the tool backwards in his hand to give his cousin some light.

Almost immediately, liquid started pattering down onto the earth, making him roll his eyes. Yeah, clearly he just 'liked the company.'

"If ghosts were real, what the fuck would I be supposed to do about them anyway?"

"Run slower than me."

North Hamgyong shot him a look over his shoulder, catching his smirk.

"Bastard."

"Joking," he said. "It's just easier to believe supernatural things aren't out here with me if you are. If I believed in the supernatural, obviously."

"Obviously," his cousin sarcastically echoed.

He glowered into the dark as Kangwon pissed like a horse. The bastard had probably been lying in bed holding it for an hour before he decided he couldn't wait until morning.

The shadows shifted out in the woods, leaves swaying, colours fading to dim grey where the flashlight beam touched them less, before transitioning to bottomless black. The rustling of the foliage murmured rhythmically, making his eyelids dip as the exhaustion bore down on him.

His spine ached, demanding to bend, but he kept it ramrod straight. He wasn't wearing his epaulets, but he could still feel them pressing down into the charred skin under his bandages. The work

had been letting him dull his mind, but now those words came back, circling his mind like an irritating gnat.

*'**That** is what hope is. A burden. One that we have to carry, because if we don't, then our country and everyone in it will suffer for it.'*

It was easy for Korea to say. Everything was. It was easy to say they were going to win, that the war would be over by next year, that they could still be free. It was when he was wrong that it got hard.

Yet he still made himself get up in front of their people and say it again. He still carried it with ease, he always had, like he was Mireuk the giant, striding from one end of the earth to the other to hold up the sky with his copper columns. Never mind that the sky was fucking falling down around them.

He had a flash of Korea in the fields, digging like he was possessed by one of Kangwon's spirits, blood sheeting down the shovel as he stared blankly at the soil.

Maybe not ease, not anymore. But that just made it even fucking harder. How was North Hamgyong supposed to carry this burden if even Korea was bowing under its weight?

He *did* know what a burden was, he had slaved away in that factory, whored out his labour, for *six years,* all so the person he'd cared about wouldn't have to suffer. But she had, every day. He hadn't been able to do shit about it. None of his suffering had ever stopped hers.

And he hadn't been able to carry it. Even if he'd never dropped it, even if he'd kept it on his shoulders while his teeth splintered and his ribs snapped, he had been planning on dropping it. Because that's what offing his sister and himself would've been- putting down the burden, giving into that relieving nothing because he was a weakling who couldn't take it.

One and a half more months and he would have.

He didn't want their people to suffer, and he knew if he didn't, he

had to carry their weight, the weight of that 'province's responsibility,' even heavier than the four billion tons of an officer's.

But he wasn't fit to. Not when he couldn't even carry his own sister. Korea hadn't been able to carry his, he'd gotten out of wherever they'd been and left the Southern bastard behind. He'd left him again after Liberation. But he still believed he could save him, that he was good enough to. He was a fucking idiot for it, but he did.

North Hamgyong didn't. He couldn't. And Korea was right- he had lost South Hamgyong because of it.

His eyes squeezed shut. Then the darkness behind them got darker, colder.

'Ssi-bal.' He opened them to see the flashlight had gone dark again. He thumped his palm against the bottom, harder than needed, but this time it stayed dark.

Damn it. He just knew he was going to smash his teeth out on a rock on the way back.

"Kangwon," he said, realizing he didn't hear the stream of liquid anymore. "If you're done, let's go."

"North Hamgyong," he said lowly. "Come look at this."

"Fuck you."

"I mean it."

And something in his voice, a waver he didn't hear even when his cousin was elbows-deep in a comrade's blood, told him he did. And he realized he hadn't yelped when the light died.

He spun around, emerging from the trees. His cousin was standing with his hands on his belt buckle, staring up at the hole in the canopy. As he approached, he raised a shaking finger.

"What-?" he demanded, following his trajectory, then stopped.

There were lights in the sky.

They were in shades of orange and yellow and red, like blood, like the dying trees. They darted over the oil spill, fast. Trails of light flashed behind them as they moved in circles, loops, darting forward and doubling back with far more mobility and speed than he'd ever seen on any fighter jet or midnight bomber.

"Hey." Kangwon half-turned to him with a trembling smile. "What are those?"

North Hamgyong blinked, hard, thinking they were afterimages from the flashlight, but when he opened them they were still there.

"Stars," he said after a moment, voice hoarse, though even shooting stars didn't move the way those lights did, like mosquito larvae skidding across stagnant water.

"I can see the stars." Kangwon's finger moved to one of the white, static dots, far smaller, farther away than the lights.

"Yankee planes," he said after a moment, watching one red light blink out of existence, then appear in another part of the sky.

He'd thought Kangwon had lost his stutter in the Division, but it was there as he said, "I've n-never seen planes move like that."

"It's- It's experimental tech, or something."

Incredibly advanced, so advanced that he couldn't even hear the drone of the engines that was always fucking there, or the one he'd been able to hear before. He couldn't hear anything, no distant trucks, no nightbirds. Just the rustle of leaves, which suddenly seemed far too loud.

Neither of them moved. He didn't know how long they stood there under the sky, transfixed by the lights high above them, flitting and swirling like they were alive, until they suddenly froze in place and started to blink, off and on, off and on. They flared like streetlights when you narrowed your eyes at them, in shades of blue and green that reminded him of burning copper, coronas growing brighter-

And then they were gone. No silhouettes in the cloudless sky, no shadows as they crossed the real stars and vanished. Nothing. Like they'd never been there.

The flashlight flared back to life.

North Hamgyong slowly, jerkily, brought his gaze down to Kangwon. His cousin did the same. His russet skin was almost as pale as his bandages in the harsh white light, and his eyes were the size of headlights.

"I don't... think those were planes."

"They were," the Hamgyong said, heart in his throat. "What the fuck else would they be?"

Kangwon stared up at him, trembling. "North Hamgyong."

"No," he said.

There was a whine in his voice. "North Hamgyong-"

"No." North Hamgyong seized him but the shoulders, making him flinch. "Absolutely fucking not. There was nothing there. We saw *nothing.* And if we *did* see something, then it was Yankee planes, some new shit to kill us the bastards are trying out, that's all. And we are not going to tell *anyone* about this because they didn't do anything and it doesn't matter and we didn't see *anything.* Understand?"

"But-"

"Do you understand?" North Hamgyong shook him so hard his head bobbled.

"Y-Yeah," Kangwon said quickly, still being shaken. "I understand."

"Good." He let go of him, then grabbed his shoulder again. "Do up your fucking pants, we're getting out of here."

His cousin hurriedly finished buckling them. The taller province was already dragging him away before he was even done, both of

them half-jogging, not even caring when they stumbled over roots as they made a beeline back to the bunker, leaving the leaves to rustle for no one.

—

South Pyongan and South Hamgyong looked up as the undergrowth beyond the GAZ crackled, and their two cousins came spilling out, faces pale and haggard.

"What took you two so long?" the Pyongan asked, leaning against the mountainside. "You were gone for like, an hour. Did the piss ghosts get your dick after all?"

"We didn't see anything!" Kangwon blurted, and North Hamgyong growled, *"Nothing,"* as he dragged him by them, tearing open the steel door and disappearing inside with a heavy *'clang'* that still made unease churn within one of the women.

She pretended she didn't feel it, as usual, as she looked at her cousin, arching an eyebrow.

South Hamgyong shook her head in answer, pretending she didn't feel what she felt about one of them, also as usual. "Men," she sighed.

Accepting the verdict, South Pyongan bobbed her head. "Men," she agreed.

High above, the stars in the sky twinkled merrily, alone once more.

—

Some time later, North Hamgyong laid in bed, still awake. His muscles weren't cramped and screaming anymore, but he'd traded the soothing of that inner agony for a worsened surface one. Each grind of Kangwon's palms against his lower back and probe of his fingers had burst open his overcooked skin, no matter how gentle he'd been trying to be.

Whatever. At least he'd be able to move tomorrow, and wouldn't

want to kill himself if he had to sit in a chair for an hour at another banquet for the Chinese.

They'd both been dead silent as his cousin gave him his treatment, and Kangwon had slunk back onto his bunk with only a nervously muttered, "'Night." The Hamgyong hadn't answered, still determinedly trying not to think about what had happened because nothing *had* happened.

But even if something had, it paled next to everything else. He'd rather his mind chased its tail over lights in the sky and strange silences, instead of the bitter one between him and South Hamgyong.

The bunker door had opened earlier, South Pyongan pushing open the one to their room and quietly waking Hwang for his watch. North Hamgyong was safe for tonight, along with the rest that had been working on the flooding. Their other cousins were taking longer shifts to let them and Kangwon rest. He'd been planning on taking the male Hwanghae's, since he'd been working his ass off with all the bombing raids in his province, but now the idea of standing out there in the dark, not just having to look out into the dark woods, but *up*...

Fuck that. At least if Hwang saw that shit he'd be excited.

North Pyongan had woken up, slinking into the room as the Chinese province returned to the women's with South Pyongan. The bunker was silent again. With Hwang's snoring gone, the other men breathed quietly, barely audible under North Hamgyong's laboured breaths.

He hadn't heard South Hamgyong come in. It had to have been a bad one tonight. Another one.

The door quietly squealed open again, like he'd known it would. Socked feet padded across the concrete floor, creaking coming from North Pyongan's bed as South Pyongan crawled into it. Sheets rustled as she made herself comfortable up against the wall, trying to hide out of sight from the next shift change, like she'd been doing almost every night for the past few months.

He didn't know if North Pyongan ever woke up. He never heard him say anything, but that didn't mean he didn't.

The annoying siblings weren't disgustingly glued to each other anymore, but every time they were here, they were together. Now that South Pyongan wasn't able to scrap the way she wanted, in the small bits of free time they had during breakfast and after dinner, she'd never be anywhere but pressed up to North Pyongan, even if she was talking to someone else.

She knew. They all did. South Pyongan spending every bit of time she could with her brother, North Pyongan brushing his sister's shoulder and squeezing his Chinese woman's hand very chance he got, Hwang tightening his grip on the finalized short course plans as Hae babbled about being their own provinces, Chagang staring down at his bowl of juk with a blank expression, Kangwon's hands shaking as he slid the IV into his arm and said the war would be over soon. South Hamgyong and her increasing nightmares. They all knew. They were just pretending not to. Except for maybe Hae. And that was just because she didn't want to. They just got pissy with him for ruining their delusions.

Didn't they know that if he could be delusional too, he would be? This was fucking *exhausting,* living every day feeling his muscles wind tighter and his jaw winch shut, waiting for the end. Those final months in the factory under the weight of what was happening to South Hamgyong and what he would have to do had been torturous, to the point he'd almost been glad when they started running out of time. He knew they couldn't make enough money, he knew they were doomed, that they didn't have much longer left. So why the fuck should he have to live with the future hanging over him like a Jap sword?

...Fucking fine- he was jealous. He could admit that. It disgusted him that North Pyongan could hold hands with a Chinese Provincehuman and think they had any chance of a future together, but he envied that he thought they could have a future at all. He envied that Kangwon could treat patient after patient torn apart by Yankee germs and bombs and still believe that one day he wouldn't have to. He envied that South Pyongan could still joke and tease and ignore the atom bomb suspended above their heads, and that

North Pyongan had her to-

Even if it would be better for them if they could admit that the cliff was there, he envied that they didn't have to spend every waking minute with their eyes fixed on the edge, counting down the steps left to reach it.

He had always despised South Hamgyong's optimism, the way she could look him in the eyes and tell him they almost had enough when they didn't, when even with four more years they wouldn't, let alone four months, how she tell him she'd saved him candied fruit with vomit on her curved lips, the way she'd smiled at him over that table and told him everything would be alright after he'd just woken up to find out she'd been forced to whore herself out because of him.

But he'd also envied it. The way she was strong enough to believe those things, to believe they could be free. Even when he wasn't strong enough for her to believe he could save her, she was strong enough to hold on anyways. Even back when she'd been weaker than she was now, back before it had turned to pretending. She was strong enough to bear that burden. He wasn't.

And...

'We'll be free one day, oppa.'

He didn't know if he *had* always despised it. He didn't know if the memory of them standing on the hill as they laid eyes on Hungnam for the first time had always felt like a rusty nail, and her smile the hammer that pounded it in. He didn't know if the way her eyes squinched in his memories as she tapped her eyeless fish against his had always made him grit his teeth and want to make them dull, or if all the years sitting in his sister's cage as she pretended that she hadn't ruined them, that he hadn't made her do it had done it, the bars pressing in and leaving imprints on those moments, warping them.

It didn't matter. This was the way they were now.

'Get over it,' Korea had said. But how could he? How could he

when his back still ached and the scars on his arm still itched and the sight of South Hamgyong's smile still filled him with that old rotten anger, and he saw her in the Worker's Party members that assured their civilians they would win, and in the peasants that promised they'd get the fall harvest salvaged no matter what, and in the General as he told him hope was what gave you the strength to fight? And in Korea as he bared his teeth at the flooded earth. How could he when the bars had done their damage, when everything they both did just made him taste bitter green tea and candied pears and blood?

How could he when she hadn't either?

The bottom bunk closest to his head creaked again, and he heard North Pyongan sit up, and gently pull South Pyongan down into his lap. As mouthy as she was, she didn't say anything, either the one sleeping now or the one pretending.

North Hamgyong gritted his teeth, turning to face the wall, letting the friction between his bedroll and his body tear his skin.

The female Pyongan never would've done what his sister had, not the old one. But if she had, he bet the Pyongans wouldn't be where the Hamgyongs were now. They'd still be sharing beds and wanting to spend the time they had left together. Not like him, who'd started wishing he could just work late again instead of visiting the house on the hill, and couldn't move on.

Not like him, who'd been so weak he'd lost his only sister.

A soft humming filtered through the dark, and North Hamgyong closed his eyes.

Finally, the long-awaited alien chapter...

It would be funnier to just leave this without comment, but I need to explain. Originally this was supposed to be randomly interjected with absolutely no plot relevance, but a small timeline tweak ruined my fun. ㅠㅠ So now the alien chapter is a load-bearing chapter. This is inspired by the alien sightings alleged by Americans during the Great Fatherland Liberation

War. In January 1952, American pilots reported seeing orange globes over Wonsan and Sunchon that followed their bombers in the sky. In May 1951, Yankee soldiers near Chorweon also saw an orange light that came into their camp, unscathed by artillery strikes. They shot at it, reporting that it sounded like their bullets hit metal, and it blasted them with light, then flew off. Three days later they all got sick with symptoms that seemed to be radiation poisoning. There were also dozen of other reports of unknown aircraft. At the time it was assumed by the Yanks that it was some sort of Soviet experimental tech, yet it never made a return in any future conflicts, and when the Soviet Union fell, nothing like that was ever found in their records. What *was* found were Soviet reports of seeing unidentified discs of light over Korea, too. And Korea and China did not have the technology for this at that point. So governmentwise, it could really only be America left. Or, you know. Aliens.

Americans also reported UFOs during the war in Vietnam, and in many other conflicts. It was actually in 1952 that Project Blue Book, the US 'let's find aliens' operation began. I want to acknowledge that Americans do tend to be crazy and spiritually schizophrenic, so that could be why they're always seeing aliens during wartime when their victims aren't. But also Communists are materialists (*this* materialist just also believes in aliens), and more likely to rationalize those things. Plus if your average Korean or Chinese soldier saw some weird advanced technology, it would be far more likely for it to be assumed as American.

For the one that made US soldiers sick, I think it is interesting that it happened in May 1951, during the tail end of the first germ warfare outbreak, and also when the front was near Chorweon. That very well could have been an American experiment that hit their own soldiers either on purpose or accident. Just like the other orbs could have been American tech that remains classified to this day, since their archives have never been opened. I think there's a very good chance that's the case for many alien sightings- Americans interfering with other countries, as usual. I long for a river of blood to spill their secrets.

Anyway. Just to show I'm not crazy. I'm not one of those 'aliens

are responsible for this and that, and secretly run the governments!!' I just believe they're out there. Watching. And also seemingly harassing Americans during their genocidal wars. If I want to believe aliens are out there, and perhaps comrades, this harms no one.

However this experience *has* harmed Kangwon and North Hamgyong. They will never recover. And they will never tell a soul what they saw.

Also a fun fact- the word piss has been used 34 times up until this chapter in all of Chasing Liberty. And 14 times in this one alone. What does that make the piss ratio? Another fun fact- North Pyongan knew North Hamgyong was awake. He wasn't just humming for South Pyongan.

Something Wicked

Kungkwang-kungkwang-kungkwang. North's heart beat in his 'ears,' too fast for someone who had been lying in the same spot for hours. Despite it working overtime to pump blood, the dark behind his lids spun, and his fingertips tingled with pins where they lay on his chest.

It was fine. He was sure it was just one of those useless reactions his body had, or his system straining itself to try and scab over the burns after all the labour he'd been doing. Whatever it was, he wouldn't be going to the hospital. He would only set foot there tomorrow, and *not* to see Kim Yong-hwan, just to donate blood before they departed for the Supung Dam again.

His jaw ached as he somehow managed to grit his teeth tighter.

He should be there *now*. He shouldn't have left, there was still too much work to do. And his people needed to see him on the ground, needed to know he wouldn't have given the order to release the water if he didn't feel like it was necessary, needed to know he hadn't done it callously.

All that damage and the bombs hadn't even cracked the concrete. They hadn't even-

There was a sleepy hum from beside him, and the sound of fabric rustling. North angled his head away from it, heartbeat pounding annoyingly loud in one ear slit now, drowning out his thoughts.

"I told you to get out of my country."

"I did." China didn't sound muzzy at all, even though it had to have been an hour since he returned, and North hadn't heard him moving around from his half-conscious state. "And I told you that your orders stop applying the moment I set foot on my soil. Either you forgot, or you expected me to come back."

North stayed facing away, even though it was too dark to see each other anyway. "Did anyone see you cross?"

"I accidentally made my presence known to a few border guards. I believe they saw me without my mask."

China didn't do accidents. And he didn't sound bothered. It seemed he had guessed what North was planning. Though hopefully not all of it.

"Sloppy," he still judged, making his comrade hum in amusement.

"I'll make sure to write some self-criticism after the banquet."

Ssi-bal. North didn't want to go to that. But he knew he had to. They were honouring their Chinese comrades on their National Day again, and it wouldn't look good if the Countryhuman of the country they were fighting for wasn't there.

And... North did want them to know he... cared about them. It was just the other parts he wanted to avoid.

"Though I hope you'll let me visit the theatre first," China continued.

The Korean stiffened. "Why?"

"I was thinking maybe your lovely dance troupes might be putting something on for my birthday."

"There isn't anything special today," North lied.

"Pity," China sighed. "Will I at least be getting a present from you? Another persimmon perhaps?"

Relaxing, North said, "The banquet *is* your present."

"I thought the banquet was a reward for being a good ally." There was an audible pout in China's voice as he rolled over to face him. "What about my birthday present?"

'Greedy.' As usual.

"You're the one who wants to pretend the days our nations were founded are birthdays." Him and everyone else. "I'm not obligated to play along."

His comrade let out a exaggerated sigh, flopping back over. "Very well. I suppose it's a fair exchange. I fed you, so you'll feed me."

North's head retreated down between his shoulders, both of his 'ears' filled with the unsteady rhythm of his heart again.

They hadn't spoken about that night, even before the mess with the dam. He'd helped China clean up far too late, then returned to the bunker to collapse. Even with his stomach feeling uncomfortably full (even though he was aware that he hadn't actually eaten that much), he had managed to get some real sleep, which was already feeling like a distant memory again. In the morning, the other country hadn't even mentioned it.

Not that there was anything *to* mention. It had just been a meal for his not-birthday. A meal he probably should have thanked China for, regardless of who made it. But still wouldn't.

And it was good he hadn't said anything. Chagang had been gone when they'd gotten back, replaced by SH. They were both discreet, and wouldn't mention either that China had taken the food cooked by the Liaos into the woods, then taken North into them, or that they'd came back with empty dishes. So as long as China kept his mouth shut, the others wouldn't find out.

His provinces might not begrudge him the meal. And it wasn't like they'd gone hungry while he feasted. But he *had* eaten better. His portion of the rice ration wasn't worth the meat sauce and bitter melon. Hae would have loved to have more meat, and Kangwon could have used the calories to finish recovering from his anemia. Even if he hadn't eaten it entirely willingly, they *should* begrudge that. And then they would begrudge that they weren't eating well at all, that no one was, that he'd destroyed their farmland for nothing and-

"Though I'll point out that you aren't actually involved in the preparation of the banquet," China added.

North pressed his face into his bedroll, breathing in the mild scent of tallow soap under the charred meat smell it was already soaking back up before he could respond, "And *you* didn't make the noodle."

"Touché." China's dejected sigh transitioned into a moan as he stretched. There was a soft scuff as his palms brushed against the wall by their heads, and North could hear his clothes rustle as he arched his back off the bedroll in the same noisy routine he performed nearly every morning.

He turned onto his own back, blindly reaching out.

"Oof." China thumped back to the ground as he was chopped firmly in the stomach. "Aiya, it's my birthday and you're assaulting me before you even wish me a good one. It's beginning to become a tradition with you."

"Still not playing along," North said, sitting up. They'd been speaking low, maintaining the nighttime atmosphere. But he raised his voice now. "Get up. I have things I need to do today."

"Not even going to let me sleep in?" His comrade's voice was muffled. Turning on the his flashlight revealed he was facedown on his pillow.

"You need breakfast."

North hadn't warned him he was kicking him out of his country ahead of time, so he had no idea if the other man had been able to make arrangements to eat dinner last night. He didn't want him passing out. It would make him look like a poor host.

"And you need to take the GAZ with us."

There was no way he was letting him walk to the city alone when the border guards had seen him cross. Even one spy with another radio...

And China's holidays weren't exempt from the heavier bombing. North didn't trust that his 'visit' on Liberation Day wouldn't spur America to up his attacks even more today, even without confirmation he was here. He already thought he was anyway.

"If only I had my own vehicle." China sighed dramatically. "Alas."

"Too bad you don't," North said flatly.

He'd had to pick out an officer's transport to wait for him to get back over the border. He couldn't risk the name 'Mao Zhilong' being seen on China's special transportation permit if he went hitchhiking. Not today.

China lifted his face from the pillow, squinting in the bright glow of the flashlight. "Has anyone ever told you you're utterly shameless?"

"Just now," the Korean answered immediately. "Up."

He went to grab China under the arms and haul him up, but hesitated.

He still didn't understand how his comrade was so casually... touchy. At their dinner, his legs had kept brushing against North's. At one point his knee had bumped against the side of his folded leg and been content to stay there while he talked about operas he'd seen, a topic North couldn't even remember how they had got on. CCCP was the same way, always touching him on the shoulder or arm like it was the easiest thing possible. And the way they'd hugged each other on Liberation Day, like it was so natural...

Whenever North touched someone, he was hyperaware that he was doing it. He hadn't absorbed a single thing China had said after his knee touched him, too focused on the pressure against his skin. Outside of his people on holidays, he was always waiting for the chance to withdraw, or for them to. He was fine initiating contact on the battlefield, to haul a comrade to safety or hold him down for the medics, but outside of that it felt like... an imposition.

It *was* an imposition. He wanted to dig his fingers into China's ribs and heave him to his knees, at least. And it wasn't like the other country ever paid any mind to *his* comfort. So he shouldn't care.

He noticed the glint of China's eye peering up at him from the folds in his pillowcase, squinted mischievously, like he was ready

for him to grab him.

He looked away, changing the direction of his hands to twist, grabbing his boots instead.

'Stupid.'

He'd had no issue when they did on-the-spot sparring, easily jabbing him in the ribs and grappling with him on the ground, just like he had no issue doing it to his provinces. He was capable of grabbing North Hamgyong by the shoulders to force him to kneel. But patting him on the back after an arduous day of labour was impossible.

Why was it so easy to reach out to hurt people, but not to just... touch them?

He curled his fingers into his palms, feeling them throb through the bandages, and the pulse of China's blood in his veins as he had held his life in his hand.

It hadn't been that way with South. Touching him had been as natural as breathing. More so. Kim Il-sung was the only other person he came even close to that with, and even then...

"Comrade, come back to me."

China's sing-song broke him out of his reverie, and he realized he'd been staring blankly at the boot in his hand, the other one on his foot already. The other man was finally sitting up, or at least propped up on his palms, the thin blanket half-draped over him.

He smiled. "No flying away on my birthday."

North snapped his gaze away, hurriedly shoving on his other boot. "It isn't your birthday."

"Ah ah," he chided, unbuttoning his nightshirt. "That's your complex to bear. *I* do consider this my birthday, and I expect lots of special treatment for it, especially if you aren't giving me a gift."

A year ago, the entitlement in the words might have made North

bristle. But he knew him well enough by now to know he was joking.

"You'll get special treatment, alright," he muttered. "I'm ordering South Pyongan to push you out of the truck."

"I suppose that means I'll have to sit up front with you then," China lilted, seamlessly outmaneuvering him.

North huffed, not refuting him as he stood up to put on his tunic. As had become holiday protocol, he would be changing into his less-worn one after breakfast, when he put on fresh bandages. But not the white dress uniform yet. He wanted to visit some of the Chinese units stationed around Pyongyang before the banquet.

Well, he didn't want to. But he needed to.

He picked up one of his epaulets, holding it so the sides cut into his tender palm, gazing down at the emblem. Then he fastened it and its twin to his shoulders.

Even if he was going to change, he had to put them on. It was his duty. One he needed to prove to his provinces, especially North Hamgyong, that he could bear.

As his comrade began to put on his jacket, still dragging his heels, North hurried from the room, taking his flashlight- and China's- with him.

—

"And you're sure everything is ready?"

SH let out a fondly exasperated sigh as Korea demanded the same thing from her yet again.

*'They've probably only gotten **more** ready since the other four times you've asked.'*

She didn't say that. It was nice he was worrying about something like this for once, and she didn't want to shame him for it. Especially not when he'd been so awkward and... she didn't want to

say 'sheepish' when he asked her to set it up.

"Yes, Korea," she said instead. "The recital went well. All our comrades have been working hard with the instructions I gave them before I left."

She'd had to scramble to do it. Korea had woke her up early the day after Foundation Day and assigned the task to her. Which meant she had to rush around Pyongyang like her life depended on it, just barely getting back in time to catch her transport to Hamhung.

But at least she hadn't had to ride with North Hamgyong. Always nice.

"I'm ready, too," she assured him. "But are you sure you want me to per-?"

"Shh!" Korea hushed her sharply, looking around at the stretch of underground hall they were in, eye narrowed.

They were in an offshoot that dead-ended in a meeting room, metres down from the main corridor, where a few Party members were hurrying by, putting the final touches on the mess hall.

Korea glared in that direction. SH knew he was expecting China to poke his head around the corner.

"He's with his soldiers," she said helpfully.

"That's what he wants you to think," Korea muttered, keeping his eye on the hallway.

Placating his paranoia, SH kept her voice down, and shaped her words a little more vaguely. "Are you sure you want me there tonight?"

"Yes," he said immediately, then twitched towards her. "Are you comfortable with it?"

He sounded alarmed, so SH quickly assured him she was.

He hadn't asked before because he'd known she would be. She hadn't meant to make him doubt it.

"I'm just worried I don't know the steps as well," she confessed.

Even if she was tolerable at the performing arts (more than tolerable, according to Yun-hui, and a few other people, she supposed), she still didn't feel like she was amazing at them. Not when she wasn't dying of hypothermia and exhaustion, anyway.

"I didn't have much time to practice." She'd been allowed to return from her province three days early to do it, but that wasn't as much time as the three weeks the rest of the troupe had had.

"You'll do fine," Korea dismissed. "He's always praising you anyway."

SH straightened a little at that. She knew China had liked her performance of *'Aegukka,'* and had griped about missing her May Day one because of his injury. And of course he was always bringing up her art. He'd told her he loved the Foundation Day piece she had made, and that Korea did, too, to her relief. She'd been worried after he looked at it the way he had when she gave it to him.

But it was nice to hear that their comrade had been complimenting her to her Countryhuman, too. It meant it really wasn't just flattery.

But...

"Wait a second." She narrowed her eyes at Korea. "Are you just using me to show off?"

He tilted his chin, not answering, and she let out an amused puff of air.

And a little touched. Korea was a perfectionist, but he thought her skills were good enough to demonstrate. And he hadn't even heard *'Aegukka.'*

"I'll make sure to do our country proud," she assured him.

He opened his mouth, then shut it. "You had better," he said gruffly. Then his brow crinkled. "Do you think-?"

He cut himself off, spinning in an abrupt circle. SH had to step back into the rough stone wall to avoid being bumped.

"This is stupid," he growled with sudden aggravation. "We have more important things to worry about than entertaining foreigners."

"It's more thanking them for all they've done for us," SH pointed out, and he made another growling sound.

"You've lost valuable days, days you *should* have been in your and North Hamgyong's provinces preparing our people for winter."

He said it like he was mad at her, despite being the one that gave her the orders.

"Everything is going well, Korea," she soothed.

As well as it could when not a single one of their towns hadn't been reduced to ashes, and their villages were swollen with refugees and dependent on supply lines that were constantly under attack.

"The harvest is almost all in, the autumn planting is mostly finished, and our comrades in my province are rallying the villagers to start kimchi-making, clearing roads, and getting everything else ready," she told him again, like she had when they gave their reports at dinner yesterday. "And even the North Hamgyong organs are carrying everything out diligently."

That 'even' was *not* a dig at certain people she couldn't avoid naming because he shared one with the province she'd been in. It was because they'd had so many left deviations in the Party branch there, and that issue with his former Provincial People's Committee chairman. That was all.

Flicking away the glimmer of anger she felt at the thought of that person, she said gently, "Our people will be fine, Korea."

Most of them would be anyway.

She reached out a hand, but he flinched back from it. By the way he tensed, she knew he'd done it more noticeably than he'd meant to.

She had to get better at that. She knew he must feel awful, he didn't need her making his burns worse. She'd managed to resist hugging him on Foundation Day because of them, but it was harder to control the instinctive comfort she wanted to give him.

"They still could have used you there," he muttered as she withdrew her hand.

"I did work here, too," she told him. "I didn't just practice all the time."

She'd visited their railway workers, donated blood, and worked on her posters, churning out more designs of Yankee soldiers murdering civilians and getting their 'brains' smashed in by the KPA.

Conveniently, she forgot to tell Korea most of them had been rejected. 'Too gory' again. Which was why she finally had a suitable one to hang in the bunker.

"And it's really nice that you *are* thinking about this," she said. "It's sweet."

His eye flared, and he snapped, "It isn't 'sweet.' It needs to be done."

She closed the jaws of her trap. "Then it's a good thing I was here to do it."

He hunched, glaring recalcitrantly off to the side.

"...Whatever. It's already over."

"Not until tonight." SH looked to the side, hearing more voices echoing down the rough stone halls. "Oh, the banquet guests are arriving. We should get in there."

Korea shifted slightly, eyeing the door to the vacant meeting room.

She didn't attempt to touch him again. Just smiled as she stepped in front of it.

"Don't you think?"

Her Countryhuman glowered at her, but looked away like he hadn't been considering it.

"Let's go."

"Do you think you could-?"

But he was already gone, leaving SH to finish tiredly, "Eat something this time."

He'd refused breakfast again this morning. And dinner last night. And asking Liaotung (casually) had confirmed he'd barely been eating at the Amnok River, sneaking his rations into the other workers' sacks when he thought no one was looking.

She had felt hopeful when he stumbled back into the clearing on Foundation Day somehow looking nauseous and as close to sated as he ever got at the same time, and stood there swaying and avoiding eye contact with her while China started to wash the dishes they'd brought back (SH had volunteered before long, since it looked like if she didn't, Korea wouldn't be sleeping). But it looked like he was still being like this.

'That just means I have to keep trying.'

She nodded confidently to herself, marching after Korea to join the Chinese at their celebration, hopefully the last one they would have to have in their country.

Or maybe it's only easy to reach out when you have an excuse.

Important to me that North acts like a weird little freak when it comes to acts of friendship. 'They hadn't spoken about that night' like they tore each other's clothes off in the throes of passion instead of China giving him a noodle.

With the acceptance that there will be three parts to this, I

have done you the kindness of cutting this 13000+ word chapter into two. We get a rare shorter one today.

The phrase 'something wicked this way comes' has always been associated with that 'dark beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born' line to me. I thought they were the same poem. No. I just remembered something wicked is from Macbeth, so I looked that poem up and I'm sure I have never heard it before. I don't know why I know that line.
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
I also thought it was some hardcore anti-Christian poem. But no. 'Tis about war.

Feast and Famine

The banquet was being held in the same mess hall the last National Day had- a natural cavern that had been expanded manually, the rock carved back and tamed. More work had been done in the year since, leaving it a friendlier space for sheltering civilians during air raids and hosting mass meetings. Extra decorations had been added in advance of the holiday. A scarlet carpet had been spread out in the hallway leading to it, flanked by China's five-star flag and their red-star one. More of them stood near the long tables set out inside, and hung from the walls. The number of lanterns drilled into the stone had doubled, and electrical lights were now placed overhead. The dark stone had had its rough-hewn edges covered by cheerful red banners with slogans written in white lettering in both Korean and Mandarin. *'HAPPY NATIONAL DAY TO OUR CHINESE COMRADES,' 'LONG LIVE KOREAN-CHINESE FRIENDSHIP,'* and *'GLORY TO THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S VOLUNTEERS'* were a few she saw.

She also saw, to her delight, that her painting had been used. The canvas was set up in a prominent location near the wooden stage at the back of the cavern, presiding over the tables along with a few others depicting scenes of Chinese and Korean soldiers.

Hers was a moment she'd witnessed in Mangyongdae when visiting the School for Bereaved Family of Revolutionary Martyrs. A PVA unit had been resting there on their way back from the front. One of the men had tried to go to sleep under the shade left by a ruined house, only to get shaken awake by an older woman and forcibly dragged over to her mostly intact one, where she'd made him sit next to her son, who looked to be home on leave, and ignored his protests to serve him a bowl of rice hash. In the painting, the Korean soldier had an arm around the Chinese one, both of them laughing in between bites of hash, while the mother in her choson-ot looked proudly on.

SH hadn't intended on painting it. Scenes like that just weren't encouraging her creative juices to flow lately. But she'd thought it was cute, and so saved it in her heart. And when the General Political Bureau of the army commissioned (well, it was for free, so maybe it was more like 'recruited') her a few months back to get something ready for China's National Day, with no inspiration coming from her own mind, she'd chosen that one. It had only been finished two days ago.

Some of the Chinese soldiers in the room were already gathered around it, praising the detail. SH (with a little strategic sidling) caught a few snatches of them reminiscing about their own experiences in their villages, praising their villagers' hospitality and laughing about how it seemed aunties were the same everywhere.

She gave a satisfied nod. *That* was what she wanted to inspire with her art. Pieces shouldn't just be looked at and admired, they should inspire *feeling,* and reflect the observer's own life.

Art wasn't about the art, it was about the people experiencing it. They shouldn't just look at her motivationals and appreciate the men and women with their burgeoning harvests and lush fields- they should think about their real comrades and how hard they were working to keep them all fed, so they would be inspired to work just as hard.

And her war posters shouldn't just strike anger in the witness. They needed to see the blood on the Yankees' hands and know that it wasn't just paint. Their neighbours and friends, their families, and all of their countrymen had been made to suffer because of them, because America couldn't just keep his hands to himself. All of the pale, blood-soaked ones in her art were his, and all of the crimson fluid splattered across them came from the well inside of SH that he and all of his puppets had filled with her people's blood.

Those left needed to see those crimes and not just feel rage, but *know* it. They needed to hate the Yankees as deeply as possible, so they would keep fighting. And so they wouldn't get complacent even after a ceasefire.

But it still wouldn't be enough. They could never hate the Yanks as

much as they hated them.

Because they didn't, not truly.

It was a truth that made the dark thing growl, but one she'd understood a long time ago, lying in the dark and listening to someone else's breathing, a bite mark burning on her breast. Their puppets did, the southern troops. They hated them for the crimes Rhee's clique had told them the KPA had committed against their families, or because the world they wanted threatened their officers' privileges and powers. But not the foreigners.

None of the men in her cage had ever hurt her because they hated her. They hadn't- done any of what they had because of it. They had choked and beaten and bitten her, *violated* her not because they felt any hate in their hearts, but because they felt nothing at all.

Some men that hurt women might hate them. But the majority simply didn't see them as human. The hatred of them that was baked into almost every society in the world, or at least all those SH had ever heard of, wasn't born of true hatred, of the fury of being wronged or oppressed. It was born of apathy. The same apathy which Japan had stared through her with as he called her 'it' or 'the province.' Anything but what could mark her as a person.

His people had been the same way, as were the Yankees now. They didn't decimate their villages because they hated them, they didn't cut their electricity and scorch their fields because of it. They were told to hate them, and they did, in a way. But there was no *feeling* in it. No Yankee poster could ever rouse someone across the sea to gnash their teeth and shed bitter tears, because there wasn't truly anything to hate Korea *for.* The Yanks didn't hate them for what they had done, the majority didn't even hate them for what they believed because their hatred for Communism was the same- they were told to feel it, and so they did.

They hated them the way men hated women. For *what* they were- Communists, Koreans, foreigners- and not *who* they were. To them, there was no 'who.'

There was no such thing as 'too gory' when it came to their

propaganda. Because no matter what horrors SH showed her people, no matter how hard she tried and succeeded at stoking their fires, it could never be enough. She was teaching them to hate people- their enemies taught the ones butchering them to hate things.

The thing inside of her uttered a low growl she felt resound in her clenched throat, and she suddenly realized it had a claw through the wall.

Anyway!- she beat at the appendage with her paintbrush- tonight was a celebratory night. The only thing anyone in here should be feeling was admiration for their Chinese comrades, and gratitude from them that their efforts were appreciated.

Even if it took a few too many coats of paint to seal the hole the shadow left.

She straightened up, smoothing the skirt of her dress uniform, before striding over to greet Deng Hua and the other officers with Korea (and make sure her cousins gave suitably polite greetings).

No North Hamgyong. Hm. Oh well! Maybe he'd gotten caught in a raid.

One couldn't hope. One also couldn't not hope. One felt nothing about him at all.

Deng Hua had a more cheerful face than Peng Dehuai (not a very high bar), but greeted her just as respectably. SH had heard that he'd been reluctant to take command of the PVA after Chen Geng, uncertain that he had the skill for it. But he seemed to have settled into the role well. He didn't seem to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, at least.

After, she took her seat near the head of one of the long tables, covered with a cloth of good-quality fabric the colour of the banners on the walls. Like last year, Korea had scattered the provinces around the room so they could mingle with as many Chinese soldiers as possible. Also like last year, he'd seated her several tables over from where he would be sitting, so she couldn't

coax him to eat.

She was also a couple seats down from South Pyongan, so she could rein her in if she got too rowdy. Her cousin was leaning over her chair, refusing to sit until she had to, already talking to some of the soldiers there.

"You comrades are from the 45th Division, yeah?"

"Yes, Comrade Province." The man across from her saluted. "134th Regiment, 4th Company, unit commander Ping Ziwei."

The 45th Division was in the 15th Army, if SH remembered right. They were on the front right now, down near the Kimhwa Triangle (she refused to call it the Iron one- she was *not* letting foreign men parts of her country as they pleased) and despite their neat uniforms, their slightly haggard faces and the scabbing cuts on them said they weren't new recruits on their way to join.

"Are you a model unit?" she asked, leaning over slightly.

"That's right, comrade." The commander flushed with pleasure, sitting up straighter. "My unit has had a perfect record ever since we came over last March."

They'd been here for the Fifth Phase Offensive then. SH debated asking if they'd recovered from their losses around the Hwacheon Reservoir to show she cared, but decided against it. It had been well over a year since then, and she already knew that they had. She didn't want him thinking she didn't, and was ignorant to how hard their allies were fighting.

"I've heard good things about the 15th Army," she said instead. "You've been holding out well against the Yankees near Pyonggang."

"Honoured to know we've been heard of," he said humbly. "But we don't deserve the praise. We've been losing ground recently. Just can't hold it with all those bombs."

SH's nails scraped at her thighs.

"But we won't get pushed back any further," a younger soldier with

slightly shaggy hair promised from next to her. "We've got a maze of tunnels built, and a firm hold on a good position. And I hear the 38th Army is making a push to take back a key position soon."

SH exchanged glances with South Pyongan. *'Oops.'*

His comrade across from him kicked him in the shin under the table. "Military confidentiality, *Yang."*

Yang winced, giving him an indignant look as he rubbed his calf. "It's not like I just told the cook. They're Korean Provincehumans!"

"No, your comrade is right." SH didn't want to get into the specifics of the Commands, not when the wall felt so fragile, so she said, "You never know who could be listening."

"Yeah," South Pyongan piped up. "Probably no Yanks, we'd see that fishbelly colour a ri away. But you never know when a traitor's lurking *right* around the corner."

The soldier jumped as she suddenly grabbed his shoulder, and he glanced over it instinctively, though there was just another table of soldiers there.

"You're right," he admitted shamefully. "My bad."

"Just be careful." SH gave him a reassuring smile, and his cheeks turned red.

"Yescomrade," he said quickly.

Sigh. She'd give him some allowance, just because he looked young enough for Korea to be his first combat experience. And because his comrade kicked him in the shin again.

The men's brief cross-table brawl (slapping fight) was interrupted by Deng Hua calling for his troops to sit down. The mingling PVA soldiers quickly headed for their seats with militant discipline as he began to address them, giving them praise for their efforts and passing on Peng Dehuai's from where he was still recovering in China.

SH subtly looked around as he spoke, finding her other cousins. Chagang was seated at the foremost table next to the stage, waiting for Korea to sit at the head, North Pyongan was at a round corner table with Laioxi (masked), Hae and Liaotung (also masked) were sitting behind her with another frontline unit, Hwang was also near the stage with a few political officers, and Kangwon had actually left the hospital for once, and was with a group of Chinese medics near the door, where he'd been trading field treatment experience, and probably setting up a blood delivery.

Really? Korea had told them all to make sure to be on time, but someone still wasn't here.

It was probably because she'd reminded all of them to be punctual, too, before they went their separate ways this morning, so now he was purposefully disobeying Korea's order just to feel like he was disobeying *her*. How immature could someone be?

She bet if she confronted him about it, he would find some way to twist it into her being responsible for his absence, like she hadn't just wanted everyone to be respectfully on time to celebrate their comrades' National Day and China's birthday. He'd blame it on her, just like he did with everything.

'You should know. It's your fault.'

The fabric of her skirt bunched between her fingers as the wall creaked menacingly, pressure mounting against it from the other side no matter how much paint she soaked it with. She was only able to gain a reprieve when the General's voice boomed around the hall, drawing her full attention back to the stage.

He'd taken Deng Hua's place, giving a brief speech thanking their comrades for their aid, and lauding the recipients of the Soldier's Medal of Honour in the room, both the current holders and the ones that would hold it after tonight.

Some people had feelings about foreigners getting one of the highest awards in their country, *the* highest for the Hero of the Republic title bestowed upon Peng Dehuai. *That* person was an idiot who had incorrect feelings about everything, though. Everyone else

in the country was solely touched that thousands of Chinese had done enough for their people and nation to be granted such a high honour.

SH kept her attention fully focused on the General and his warm words and warmer smile, using him to paint over the hole. Using him to paint harder when the door to the hall opened and someone came in, boots clomping on the stone floor.

She didn't look. She had spent years stupidly waiting to hear those footfalls coming up the hill. Maybe one day she'd finally be able to disassociate them with their owner, but it wasn't today.

Did he have to stomp? He was already late, the least he could do was come in quietly, with even a thimble of shame.

But she knew he didn't feel that. Not when he'd so easily blamed his mess and the mess that was him on her.

When the General was finished, Korea stepped onto center stage, surveying the room. SH surveyed him in turn, looking for signs of his lingering anemia, which he still hadn't recovered from (wonder why?). But his legs were solid, and his hands were hidden behind his back.

"Ever seen a Countryhuman in person before?" South Pyongan asked the soldiers under the cheers and whistles of the crowd greeting theirs.

"Actually, yeah," Yang said cheerfully. "We met Comrade Korea after your Liberation Day, right Liu?"

"Came down to the front to see how we were doing," Liu supplied from the other side of the table. "And bring us some words from Comrade China."

SH's brows shot up as she traded looks with South Pyongan around Yang. Her cousin gave a little shrug, silently saying she hadn't heard about that either.

The Hamgyong had known he went to visit their section of the front (something that made her more than a little nervous), but she

hadn't known he'd visited the Chinese divisions, too.

"He looked a bit rough, forgive me for saying, comrades," Ping Ziwei said, looking up at Korea on the stage.

SH couldn't exactly not forgive him for saying the truth. Even now Korea looked...

Her gaze flicked to him. He might not have any burns on his face, but he also had no bandages to hide the heavy shadow under his eye, or the sharp edges and hollows of his cheeks. And while more obvious signs of his anemia were hidden, the difference in shades between the flag above him and the one on his face wouldn't just be noticeable to an artist.

"But he insisted on meeting with us, even while we were under fire," the man continued.

"They say he visited the whole line without sleeping," Yang chimed in, eyes bright. "We even offered to let him rest, but he said he needed to make sure all of our comrades knew him and Comrade China were thinking of us."

'Without sleeping' was usually just a dramatic way of saying 'barely slept.' But SH knew for Korea it had almost definitely been literal.

*'So he was travelling the front without Chagang **and** without sleeping. **Great.**'* If she had hair, he would make it fall out.

But as even more nervous as that made her, it was still...

"You've got a good country there," Ping Ziwei praised, and SH smiled.

"I know," she said softly, looking back at Korea as the raucous greeting quieted down.

"Comrades," he said, his voice echoing in the underground hall, the walls bouncing his words back like they wanted those gathered to hear it better. "In less than a month it will have been two years since the People's Volunteer Army crossed the Amnok River to

Korea."

SH shifted, folding her hands tight. Korea stood rigidly, keeping that same even oration.

"Many of you crossed after, either to launch the Fifth Phase Offensive or to shore up the front against the enemy onslaught, as they have striven to steal even more of my people's land during their stalling of the ceasefire negotiations." There was a tinge of darkness in his words, echoed by the thing behind the wall. "But regardless of when you came to our country, you have all performed outstanding feats on behalf of Korea in the time you have been here. If I were to honour every one of your comrades who deserved it here today, this room would be overflowing, and the front would be undefended."

The soldier on the other side of SH made an amused noise, thinking Korea was adding a bit of levity to the speech with a semi-joke, not knowing that he didn't exactly 'joke' ever, let alone for something like this.

"China came to Korea's aid in- a desperate time, when no one else would. And-"

His eye flicked down to SH, skirting to the other provinces around the room, and not for the first time, she thought it might be better if they didn't come to events like this. It might make it easier for him.

"-we will be forever grateful for that," he finished. "I have given nothing but praise for your army on my Liberation Day and Foundation Day, and to all three of your commanders, and Comrades Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. And to Comrade China."

A smile ghosted across SH's lips at the begrudging way he tacked on 'dongji' to their ally's name. Maybe she should give him a disappointed brow, but she was sure the Chinese couldn't hear it, and it was very Korea of him. Though...

She subtly glanced around, confirming it.

Where *was* China?

"I've given a thousand praises and I could give a thousand more," Korea said soberly. "But they might mean more coming from someone else."

He lifted his head, his gaze travelling over the sea of heroes, and SH instinctively followed it, just as the doors at the back of the hall flew open. When she saw who stood silhouetted in the frame, she stood up out of shock, a number of Chinese following her.

"Hello, comrades," China said, smiling as he moved into the room. "Happy National Day."

He was dressed in the same slim black dress uniform he'd worn on Liberation Day, that SH hated to admit he wore incredibly well (and had refused to out loud when he tried to bait her to), the golden threading and red stars reflecting the glow of the lamps next to the entrance in shining pinpricks, and his leather boots polished to a gleam even in the dim light.

And he wasn't wearing a mask.

SH swung to look at Korea, though her mind had already put together that he must have sanctioned this. And she was right. He didn't look shocked or worried, or murderous, the way he had when China had first revealed himself to her and her cousins. He almost appeared relieved instead, and had already retreated out of the spotlight.

She would admit- she had a *tiny* moment where she wondered if he had orchestrated this solely to escape bearing the main responsibility of thanking the PVA.

But as the faces of the men and women around her transformed from stunned to delighted, eyes glowing like the stars on their Countryhuman's flag as they realized that it was really him, that he was here, she dismissed it.

Korea didn't run from responsibility. He had given China permission to reveal himself because he thought their foreign comrades deserved to see him, to know that he was here with them, even if they couldn't know how long he had been here with them.

To think anything else was the kind of cynicism a certain other person would have had, and probably did where he was standing in the shadows off to the side of the door. That it had even flickered across her mind shamed her.

"Comrade China!" someone across the room called, half a question and half a breathless exclamation.

"Yours sincerely."

China padded forward, differently than usual. He used his hips less, not moving in that sinuous glide that reminded SH of a ribbon being drawn through the air, but striding assertively, more like Korea moved. In fact...

She narrowed her eyes. It was a *lot* like Korea moved.

The Chinese country marched past his soldiers, casting a winning smile at one man as he brushed by, mounting the stage at the back and practically spinning into the limelight. Korea took another step away, clearly thinking about sneaking off and joining the General offstage, but China reached out without looking, taking his hand and tugging him in, not letting go.

SH recognized the sudden blank look on Korea's face. It was the one he wore when Hae would glomp him in public, or she would link their arms. He wanted desperately to shove the other man away, but couldn't in front of all the onlookers. He was effectively paralyzed.

"Comrades!" China called, the word flying like a songbird up to the stone ceiling. "No words can express how it lightens my heart to finally meet with my volunteers! Not a day has gone by where I haven't thought about my comrades fighting so bravely across the Yalu."

He was speaking differently, too. The silk in his voice had roughened slightly, his fingers running over cotton now instead. It wasn't enough to make him sound like a completely different person, like he did sometimes when he sang, but it was enough for SH to think if she heard it over a telephone, she wouldn't

immediately be able to place that it was him.

"Comrade China!" one of the political officers called out, concern colouring the name. "We're honoured to see you, but you shouldn't be here. America is still trying to claim you've been fighting in Korea."

China waved his free hand dismissively. "I'm well aware that our enemy has been persisting with his slander. I held back from our comrade's invitation to his Foundation Day-"

Korea shot him a look.

"-and kept my presence unobtrusive on his Liberation Day for that very reason. But this is *our* day, the day China's freedom was truly declared, one my soldiers have chosen to spend away from their homeland, fighting for that of our neighbours. You deserve to be celebrated for that, don't you think?" China half-turned his head to smile at Korea before looking back out at his comrades. "And should a free country bend to the whims of a paper tiger and neglect his people out of fear?"

"No!" one table roared, winning a toothy smile from him.

"Exactly," their country crowed. "If China let the disapproval of a few puppets stop him from marking the day his soldiers fought so arduously for, then we wouldn't have it at all. And if the United Nations sees fit to waste both of our time and take me to trial again, then I'll just have to prove my innocence once more. They can't punish an innocent man for a crime he never committed."

They could. They were punishing Korea for the 'invasion' they had laid at their feet. SH had no doubt that even if China *was* innocent, it wouldn't matter.

And he wasn't.

She could tell Korea was thinking the same thing. He subtly tried to pull his hand free, but only got it trapped more thoroughly.

"And so long as I get back before midnight, not even our antagonist can complain," China said impishly. "That isn't anywhere

near enough time to heap all the praise I'd like to on all of you, but it is enough to at least share part of our National Day together." His voice softened slightly. "And the rest can come after you come home."

SH had to look down at the tablecloth as Yang sucked in a sharp breath.

Thousands of soldiers perished at the front every day, even without offensives planned. And America's recesses hadn't stopped.

"I had to come today," China said, his voice tender without being quiet. "Because every day, you give your lives for me and our comrades. Every day you're fighting with all your strength for our joint Liberation, and to Reunify Korea the way you Reunified China, and will one day Reunify us completely. And because even with all your courage and will, every day might be your last. If I couldn't spare even one to make sure you knew none of it went unappreciated, then the pamphlets our enemy showers you with would be true."

SH realized that she'd become familiar enough with their ally to wait for him to add something like 'And I would hate to let him be right about anything.' But he didn't.

"I would spare every day, if I could," China told them. "I would be here, fighting by your side, just as we fought against the Japanese and the Nationalist cliques together. But I can't."

The regret behind the words was like an open wound, causing SH's heart to squeeze for him, before she remembered he was a liar and he quite literally had been here for almost two years now.

'Dangerous.' She thought she understood how he'd convinced the UN he wasn't guilty.

"I have no choice but to work with our comrades on the homefront to make sure our country is shaped into one you're proud to come home to," he continued. "And leave you in the capable hands of our Comrade Deng. And our Comrade Korea."

Korea straightened as focus shifted to him, along with China's smile.

"This may only be our second meeting," the Chinese country lied. "But he sends me letters frequently, and all of them are filled with the highest praise for our People's Volunteers, and concern for your well-being."

Korea hunched slightly, eye twitching as he clearly fought not to glare at him.

"He's going to kill him tonight," South Pyongan inched over to whisper in her 'ear.'

That... was probably true. Hopefully SH could talk him out of it. He didn't need to aggravate his burns any more.

"As our comrade trusted us to come to his people's aid, I have nothing but trust in his care for you." China raised his head, smiling proudly. "Just as I trust that we made the right decision in coming here, and that I made the right decision the day I placed my faith in our Communist Party, and myself in your hands. This day is the third anniversary of the day it was proven that that faith and trust weren't misplaced."

His smiled softened, eyes dipping at the edges. "But I never doubted that they weren't."

An older soldier made a strangled sound before glancing away, pressing his fist over his mouth, the way men did when they were trying not to cry. China smiled kindly at him, then looked at Korea. SH's Countryhuman hesitated, and she thought he might stay silent.

But then his throat flexed, and he said, "And I don't doubt that the fires of this war have forged the relationship between Korea and China's people into one of unyielding steel. That you are spending another National Day in lands foreign to you, fighting for people whose language not all of you understand, isn't something that goes unappreciated. No matter what happens, Korea will never forget that when the world was against us, China-'s people stood with us."

'No matter what happens.'

SH swept that behind the wall, one corner of her lips lifting. He'd be happy to know the Mandarin he was speaking in hadn't conveyed his hesitation properly. He'd be less happy to know that her Korean translation had clearly captured his 이 changing to 의.

"To the end, Comrade Korea!" Ping Ziwei shouted, holding his glass up. "'Go ahead bravely for the millions of Koreans, to destroy the enemy of our fallen comrades!'"

SH recognized the quote from their informational debriefs. It was from the diary of the Chinese soldier that had drowned saving one of their village children. Korea clearly knew it, too.

"And win the War to Resist American Aggression and Aid Korea!" China called back, thrusting their linked hands in the air. "Long live Korea and China's friendship!"

Korea had startled when his arm was suddenly dragged up, but he recovered to shout, "Long live the joint struggle against Imperialism!"

"And-" China's teeth flashed as his eyes squinched up. "Happy National Day, comrades."

The moment his words finished falling into them, the hall erupted, the Chinese soldiers whistling and shouting stormy *"URA"*s with all their might, filling the cavern with echoes of joy as they stomped their boots and clapped their hands.

China beamed, still holding Korea's hand up, the other raised like he was about to sweep them both down into a curtain call bow.

It certainly made a picture, both of the men standing with their shoulders back and heads up under their flags crossed high on the wall, and between the long banners that flanked them, proclaiming *'LONG LIVE KOREA'* and *'LONG LIVE CHINA'* respectively. Korea's white uniform gleamed like fresh-fallen snow and China's black garb glistened like ink, but their epaulets and pins glittered in matching crimsons and golds. China's skin also complemented

Korea's nicely (though maybe SH was biased, crimson and navy being the dominant colours on their flag).

If, theoretically, she *did* paint something for China after the war was over, it would make for a gorgeous piece. Though she would brighten her Countryhuman's complexion, and remove the bandages wrapped around his fingers to better showcase the contrast where they linked with China's.

He was being a good sport about it, too, not trying to- Ah. No. She'd looked closer and could see he was squeezing China's hand back too hard, his arm slightly quivering with the strain, like he was trying to break his fingers. It was the other country who was being a good sport.

SH internally sighed. '*Korea.*'

Maybe she shouldn't paint it for China. Her Countryhuman probably wouldn't like the idea of someone else having a portrait with him in it. But she used the few moments as her country stood on the stage with their comrade, hands woven together and held up like a torch, to burn the image into her mind anyway. If she-

She *would* get a chance to paint it. The war would be over by next year.

They would have a ceasefire, at least.

On stage, China finally lowered their hands, loosening his grip. SH was too far away to scold Korea for how he cringed away, holding his wrist like the foreigner had been the one trying to snap *his* bones. At least he only did it for a second, and the Chinese were focused on their own Countryhuman, swarming him as he jumped lightly off the stage.

Most of them weren't as handsy as their people were with Korea, constraining themselves to taking his hand or patting his shoulder, like they were reassuring themselves he was real, but a few, some of the officers she recognized from being stationed around Pyongyang, that had been in the theatre on Foundation Day, were more bold, wrapping him in embraces. One even grabbed him by the back of

the neck, pulling him in to touch their foreheads together, and China easily bent to let him, closing his eyes as he leaned in.

It looked like the Chinese really didn't find the way the Koreans treated Korea on holidays so strange after all.

"Are you not taking off your mask?" she asked the person that had come to stand beside her.

Liaotung looked at the crowd of people surrounding the stage, her snowy eyes wistful under her crimson scarf. "We're not as good of actors as him. We can't risk someone connecting Liao Juān and Liao Shī to Liaotung and Liaoxi."

"I'm sorry."

There was always a yearning, watching Korea with their people. Not to be touched in the same way, but to be embraced by their presence. For SH it was always fulfilled when their comrades were finished with their Countryhuman, and would come to thank her for her efforts and compliment her on her art. But the Chinese provinces couldn't satisfy that yearning. It must leave them with an unbearable ache. Especially when they had only been able to celebrate two of their National Days as themselves before this.

"Don't be," Liaotung said softly, eyes still fixed on her people. "We chose this. And we'll get to be with them one day."

One day.

SH squeezed her comrade's arm comfortingly, and she gave her a grateful smile before retreating to her table again, leaving her people to revel with her Countryhuman.

Korea had slunk off stage, going to stand to the side, next to the General. The man was watching their allies fondly. Neither he nor Deng Hua had seemed surprised to see China maskless either.

He looked over at Korea as he loomed next to him, holding his wrist again. SH got to witness her Countryhuman give a sideways glance to the man, who reached over to pat his hand. Only then did he remove it behind his back, like it had been cleansed.

Her country really was something.

The awarding of medals was even more exuberant than last year, the more somber mood of ceremony dispersed by the constant chatter of the Chinese soldiers talking amongst each other, sometimes just repeating the same thing in different ways, little ripples of incredulous delight that spread through the room. "Comrade China is here, he actually came to visit us, he's *here."*

The Soldier's Medals of Honour and the Orders of Freedom and Independence were theirs to give out, but China stood next to Korea as he pinned the heavy gold medals to their chests, and pressed the multi-coloured ribbons into their palms. SH could tell the contact made him uncomfortable, but he was bearing it well.

The Chinese didn't have their own medals. Liaotung had said their Party leadership considered the system as promoting harmful individualism. SH didn't agree with that view- in her experience, medals and honours just encouraged people to work and fight harder, aiding and inspiring their comrades in the process- but it was one she understood. She was just glad they were okay with being honoured the way they used in Korea.

Deng Hua gave his personal congratulations to each of them, too, and so did China. Every soldier, male or female, infantry or engineer, got pulled into his embrace as soon as Korea was done pinning them. He held each of them tightly, and even though the embraces weren't long, SH got the sense they all ended reluctantly.

It was strange to think that so many foreigners would be carrying one of the most prestigious awards in their country. When the war was over the Chinese would take them home to display on their mantles, or hide away in a box somewhere if they shared their Party's view of honours. The Soldier's Medal of Honour had been designed just after the war broke out, only made with the expectation that it would be their own soldiers wearing it, a few hundred given out in the short time it would take to reach Busan. But now there would be thousands of Chinese soldiers heading back across the Amnok River with a piece of their country pinned over their hearts.

She wondered if that was why Korea's jaw looked so tight.

When the ceremony was over, the food was brought out, and SH had to compose herself.

It was similar fare to the last National Day, simple but nutritious. Chicken-ginger soup that SH yearned for, though she knew her own would be a little lacking, fresh kimchi made with recently harvested cucumbers, patkalguksu (the red beans in the patjuk had been a big hit last year), and rice, of course. But the sudden smell of meat and rich broth made her mouth tingle.

"Oi." South Pyongan almost jumped out of her seat to grab SH before she could hustle off to help the cooks set the tables. "Uh-uh, no way. We're *guests* at this banquet. And what do *guests* do?"

"Eat the food," SH answered reluctantly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Her cousin forcibly pushed her back down into her chair. "No relapsing."

"Helping our comrades isn't exactly the same as... what we talked about." She glanced around, not wanting to elaborate, but their Chinese tablemates were all still clustered around their Countryhuman.

"Yeah, and having a little bit of soju isn't the same as having a bottle," South Pyongan retorted. "Sit and stay, cuz."

SH pouted slightly, eyeing the women as they set the plates and bowls of food on the tables. She couldn't resist taking hers directly from the comrade that came to give them theirs, helping her with the rest, too.

"Addict," her cousin judged once they were alone.

"This looks delicious, doesn't it?" she asked innocently.

"Total addict."

"Comrades," China called, voice rising above his admirers'. "Why don't you enjoy our Korean comrades' hospitality? I won't go

anywhere. Well, not so long as the food is good."

His soldiers laughed and dispersed to their chairs, drawn by the smell of the steam wafting off their bowls. They started to eat right away, shovelling food into their mouths, in a rush to get back to spending time with their Countryhuman.

China walked over to a table, confidently perching on the edge of someone else's chair, the man eagerly making room for him, offering him a bite of chicken from his own chopsticks, which his Countryhuman took to the sound of cheers, the other men crowding in to feed him.

'Vulture,' SH decided, turning to her own meal.

"Comrade South Hamgyong," Yang said from around a mouthful of rice. "Where's your chicken?"

SH pulled her bowl of soup closer. Unlike his, which had chunks of shredded white meat floating in it, hers only had scallions and jujube floating in the cloudy liquid, and was smaller. Her spot of the table was also missing the thick red slurry and knife-cut noodles of the patkalguksu.

"This is our Chinese comrades' day," she said brightly. "We've saved all the good bits for you."

She didn't tell them the truth- that they needed to ration every bit of food that the could for winter. But it wasn't like the Chinese were unaware. Yang looked down at his bowl, guilt flickering across his eyes.

"It's okay," SH assured him, even though samgyetang was one of her favourite dishes. It was what Kim Jong-suk had made for her that night in her cabin. "This is more than enough."

Yang frowned. After a moment of hesitation, he plucked a piece of meat out of his bowl and tried to place it in hers.

"Oh no." SH blocked it with her hand. "It's okay, really."

"I'll take it if she doesn't want it," South Pyongan volunteered,

leaning back in her chair. Then at SH's look, said, "Okay, fine, never mind," and returned to attacking her own soup.

Yang's chopsticks didn't retreat. "Your food situation isn't good right now, right?"

No. Especially not after the floods. SH hadn't got the calculations from Hae yet, but they were at a point where any loss of farmland could be disastrous.

"But you're generous enough to share what you have with us," the Chinese soldier continued. "Just like your civilians." His gaze went to her painting, then back to her. "I couldn't keep my meal down if you didn't get to have even a little meat."

SH watched the broth drop from the piece of white meat, a small dark stain blooming over the crimson tablecloth underneath.

She had to swallow back her saliva before she moved her hand away, consenting. "Alright. But just one piece."

Yang placed it in her bowl, satisfied.

"And just one piece for Comrade South Pyongan," South Pyongan said hopefully. "Maybe two because she's so awesome?"

SH gave her cousin a dry look, but her shamelessness seemed to win their Chinese comrades over, as Ping Ziwei and the man beside her both slipped her chicken from their bowls, which she greedily shoved directly in her mouth, making a noise you shouldn't in polite company, but SH was too far away to nudge her for.

And she knew she'd have to restrain herself to avoid making the same one. Though she was saving her chicken for last, as it was the best part.

She chatted with the Chinese soldiers, learning their full names. Liu Tao was from Liaotung, and had signed on towards the end of the civil war, only seeing a few battles, and Ping Ziwei was a veteran of the anti-Japanese struggle. Yang Xiaolong was from the Sichuan region, all the way in the south, and Korea was his first time seeing combat, like she expected.

"Why did you join the army?" she asked curiously, and he rubbed the back of his head.

"Oh, y'know, I just thought it would be cool to be a soldier."

"Oh, what's this?" Liu Tao raised his thick brows. "That's not what you told me."

Ping Ziwei leaned over to smack him upside the skull. "Don't give some bullcrap answer to an allied general."

Yang Xiaolong winced, clicking his tongue. "Alright, alright. I joined because..." He tapped his forefingers together, looking down at his bowl. "I really hated to think that Korea still wasn't free when China was. You won your war before we did, so it just seemed... unfair that we'd be truly Liberated before you." His voice got more muttery. "I wanted to help."

"Now there's a better answer," someone purred from behind them, and SH startled.

Yang Xiaolong startled even more, jumping to his feet and whirling around into a salute. "Comrade China!"

He bumped against his chair, almost falling backwards, only saved by his Countryhuman precisely grabbing him by his collar and righting him.

"At ease, comrade," he said lightly. "No need to hurt yourself over me."

The man's cheeks were painted almost as red as his country's as he ducked his head.

"And there's no need to be afraid of sincerity," China added. "No hearts were ever moved by disaffection."

*'Aren't **you** disaffected most of the time?'* SH wondered wryly.

But not when he was singing, she supposed. Or on the stage just now.

"Mm," she agreed. "It means a lot more to us that you came because you wanted to help, and not just to wield a gun."

"Even if it *is* embarrassing that you said it out loud," South Pyongan teased, earning a look from her cousin.

'If you want to talk embarrassing, I seem to remember you saying some pretty sincere stuff to me.'

South Pyongan made a face. ***'Never** bring that up.'*

"Don't listen to her," SH soothed Yang Xiaolong. "It's never embarrassing to care."

"R-Right," he stuttered, scarlet spreading to the rest of his face.

Sigh. Again.

SH suddenly realized that she was standing next to a foreign Countryhuman she 'didn't know well,' and hadn't even addressed him. She hurriedly turned, going to incline her head in a slight bow, but China placed a finger against her brow, stopping her.

"We've already met once, comrade," he said with a smile. "We're allies in the fight against Imperialism, so there's no need to be overly formal."

SH glanced sideways, finding Korea watching them with his eye narrowed. Even though it was only polite for a Provincehuman to bow to a foreign Countryhuman (they did it with CCCP after all), she had a feeling he wouldn't exactly be thrilled with her doing it to China at this stage, even if it was just for an act. And she probably wouldn't be the one receiving his ire for it.

"Of course," she said with what she hoped wasn't an overly-familiar smile. "I just didn't want to be impolite."

"What's a bit of impoliteness between friends?" China asked innocently. "Even though our acquaintance was brief, with how much your Countryhuman sings your praises to me, I feel like I know you as well as one of my own provinces."

SH knew Korea did *not* sing any of the provinces' praises to him, let alone in their fake letters. It was probably why he was showing her off tonight, to make up for withholding from bragging.

"Oh?" she said with the polite interest of someone who didn't know he was lying.

"En," China replied. "He's always going on about his talented little artist. Did you know our Comrade South Hamgyong actually created that big painting over there?" he said to his soldiers, gesturing at her canvas.

Yang Xiaolong's eyes widened. "You painted that?"

SH dipped her head demurely, and he exclaimed, "It's amazing!

"It isn't that good," SH denied.

"You kidding?" Liu Tao raised an eyebrow. "It looks just like one of those colour photographs."

"Better," Ping Ziwei appraised. "The colours look more real. When I looked at it I could've sworn we were walking through one of the villages we passed on the way here."

"I'm not-"

"What do we say when someone compliments us for something we don't suck at?" South Pyongan interrupted, coming over to take her by the back of the arms.

SH sighed. "Thank you," she said, which was still more humble than what her cousin would have. "But I haven't been painting very-"

"Nope, 'thank you,' full-stop."

SH blew out a puff of air, making the men chuckle.

"There we go, comrade," China said, smiling. "Humility never moved hearts either."

"I think some of your comrades over there want to talk to you." SH gestured vaguely across the room.

China followed the motion like there was actually a destination to it. "I believe you're right. Well comrades, enjoy the rest of your meals."

Yang Xiaolong saluted again, sitting back down to finish his patkalguksu with renewed vigour.

"By the way," China murmured into her 'ear,' making her twitch. "I can't help but notice that your Countryhuman's place setting is empty."

SH nodded to show she'd noticed, too, and he dipped his head, gliding away to another table.

She didn't entirely like that it felt like she was collaborating with China to get Korea to eat, but it was... nice that he genuinely seemed to want him to.

She knew she had to finish her own food first, or her Countryhuman would accuse her of wasting it if she approached. So she quickly returned to it, finishing off her cucumber kimchi, soaking up the last of the broth with a few spoonfuls of rice, plucking the scallions clinging to the sides of her bowl like scraps of emerald fabric into her mouth, and finally nibbling delicately on the piece of chicken, stopping herself from biting the ends of her chopsticks off with it.

She took a moment to savour it. They hadn't got to eat samgyetang on the hottest days this year, obviously, but the amount of people in the cavern had turned it slightly warm, so she could pretend.

Then she got up, giving South Pyongan a slight incline of her head towards their Countryhuman. Her cousin (mouth full of rice) raised her fist under the table. *'Go get 'em.'*

SH made her way across the room. Korea pretended he didn't see her coming.

The General had left after the medal-giving ceremony, but that

didn't affect her strategy much. She had never seen him try to make Korea eat, only ask her to, even though she was sure he was one of the only people that would have more success at it than her or her cousins. *The* only person now that Kim Jong-suk was gone.

Chagang had used to eat very meanderingly, finishing long after most of them. But recently he'd started eating with a militant swiftness, so his bowls were already clear, neatly stacked for a kitchen aid to take. He was talking to the soldiers next to him, but he gave her a brief glance as she approached.

'I tried.'

She let him know it was okay with her eyes. *'My turn.'*

"Korea," she said brightly, stopping next to him.

"No." The word was flat, and he didn't look at her.

The room was loud, and Deng Hua's seat on his left was empty, the commander taking the opportunity to confer with his political officers farther down the table, but she still kept her voice low.

"It's a banquet. It looks strange if you don't eat anything."

"It is a banquet for the Chinese," he said stonily. "Not me."

"People are noticing." She was sure they had.

Korea's hands tightened on his thighs. "I'm not hungry."

SH didn't let her eyes flick to see how his knees were trembling slightly, even though he was sitting down. "You didn't eat this morning."

His nails sank into his legs. "South Hamgyong. *Go."*

She sighed, exchanging looks with Chagang.

'I will keep trying,' his slightly dipping eyelids promised.

'Good luck.'

She returned to her seat, where South Pyongan was dramatically recounting her epic tales of military conquest. Since if SH opened her mouth, she would have to tell the truth, she kept quiet, keeping her counter of exaggerated or outright false details to herself, and keeping her eye on Korea.

Until he shot her a glare from across the heads between them. Then she suddenly found other things to watch while she waited for him to cool off.

The hall echoed with the sounds of laughter and cheers, pulling SH's attention to Hae, giggling as the men around her regaled her with tales from the front. There was Hwang, hunched over a booklet of some sort with one of the political officers, Kangwon, talking seriously at the table of medics, and North Pyongan with the Liaos, laughing about something or other.

Just by coincidence, SH's gaze drifted near the door. Her light mood curdled slightly as she saw who was standing there.

North Hamgyong had sat at his table for less than ten minutes (she'd happened to notice), wolfing down his portion of food before retreating to the shadows again, standing there with his arms crossed.

Didn't he know how unfriendly that made him seem? No, he definitely knew. That was why he was doing it.

He was looking up at the electrical lights, which did nothing to illuminate the dark look on his face. She bet he was grinding his teeth over 'wasting electricity' instead of being glad that they'd repaired their power stations enough that they could lighten this cavern for a brief two hours.

Somewhere behind her, a group of soldiers broke into song, led by China's clear, resonant voice.

They had even more to be thankful to the Chinese for than some of their cousins. The Battle of Lake Changjin had taken place in her province, where tens of thousands of Chinese soldiers had given their lives to repel the Yankee advance, freezing to death in the sub-

zero weather. It was *their* sacrifices that had allowed the KPA divisions in North Hamgyong's province to push down the coast without fear of being flanked, and they'd been there when Hungnam was decimated and freed.

That was probably why he hated them so much. Because they had helped free her province. Just like he hated Korea for freeing *her*. Just like he hated-

His eyes flicked to hers, like he felt them burning into him, and SH quickly looked away, before he could confirm they were.

She trembled slightly, fists grinding into the bandages around her thighs as she took deep breaths, trying to paint the dark thing back. It had punctured the wall again, something it had been managing with increasing ease, as easily as she could slide a pin though a piece of soggy mulberry paper. She could feel it leaking out, the claw turning to viscous black fluid as it seeped into the rest of her mind.

The singing, beautiful before, turned sharp and sour, stabbing at her ear drums and encouraging the thing to scrabble at the wall with its hind claws, trying to widen the breach. Her light meal churned in her stomach.

She hated that he could still make her feel this way, no matter how hard she worked to keep him out of her mind, refusing to think about anything he'd ever stabbed her with, pretending that all of Hamgyong was hers as she spoke with his villagers, that Korea had came to his senses and given it all to her, that he'd...

She didn't want to think about him that way. She didn't want to think about him at all. She wanted to paint him behind the wall with everything else, to trap him with the dark thing and keep it away from her.

Why did he have to make it so *difficult*?

When she looked back, he was gone.

The surge of anger left her, allowing her to shove the ink back

with ink paints, brushing it back behind the barrier, sealing it over with Chinese bayonets dripping with foreign blood.

It still felt too thin. She could feel the rancid darkness pressing against the wall, the way its sides rose and fell, pushing at the concrete like it was alive, too, like it was part of it.

"Uh, SH?"

She flinched as someone spoke in her ear slit, hand automatically seizing the sharp metal chopsticks on the table.

"Whoa, no stabbing." South Pyongan raised her hands, quickly leaning down to mutter, "Something's going on with Korea."

SH looked up, alarmed.

Korea looked like he was still sitting normally at the table, but she knew her Countryhuman well enough to see the signs that he wasn't feeling normal at all. His eye was darting around in its socket aggressively enough to see, and the cords on his neck were straining as he sank down in his chair, his shoulders starting to rise like a cat's hackles. It was the look he got when he felt like he was under attack, even though no one seemed to be talking directly to him.

Chagang hadn't noticed, and was facing away from her so she couldn't alert him. She stood up, prepared to hustle over, but Korea beat her to it, shooting out of his chair and taking off, walking too fast to be casual. In a flash, he'd left the hall, the wooden door slamming closed behind him.

SH winced as people glanced over. Kangwon half-stood, but she silently let him know she would handle it.

She couldn't follow right away, or their comrades might think something was wrong. So she hurried over to one of the cooks clearing a table, requisitioning another small bowl of soup. She was happy to give it to her- Korea had had to turn one down to her face.

With attention back on China, who had dragged more people into his impromptu concert, SH made a beeline for the door.

She raised her brows at Chagang as she passed. *'What happened?'*

He subtly shook his head, looking almost ashamed. *'I don't know.'*

SH hurried into the corridor, finding it empty. Before she ran outside to see if Korea had taken the GAZ and left them stranded again, she diverted down the dead end hall.

She could hear him from outside the thin door, an awful guttural gagging, though it didn't sound like anything was coming up.

'Probably because you haven't ***eaten*** *anything,'* she thought with a sharp pang of worry.

"Korea, are you in here?" she asked loudly. She opened the door slow, giving him time to hide anything he didn't want her to see.

"Go away," he growled, voice still thick.

He was off to the side of the door, near the wall. She thought he might have been leaning against it before she called out.

SH stepped in and away from the exit, giving him an open path to it.

"I brought you some soup," she said because she knew she couldn't say anything about what she'd heard.

His eye avoided the bowl in her hands like it was a blinding light.

"I don't want it."

"Yes you do," she said gently. "You just don't want to take it from someone else. But you're not."

"We lost almost *nine ri* of farmland," Korea snapped. "We can't afford to waste *anything."*

She had no idea how to make him see that him staying healthy and alive *wasn't* a waste. She never had. And she didn't think it would help to mention that she'd overheard the cooks talking about how Chinese Command had donated supplies to the banquet, for

likely the same reason China hadn't told him about it- it would just make it worse.

So she fell back on the one strategy she had, stepping closer as she lifted the bowl towards him, imbuing her voice with all the pleading and care she could.

"Please?"

Korea's eye finally dropped to the broth, wavering as he stared at it. She almost thought she had him, but then he tore it away, hunching as he turned away from her.

"I can't," he rasped, and he sounded so helpless for a moment that SH lowered the bowl.

He took advantage of her shock to slip past her, out the door. By the time she recovered, darting after him, he was already gone.

SH stared down the hallway at the exit door, still shuddering in its frame, heart aching for her Countryhuman, and darkness roiling for what America had done to him, and all of them.

She wanted to go after him, but she knew when he was like this, it was better to give him space, even if she would rather try to comfort him. Even if 'this' was getting more severe than she was used to.

Reluctantly, she went back into the hall, to make sure Korea's absence would go unnoticed.

—

North spilled outside, barely glancing around to make sure no sentries were nearby before he threw himself behind the nearest outbuilding. He spat and retched, trying to get the stench of rich meat broth out of his 'nose,' and the look of pity on SH's face out of his mind.

Ssi-bal, why had she had to follow him? Why couldn't she just accept that he didn't want to eat and leave him alone? Why hadn't she put down the soup and-?

He growled to himself, spitting again, before drawing in deep breaths of mountain air, the dampness of loam, thin sunlight on the rocks, the crispness of the fading leaves, and distant scent of smoke from cooking fires.

It just reminded him that it was almost winter.

"If you can't stand giving them our food, then why do you fucking do it?"

North stiffened.

North Hamgyong was standing at the corner. He must have come around from the other side of the small brick building. He had a cigarette in his hand, a thin trail of smoke winding up from it, more acrid than the distant ones.

"I don't want to hear anything about how they don't deserve it," North growled, trying to pretend he hadn't thought he was alone. "China's soldiers are dying for us. The least we can do is feed them."

And that wasn't what had sent him reeling from the hall, even if the cloying smells of food and deafening chewing hadn't helped.

"Tch." North Hamgyong tapped his ashes over empty air.

North tried to compose himself, stifling his breathing and calming his heart. But the brief sprint and the way it had kicked up when SH cornered him had sent it pounding like a drum again, shaking his thin frame. He stood there rigidly, looking out into the close of trees around the hidden entrance to the hall, avoiding North Hamgyong's eyes.

He needed to get himself under control, he needed to stop letting his weakness overpower him in front of his provinces, and *at all.*

If he didn't, he would lose them.

He was about to order North Hamgyong to leave him alone when his province said, "And what are you carrying?"

The roar of blood in his ear slits had almost drowned him out.

North turned slightly, eyeing him warily.

"Your epaulets." North Hamgyong jerked his chin roughly at the shoulder boards. "If we have four billion tons on ours, how much are *you* carrying?"

North looked down at his epaulets.

The embroidered thread criss-crossed over the board, weaving a golden backdrop. Unlike his provinces with their two large stars on each, he only had one, small and red, that sat cradled between two sheaths of golden wheat, tied with a red banner with the name of the Republic on it, his name. They wrapped around the Supung Dam and its hydroelectric plant, the lake and mountain range beyond framed behind it.

There had been discussion about adding the dam to their state crest. It had been designed and orchestrated by the Japanese. Some of their rebuilt factories had been suggested instead.

But North had cast his vote for the Supung, which sealed the decision. It didn't matter if foreigners had drawn up the schematics and ordered the parts. His people had been the ones to build it, working to the bone to divert the water, haul the earth and break the rocks, pour the cement base and construct the concrete forms. They had built the largest dam and power station in all of Asia, the third largest in the *world,* producing enough electricity to power almost all of Korea. And they had done it under slavelike conditions.

The Supung Dam represented the heights the Korean people had reached even under Occupation. And the higher ones they could climb to if they were free.

The red star burned into his eye as he said to North Hamgyong, "A country's worth."

More than four billion tons, or the millions the Supung Dam held back. More than all their people's hopes. He had his provinces', too, and those of every single Korean that had ever lived, did live, and ever would live.

North Hamgyong considered the answer, back straight, as the ashes on his cigarette grew longer. Then he gave a short nod, and held it out to North.

He turned his head. "Come on. They need to see us in there."

For a moment, his province didn't follow. Then he did, footsteps limping over the leaf litter.

North paused by the door, a crushing weight trying to stop him from opening it. He looked down at his stars again, gritting his teeth.

Then he tore it open, and disappeared into the underground, North Hamgyong on his heels.

Happy Day of the Foundation of the Republic! I have once more strategically postponed this chapter until today.

One of my favourite SH facts is that when she says 'Korea really hates abstract art' in Safeway Pyongyang, she is purposefully not revealing that she also hates abstract art, and with even more passion than him. Her line of 'it's illegal here' (which I changed because it was intended to be an SHism, but I realized I was overestimating people and some might actually believe that) is because she *wants* it to be illegal and she wants Y/N to stop thinking about abstract art *right now* and never think about it again. She'll never *say* she hates abstract art, she'll use little artist critiques 'It exists for itself, not the observer; it alienates the masses; bourgeois degeneracy,' but she will get *very* passive-aggressive if you attempt to hold a conversation about it, and if she saw an abstract canvas she would likely crush whatever was in her hand.

Fun fact- the abstract art movement was utilized by America in the same way jazz was, as a counter-revolutionary cultural Trojan horse, ostensibly claiming that abstraction was 'freedom' compared to Socialist Realism, but in reality 'divesting' politics from art and art from meaning, turning it into something toothless while giving the lure of it teeth. Which is just more proof that even the most meaningless art of

all is political.

Thinking about the stat that at the height of the American occupation of South Vietnam, there were twenty times more prostitutes than female doctors or other professionals, three to five hundred thousand, almost one for every American soldier. Thinking about the girl kidnapped by American soldiers who planned to keep her for five days before killing her because she would be 'good for morale.' They made her carry their supplies, raped her at the rest stop that she helped set up, then stabbed and shot her dead the next day, afraid their backup that got called in would see her with them and disapprove. And because she was sick after being raped, and that made her 'less alluring.' The men that did it were only punished because one soldier got loud about it and persisted through all the death threats he received from every level of the army. None of them served their full sentence. Her name was Phan Thi Mao.
They've made a movie out of it, portraying the one man that spoke out as a hero who tries to save her. He didn't try in real life. He offered flimsy protests and when those didn't work he walked away so he wouldn't have to see it. He listened to her screams and cries while it happened. And then he sat back and let her murder happen and only spoke out once she was dead. I haven't watched the movie myself, but it apparently ends with a Vietnamese girl in America, a girl who likely only lives in America because her homeland was ravaged by them, telling him his nightmare is over. His nightmare *can* end. Phan Thi Mao's family's never did after she was carried out of their house screaming in the dark of morning. *She* was never allowed to heal. Maybe I'd feel differently if I watched it but the book fucked me up enough. And it sounds to me like they made *her* tragedy about him.
These things happened at every level, and were almost always hidden. They were only exposed when someone got loud, and almost no one ever got loud. Because why would they? The Vietnamese were just gooks, not people. The men were for killing and the women were for fucking. These are *their own words,* they say it over and over in their own admissions. 'When somebody asks, 'Why do you do it to a gook, why do you do this to people?' your answer is, 'So what, they're just gooks,

they're not people. It doesn't make any difference what you do to them; they're not human.'
Two of the men that raped her were Hispanic. The superior that told the man not to make a fuss when he first told him was black. The higher superior's only concern was that the man who reported it didn't get hurt by the other men, while keeping everything else quiet. Rapes happen in every army, but even a brief overview of the American army versus their enemies, the Viet Cong, the KPA, the PVA, objectively shows that for all of *them,* the incidents are down to individuals. But in the American army, it is ingrained in every one of their ranks and every one of their races. It is not a few bad seeds, it is the entire apple grown on Imperialism. In the American army, the man that speaks out is in the minority. And he is almost never a hero, only a bystander. And he is *never* the victim. No matter what he's been told to believe, how deeply he's been groomed to believe it, he stops being a victim the moment he takes the life of someone just defending their home, and lets a girl help tidy up the place he knows she's about to get gang-raped in.
That's what Vietnamese expats want for Vietnam again. That's what's happening to Thailand right now, if 'lesser.'

You can read David Lang's Casualties of War for the full sorry on Internet Archive. Even if he's far too sympathetic to the bystander, in my opinion.

https://archive.org/details/casualtiesofwar0000lang
You need an account to borrow. If you do, be warned. The event is terrible. It made me break down.

https://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/10/23/one-my-lai-month

https://www.latimes.com/news/la-na-vietnam6aug06-story.html

Vietnam and Korea were the same. They were mirrors. It's just that only one got to Reunify, and only one was ever truly acknowledged.